



perfect
BLEND

THE SCOTTISH BILLIONAIRES

M.S. PARKER
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

PERFECT BLEND

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M. S. PARKER

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ONE

BRODY

“UNCLE EOIN! I GOT YOU A PRESENT!” MY ONLY NIECE, EVANNE, RAN across the living room and launched herself at my now-twenty-eight-year-old brother.

He caught her, and the first hint of a smile I’d seen since he’d come back to the U.S. made the knot in my stomach ease a little. I wasn’t surprised, though. If anyone could get through the armor Eoin had put up, it was Evanne. She’d had all of us, including him, wrapped around her little finger from the day she was born. It was hard to believe she’d be turning nine this November.

“Aren’t you my present?” Eoin teased as he set her on her feet.

If he felt everyone watching him, he didn’t acknowledge it. Still, it gave me hope that he hadn’t been so badly damaged – mentally as well as physically – by what had happened that he wouldn’t recover. None of us had said it out loud, but I knew the rest of my family shared the same concern I did: that Eoin’s experience would send him back down to where he’d been before he’d enlisted. And this time, there’d be no best friend to help him out.

“Don’t be silly, Uncle Eoin. I can’t be your present. I’m a person.” Evanne grabbed his hand. “Come see. Daddy says it’s too big for the house, so we had to put it in the garage.”

When we made to follow Eoin and Evanne, Alec put up a hand and shook his head. Once the door closed behind the pair, my big brother blew out a long breath. “She drew a massive picture of Eoin as a superhero, protecting kids.”

We didn't need Alec to elaborate. Eoin had never been demonstrative with his emotions, and since his injury, he'd closed down even more. If we were present when Evanne showed him the gift, he might be too self-conscious to let his true feelings show.

Evanne was old enough that she'd understand if it was explained to her why her uncle hadn't seemed excited about her gift, but if she was the only one with him, he might open up a little, even if it was only enough to genuinely show her how he felt about the picture. Evanne was the one person we knew he'd never snap at or push away.

The rest of us were a different story.

Thanks to Da calling in a few favors, Eoin had been stationed at Camp Parks in Dublin, California, putting him the closest he'd been to home since he'd enlisted. We'd all tried to give him space, only reaching out every so often over the last three weeks to check on him, but never forcing him to talk. I'd been one of the few who'd actually seen him in person.

One of the reasons our parents had decided to hold the party a few days after his actual birthday so it could be on a Saturday was to allow everyone to attend. This was the first time some of our siblings had seen him since our last video chat over the holidays, and without him in the room, they let down their guard for a minute, and I could see how shocked some of them were at his appearance.

He'd always been lean, which made the weight he'd lost during his hospital stay even more obvious, and I was tempted to tell them that he'd actually put back on some of the muscle he'd lost. But it was the scar that had shaken everyone who hadn't seen it yet, which was almost everyone. I knew Mom and Da had tried to prepare the others, but it was one thing to hear that Eoin had a jagged line on the left side of his face from his temple to just under his mouth, and something else entirely to see it.

Blaze broke the silence. "I know a premiere plastic surgeon back in Baltimore who could help."

Mom shook her head. "We've told him that we'd get him the best in the world, but he said no."

“Why?” London’s voice cracked, and she brushed away a tear. “I don’t understand.”

“The lad’s punishing himself,” Da said quietly. “He thinks he deserves to have a reminder of what happened.”

Sean shoved his hands through his hair. “He didn’t tell you that, did he?”

Da shook his head, his expression troubled. “If you’d have seen him those first few days in Germany, you’d understand.”

“He blames himself for Leo’s death,” Mom said. “But he’s not ready to talk about losing his best friend in the world.”

“How can we help?” Paris looked unusually grim, but I couldn’t blame her.

“Be there when he does reach out.” Mom gave her a small smile. “And if he asks about surgery, we’ll let him know to talk to you.” She looked pointedly at Blaze.

Blaze nodded, and I recognized the frustration in his eyes. We all hated being helpless, especially when it came to our family. For those of us old enough to remember when our parents died, it brought back a flood of memories.

My mother and Theresa’s first husband, Marcus, had both died from medical conditions, and as adults, my siblings and stepsiblings knew that we couldn’t have done anything, which eased some of the guilt and helplessness. Blaze and his siblings had had it worse, though.

They’d lost both of their parents at the same time. He’d been eleven and Fury nine when Michael and Shelly Gracen died in a car accident. Even though we’d never really talked about it, I knew they’d both struggled with feeling like they should have been able to do something to prevent it. That, even at their young age, they should have been able to somehow convince their parents to go a different way or at a different time.

I pushed the dark thoughts out of my head. Eoin wasn’t lost. He’d survived the ambush with scars but no permanent physical limitations as far as I knew. Mentally and emotionally, he still had a way to go, but he’d be okay.

I refused to accept anything else.

The sound of Evanne chattering stopped any other discussion about Eoin, and we all moved to make it appear like we hadn't been talking about him while he was gone. I doubted it'd fool him, but we didn't need to be obvious about it.

"He loved it, Daddy!" Evanne was laser-focused on her father, her grin going from ear to ear.

"Of course he did." Alec kissed the top of her head.

Watching the two of them together had always made me smile. She hadn't been a planned baby, and Alec's relationship with Keli – Evanne's mother – hadn't lasted, but Alec had loved his daughter from the moment he'd learned about her. I doubted he'd ever thought about being a father before that moment, but he was a good one. A great one, actually. I could only hope that, if the situation ever presented itself, I would rise to the occasion as well as he had.

Images flashed through my mind. A little girl with fair hair and light eyes who'd have my sense of humor. A boy with my dimples and his mother's ambition. And I could picture them both without difficulty because I could only see one person as their mother.

The realization terrified me, and I was eminently relieved when Mom called out that the pizza had arrived. Nothing could distract me from the woman who haunted my thoughts better than fifteen siblings, our parents, a precocious eight-year-old, and pizza.

I LOVED MY FAMILY, but I was definitely grateful that I hadn't invited anyone to stay at my place tonight. Our old bedrooms at the house were usually available to any of our traveling family members, but sometimes, those of us who lived nearby offered our own places. I hadn't this time, and I might've felt guilty if the house hadn't been so loud right now.

Noise hadn't really bothered me before, but maybe I was getting old. Or maybe seeing Eoin had brought up enough issues that I didn't feel like I could still be 'on' with my family. It was barely six o'clock on a Saturday

evening, but a beer and a movie sounded perfect. After winding down that way, I'd take a nightcap of whiskey and turn in early.

Except that plan went straight down the drain when my phone rang just as I was pulling into my parking space. The name on the phone surprised me, but the zing of anticipation I felt when seeing it didn't.

"Freedom, good to hear from you." My stomach had the same butterflies that I'd gotten as a teenager, talking to my first crush on the phone.

"Are you busy?"

The question was abrupt, but I didn't mind. She'd reached out to me, which was something in and of itself. I wasn't going to push my luck.

"Nope. Just got home from my brother's birthday party."

"Does that mean you wouldn't want to leave again?"

I straightened. Her voice sounded...tighter. "Are you okay?"

She let out a strained laugh. "Yes and no."

My stomach twisted, and I had to bite my tongue to stop from asking for more. She'd tell me.

"I'm studying for finals, and graduation is in a month. Needless to say, my stress level is off the charts right now."

Understanding dawned, and my pulse picked up speed. "Where do you want to meet?" To my surprise, the question came out casual rather than eager.

"I'm house-sitting for my mentor, and she doesn't mind if I have people over."

I didn't even have to think about it. "What's the address?"

TWO

FREEDOM

WHAT WAS I DOING?

I stared at my phone as if I could magically undo the call I'd just made. But I didn't want to undo it, not really. I could recognize what I was feeling as fear rather than regret, and that kept me from calling Brody back and telling him not to come after all.

I didn't give in to fear.

Ever.

Okay, so maybe that wasn't the best reason to go through with what was essentially a booty call, but it was my only explanation at the moment.

I put down the phone and took a few slow, deep breaths before standing. Brody said he'd be here in about ninety minutes, which meant I could run the dishwasher, make sure everything was in its place, and then set things up so nothing ruined the mood. I didn't want Brody accidentally discovering my vibrator if he went looking for a condom in my bag. After all, the entire point of him being here was so I didn't *need* a toy.

Especially since he occupied the number one spot for fantasies I used to get off.

Since I had the time, I did a little extra preparation. Our other encounters had been spur-of-the-moment decisions, and to my surprise, I found that I was just vain enough to want him to see how I could look when I made the effort. Granted, I'd been wearing nice clothes and underwear the other times, but

event-nice and date-nice were two different things. And since we weren't actually going anywhere, I could really go all out.

After showering and shaving and all that, I donned a deep blue silk robe to greet him, and the gobsmacked expression on his face when I opened the door was worth every second I'd spent getting ready. I didn't even care that, should anyone in the vicinity be looking, they'd be able to see me too. If I was being honest, the thought turned me on a little.

"If you like this, you're going to love what I'm wearing underneath," I promised as I stepped to the side and let him into the house.

"Do you normally wear things like that when you're house sitting?" His gaze didn't leave me as he hung up his jacket and took off his shoes. "If so, I might need to hire you."

I couldn't stop the little smile from playing on my lips. "Are you planning to go somewhere soon?"

His gaze slid down to my feet and back up again. "Not at all."

I swallowed hard as every cell in my body heated up from that look. "Can I get you something to drink?" The question sounded idiotic, and I regretted it as soon as it came out of my mouth.

Inviting him here to Dr. Ipres's house wasn't quite as intimate as taking him to my own place, but it was more than I'd done with anyone else. Even though Dr. Ipres had told me several times that I was welcome to have people over – and she'd made it clear that included any romantic dalliances – Brody was the first.

I never wanted the men I slept with to know much of anything about me at all. Since Brody already knew where I went to school and had even met Dr. Ipres, I'd figured it wouldn't hurt to ask him to come here rather than going to the trouble of renting a hotel room.

"I don't want anything to drink, Freedom."

That low baritone did things to my insides that should've been illegal.

He took a step toward me, and then another. All that easy-going humor was gone, replaced by an intensity that I hadn't seen before. At least not to this magnitude. "Do you know what I *do* want?"

"What?" The word was little more than a whisper.

"I want," he caught the belt of my robe, "to see," he tugged on it until it came loose, "what's underneath."

I was frozen in place, almost holding my breath, waiting for whatever he would do next.

Without taking his eyes off mine, he slid the robe off my shoulders, his touch as sensual as the silk itself. It pooled around my feet, leaving me in the lingerie I'd brought with me on a whim. As his gaze dropped, somewhere in the back of my head, I wondered if it hadn't been a whim at all. Had I packed it with Brody in mind? In the next moment, I decided it didn't matter. Things were good between us right now, and I knew he could give me what I needed. I refused to let myself complicate our relationship.

"Fuck me." The words were little more than a growl.

I couldn't stop my smile. I didn't struggle with body image issues, but it was still nice to know that he found me attractive. And the expression on his face suggested that 'attractive' might've been an understatement.

The lace bustier gave me great cleavage without restricting my breathing, and any curvy woman who'd ever tried to find something that could do both of those miracles knew just how difficult that was. The sheer crimson material scratched at my skin. It wasn't enough to be irritating, but rather enhanced my sensitivity, especially against the areas I'd just shaved. I'd also put on a pair of thigh-high stockings, complete with garter belt, and finished things off with a pair of four-inch heels.

After letting him ogle me for a minute, I turned and headed for the hallway that led to the guest room, leaving him to follow in silence. When I reached the bed, I turned, a sudden flutter of nerves in my stomach as the reality of what we were doing hit me. This wasn't a chance encounter. I'd made a deliberate decision to invite him into a place that was clearly my territory. I'd dressed specifically for him.

Before all of that could overwhelm me, Brody held out his hand, the belt of my robe hanging from his fingers. Now, I only had one thought in my head.

What was he going to do with that?

“Do you trust me?”

A small voice whispered that the question was purposefully vague, that he was trying to say more than what was on the surface. A loaded question meant to entrap me.

I told the voice to shut up.

“I do.”

“Turn around.”

A little thrill ran through me as I did as he said. I didn't know if he was going to tie my hands together or if he had something else in mind, but I knew he wouldn't do anything to hurt me. If I was the least bit uncomfortable, I could simply tell him, and he'd stop.

The heat from his body pressed into my back, and I waited for another instruction, but it didn't come. Instead, the belt came across my eyes, cutting off my vision completely. My pulse picked up, but it wasn't from fear.

No, this was excitement. I'd had sex before that some people would've considered rough, and I'd enjoyed it, but one of the drawbacks of one-night stands was the trust factor, so there'd been certain things I wouldn't do. I couldn't say that I trusted Brody with my heart, but I did trust him with my body enough to try experiences I wouldn't have with anyone else.

“I'm going to touch you.” He spoke next to my ear. “And by the time I'm ready to slide into that sweet pussy of yours, I'm going to be your entire world. Everything you smell and taste. Every sound you hear. You'll be so ready to come that it won't take more than a couple strokes before you do, but that won't be the last. Before I finally let go myself, you'll have come so many times that the line between pain and pleasure will have blurred. And then I'll make you come one more time.”

I couldn't hold back the soft moan or the shudder that went from head to toe. The lack of accent told me he was in complete control, and I knew that he could do every single thing that he'd just promised.

"Do you consent?"

I didn't even have to think about the answer. I nodded. "Yes."

"Good." His fingers skimmed down my arms and then back up again. "Just feel."

His words couldn't be mistaken for anything but an order, but I felt no irritation or need to protest. I simply obeyed.

And felt.

Heat flowed from his hands as he slid them across my shoulders, and I expected his next move to be the removal of my clothes. It wasn't.

Instead, he pressed his thumbs against the base of my neck, right into the knots that had formed there over the last couple weeks. The pressure made me moan, even though it wasn't even close to what I'd thought he'd be doing to get that sort of sound out of me.

Without a word, he guided me to lay face-down on the bed and kneaded every tense muscle from the base of my skull to the bottom of my feet. Time lost all meaning as I gave myself over to his skilled hands, and the only coherent thought to float into my dazed mind was that he'd missed his calling. This was so much better than his whiskey, and that was saying something because he made excellent whiskey.

Only after my muscles felt like jelly did he start to work up the tension again, fingers traveling up the insides of my thighs, a lighter touch meant to titillate and arouse. As if his mere presence wasn't enough to turn me on. As if the feel of his hands on my body hadn't already set me on fire.

His thumbs ran along the crease of my ass as his hands each palmed a cheek, stopping at the base of my spine before moving down again. Each pass allowed those digits to rub over my damp panties, press against my core, though not dipping inside, not venturing where I wanted him to go. I endured as long as I could before I pushed back against his hands, tried to regain

control.

“No.” His voice was firm but not harsh. He placed his hand on my back, held me in place as he spread my legs farther apart. “Just feel.”

I nodded, even though I wasn’t sure if he required a response.

“You thought I was going to undress you, do the usual foreplay?”

That was a question, so I nodded again.

“I’m not. I won’t be taking off any of your clothing.”

I started to turn my head, but an extra bit of pressure on my back told me to stay still.

“I won’t. You won’t. And I’ll still keep my promise.”

Of that, I had no doubt.

And less than thirty minutes later, my faith in him proved to be true.

Every inch of my body burned and throbbed, anticipation making me writhe on the cool cotton sheets. Not a single article of clothing had been removed, not even my heels, and he hadn’t even moved his hands under what I was wearing. Still, my nipples were hard, made more sensitive with each unintentional movement, and I was almost impossibly wet.

The bed dipped as Brody moved, and before I could ask what he was doing, he spoke.

“Getting a condom.” His voice was hoarse, as if he’d been yelling rather than barely speaking at all.

A pulse of desire sent a shiver through me. He was just as affected by what he’d been doing as I was, and at some point, that realization would probably scare the shit out of me, but I wasn’t going there right now. Being blindfolded had made me more aware of my body than I’d ever been, and letting him be in control had allowed me to get out of my head. I wasn’t about to waste that.

After all, that was the entire reason I’d called Brody to begin with.

He settled between my legs and placed his hands on my hips. I instinctively knew what he wanted but waited for him to initiate it. He pulled my hips up so that I was on my knees, but my chest was still pressed to the bed. I didn't trust my arms to hold me.

Keeping true to his word that he'd leave my clothes on, he simply moved the crotch of my panties to the side and slid an inch into me. I moaned, fighting the urge to push back against him. My restraint was rewarded when he pushed the rest of the way inside, filling me completely. He stayed there for a moment, the tension in his body radiating through mine.

Another moan ripped out of me as he pulled back and then thrust forward, his thick shaft rubbing against all the right places. When I thought I could take no more, his fingers were between my legs, finally touching bare flesh, and I cried out. It took less than a minute of working over my swollen clit and driving into me with two hard thrusts to send me over the edge. And he didn't stop there.

One climax rolled into the next, and all ability to think vanished. All I could do was ride the waves of pleasure and trust that Brody had me. That he would keep me safe and see me through to the end.

THREE

BRODY

MAY WAS OFF TO A GREAT START. WHILE EOIN WAS STILL HEALING, BOTH physically and mentally, he'd been well enough for his party to have been a success. My siblings had all made it back to their homes safely afterward, and things had been quiet with the whole family since then.

And then there was Freedom.

Despite the fact that I'd enjoyed Eoin's party, I had to admit that what'd happened *after* had been just as memorable. As in I couldn't even come close to forgetting it, even to my detriment and distraction.

Freedom and I had been together for hours, with me not leaving the house until almost dawn. The memories of everything we'd done during that night had kept me going in the week between then and now.

Well, those memories and the twenty-minute sexting conversation we'd had Wednesday evening, which wasn't actually something I'd done before. Phone sex with a couple casual girlfriends, including the occasional picture, but not sexting. Somehow, that seemed more...intimate.

I wasn't sure what that meant for whatever this was between us, but I knew that I was going to let things continue on, at least for now. My gut said that something was building between us, and I wanted to see where it would go, even if the idea was something I would've avoided like the plague in the past.

Freedom made me want to reconsider my previous stances on relationships and sex.

That was a thought that had kept coming back over the past few days, no matter how many times I pushed it aside. One of these days, I'd have to actually address it, but it'd only been a week. I had time.

Besides, I needed the possibility of more extremely hot sex to keep my mind entertained while I did all the stuff around my place that I hadn't been home to do over the last couple weeks. A housekeeper came every Friday afternoon and did the basic cleaning, even when I was away on business, but I liked doing my own laundry and any basic maintenance I could handle on my own.

Maybe it was a throwback to Mom and Da requiring us kids to do our own laundry once we hit double digits. Or maybe it was just the fact that I didn't like the idea of someone else seeing my clothes and making guesses about what was going on in my life. Like how I sometimes had fewer pairs of underwear in the laundry than days that had passed since the last time. The last thing I needed was someone wondering which days I went commando. Or why.

I'd already finished half of my laundry and fixed a wobbly cabinet door by the time I stopped for a late lunch. A drip in my bathroom sink was next on my list to fix, but food was necessary first. While I was eating my meal and double-checking the proper steps to take with the drip, my phone rang.

The name on the screen made my heart beat faster and my blood rush south. "Freedom, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Good afternoon, Brody." I could practically hear her rolling her eyes. "Are you busy this evening?"

"Nothing too wild and exciting," I said cautiously. I wanted to be with her, spend time with her, but I wasn't sure if expressing that sentiment would be good or just scare her away.

"I have a black-tie event this evening that's come up at the last minute, and I need a plus one. Are you interested?"

A date.

Not wanting to give her time to change her mind, I blurted out the only possible answer. "Yes."

“If I give you the address, can you meet me there in two hours? I know it’s short notice, so if you can’t find something to wear—”

“It’s not a problem,” I said quickly. “Just let me know where to be.”

After jotting down the address, I repeated it to make sure I heard her correctly before venturing a question. “Is this a Stanford event?”

After a slight pause, she cleared her throat. “It’s actually a family thing.”

“Oh.”

Before I could read too much into the fact that she’d invited me to something with her family, she clarified.

“My mother sits on the board of several charities and usually attends all the fundraisers, but every so often, she’ll ask me to go in her place. She’d intended to ask me back in April, but…” Her voice trailed off.

“Your father had a heart attack,” I finished the thought.

“Exactly,” she said. “And Mom completely forgot until this morning when she got a call from one of the attendees. Even if she could get a flight down in time, she doesn’t want to leave Dad alone, and he definitely doesn’t need the stress of trying to come with her.”

“That makes sense.” I headed toward my closet. “Do you mind if I ask what charity?”

“Oh, yes, of course.” She sounded surprised by my question, though I wasn’t sure why. “The Reimagine Project.”

While it wasn’t one that my parents were personally involved in, I knew of it. They assisted survivors of human trafficking in getting medical and psychological treatment, as well as finding education and employment opportunities. They also helped them with housing, all those sorts of things.

“I’ve heard good things about them,” I said.

A moment of slightly awkward silence was broken when Freedom spoke, “Well, I have a few things to do before I meet you.”

“Of course. I’ll be there in two hours. Black tie.”

“Perfect.”

As the call ended, I leaned back in my chair and processed what’d just happened. Freedom and I would be attending a formal event together. One that her parents would hear about, I assumed. At least her mother would.

Which meant there was a chance that Freedom would tell them about me. It wasn’t exactly a date, but it was damn close. This wasn’t something fuck buddies did together, especially since there’d been no mention of sex.

It would be interesting.

FOUR

FREEDOM

I COULD HAVE SIMPLY ATTENDED THE FUNDRAISER ALONE. I'D DONE IT IN THE past and not given a damn what anyone else thought. In my opinion, anyone who looked down on another person for not having a 'date' to an event was the sort of person I didn't want to know.

When Mom had called me Thursday morning and asked me to go in place of her and Dad, I'd completely ignored the fact that they'd be expecting two people. It hadn't been a conscious thought at that point, though. In fact, it hadn't registered until Aline had informed me that an old friend of hers, Martina Chavez, had asked Aline to spend the weekend with her, making my sister unavailable to be my 'plus one.'

Maybe the truth wasn't that I didn't want to be here alone, but rather that I was annoyed at Aline for making plans without telling me. Which was ridiculous, I knew. Plus, I'd gotten the impression that Martina's invitation had come at the last minute, and the reason she wanted Aline to spend the weekend in L.A. was important.

Protective big sister that I was, I hadn't liked dropping Aline off at the airport yesterday afternoon, but I'd been stuck between responsibilities. Since she'd be relatively close to our parents, even if she was staying with Martina, Mom and Dad had agreed with me. Letting Aline fly down and back alone would be the best solution with the choices we had available.

I preferred to think that the reason I'd reached out to Brody was because I'd already mentally planned to have someone going with me...*not* because I'd

been thinking about him quite a bit. We hadn't broached the subject of how long this thing would last or what it exactly was, but we had communicated over the past week, including a surprisingly hot bit of sexting, and that wasn't something I'd had with any other fuckbuddy.

That was as close to a label as I was willing to get for us.

Except I'd asked him to come to an event as my plus-one, and I didn't think that was really a fuckbuddy kind of thing.

All of my second-guessing had my stomach in knots as I waited at the entrance for him. It took everything in me not to pace. I had too many eyes on me to show any semblance of nervous energy, not when my family name would be connected to everything I did tonight.

Which brought me back to thinking that inviting Brody had been a terrible mistake. Yes, he cleaned up well, but who knew what he could pull together at such short notice?

When the door opened, I glanced that way, and for a moment, didn't register that the insanely attractive man in the tux was Brody. I'd seen him in a tux before, and I'd explored that fantastic body both over and under clothes, but I hadn't expected him to stroll in looking like a multi-millionaire playboy or Greek god. Or some combination of both.

By the time his gaze fell on me, I'd regained enough of my sense to smile and walk over to him. I couldn't, however, keep my body from heating up at the desire in his eyes. I supposed that was fair enough because I was definitely thinking about sex too. I didn't know how anyone could look at him and *not* think about what it would be like to have him in their bed. And I knew that he was better than any fantasy someone could conjure up.

"You look amazing." He caught my hand and raised it to his lips, managing to make the gesture look smooth and natural rather than cheesy.

Little prickles of electricity danced across my nerves, fanning out from where his mouth had touched my skin.

Damn. I was going to need every ounce of my self-control not to drag him into a closet. Again.

“As do you.” To diffuse some of the sexual tension, I added, “You know, the first time I saw you in that tux, I thought it must’ve been made for you since it fit so well.”

He gave me a charming grin and squeezed my fingers before dropping my hand to offer his arm. “It was. I keep it in the closet for special occasions.”

I chuckled and took his arm. “Well, I’m appreciative that this even warrants a special occasion.”

“You did say black tie,” he reminded me. “All the men in my family keep a tux handy for events.”

I almost frowned, confused by the tone of his voice, as if he wasn’t joking. I didn’t know a lot about him, I realized. His last name was McCrae, and he had stepfamily whose last name was Carideo. He had a couple brothers and sisters, biological and not, though Paris was the only one whose name I knew.

One brother had been a soldier and wounded overseas not long before my dad’s heart attack. Paris was an archeologist and had gone skydiving on Valentine’s Day. He owned Shannon’s and didn’t live too far from Palo Alto since he was willing to drive to this event, though far enough that he’d stayed at a hotel and with a brother during his various times here.

Maybe he thought I’d googled him and would get the joke. I hadn’t, and I didn’t, but now my curiosity was piqued. This wasn’t the time or place for inquiries or internet searches, though. I tucked the thought away for later and put on my ‘polite’ expression as the two of us entered the ballroom.

I expected everyone to look at us as we walked in, since that was the type of thing that happened at events like this, and I’d already assumed that Brody would get some attention. After seeing him in his tux, I raised that from ‘some attention’ to ‘a lot of attention.’

I hadn’t thought to consider what we would look like together. Not because I thought we were mismatched or anything like that. I’d never had body image issues and was well aware of the admiration I received for my appearance. No, what I hadn’t factored in was the fact that I’d never brought anyone to an event, and I’d attended enough for people to notice that something was

different.

Surprise radiated out through the crowd, and as people's heads turned, expressions of various degrees of appreciation appeared on most of the faces. Jealousy was there too, and since I didn't make a habit of being seen in public with men, that was new for me. Brody, however, appeared just as at ease here in a tux as he had been at every other place, time, and state of dress I'd seen him.

"Freedom, I heard you were stepping in for your mother tonight." Stefanie McClurkin was from the L.A. chapter of the organization, which meant she knew my family fairly well, and I'd always liked her.

"I'm not sure I can fill those shoes," I said, leaning in to air kiss next to her cheek. "But I'm glad to represent the Mercier family."

Stefanie glanced at Brody but didn't ask about him first. "How's your father?"

I felt my smile dim a bit. "He's doing as well as expected. Still recovering, but only going forward."

"I'm glad to hear that." Stefanie looked genuinely relieved. "You let them know that if they need anything, just call. I'll be going back tomorrow."

"I will." Time for introductions. "Stefanie, I'd like you to meet Brody McCrae. Brody, this is Stefanie McClurkin. She works on The Reimagine Project with my mom."

"Pleasure to meet you, ma'am." Brody put out his free hand.

"Likewise." The question was written on Stefanie's face, but she didn't give it a voice.

I suddenly realized that, regardless of whether or not I told my parents about Brody, they would find out about him accompanying me tonight. I'd have to decide if I wanted to be the one to tell them, or if it would be better to let the news make its way through the grapevine and dismiss any inquiries from them by saying that Brody wasn't anyone important.

That line of thinking prompted another question.

Was Brody someone important to me?

That was *not* something I wanted to think about right now. I'd have to deal with it eventually, but not now.

"If you'll excuse me," Stefanie said. "I see someone I need to speak to before they start indulging in the wine."

Almost immediately after Stefanie walked away, another person was right there to greet us. I'd never met Douglas Adkins, but he was the head of The Reimagine Project here in Palo Alto, so I knew what he looked like. My mother had always spoken highly of him, which made my smile and greeting genuine.

Making my way around the room was easier tonight than it had been at the events I'd attended earlier this year. While I did feel the need to represent my family in a positive manner, it wasn't the same sort of pressure that came with a university event.

There, I felt as if I was on display, everyone watching and waiting to see if I would succeed or fail. Maybe even wishing for the latter. While I knew that the high society circles that frequented charity fundraisers could be just as petty and manipulative as anyone else, my mother worked hard to ensure that the top tiers in those organizations were made up of people who truly believed in their causes. People were a lot less likely to be assholes if they supported the principles of the issues they were being asked to sink money and time into.

And it might've also been a little bit due to the fact that I had support at my side no matter where I went. Brody was amazing. He talked, but never over me or for me. He was charming but never flirtatious. No matter how many women smiled and flirted, he never gave them the slightest hint that he was interested in them.

He could have. It wasn't as if either of us had a claim on the other. Not once had I referred to him as a boyfriend, partner, or anything that indicated that I had a claim on him. If he was really interested in one of the women, he could've found a way to get one of them alone, give one a number, but I didn't see any indication that he'd done anything of the sort.

It was, well...hot.

Between that and the way he looked in that tux, every minute that passed made it harder for me to not have him naked and inside me. Or just inside me. Naked was optional.

I blamed all that hotness for me not seeing what was coming until it was too late.

“Do you want to dance to this song or the next one?”

The familiar voice had me turning toward him even as I lost the smile I’d been wearing. “Good evening, Mr. Worthington.”

“Now, now, what did I say about calling me Mr. Worthington?” Korbin had that patronizing tone to his voice, and it irked me as much as it creeped me out.

“I didn’t realize you were a patron of The Reimagine Project.” That was an understatement considering the way I knew he talked to and looked at women.

“My family has been looking for a few new causes to support, so when Douglas mentioned tonight’s fundraiser to my father, it seemed like the perfect opportunity to do a little reconnaissance.” Brody shifted next to me, but Korbin didn’t even glance at him, just kept talking in that same self-important voice. “The Adkins family and mine have known each other for years.”

After a few seconds of awkward silence, I decided to attempt an extrication. “Well, I need—”

“To dance with me,” Korbin interrupted. “I asked if you wanted to dance to the previous song, and you didn’t answer, so I’m assuming it’s this one you want.”

I just stared at him, even as he reached out like he was going to grab my hand. Before I could respond, Brody pulled me to his side with an almost proprietary growl.

“If she’s dancing with anyone, it’s me.”

My jaw dropped, but I snapped it shut before Korbin could see it. He was too busy scowling at Brody.

“Is that so?”

Brody didn't bother arguing. Instead, he took my hand and led me onto the dance floor. I barely registered what music was playing, only that he had one hand on my waist while the other guided my hand to his shoulder. With my heels, I barely had to tilt my head to look him in the eyes. Even with all the people around us, it was strangely intimate.

“I didn't know you wanted to dance,” I said, trying for some humor.

“Only with you.” His voice was so soft that I barely heard the words, and then his mouth brushed across mine.

Dammit.

FIVE

BRODY

I HAD NO IDEA WHY I DID THAT.

No, that was a lie.

I knew exactly why I'd taken Freedom onto the dance floor. Why I'd said that I only wanted to dance with her. Why I'd kissed her.

I was completely and utterly fucked.

"I think we've been here long enough."

My stomach sank. Shit. I should've just kept my mouth shut. She threw me off in ways that no one else ever had.

"My sister's in L.A. for the weekend," Freedom continued. Her tone was casual, and she wasn't pulling away from me, but I could feel the slight stiffness to her body, as if what she was saying was difficult for her.

I waited in silence for her to continue, hoping my racing pulse didn't give away how much I cared about what she would say next.

"I know you coming here was last minute, so I completely understand if you need to go back home from here, but I was wondering if you might want to come back to my place for a little while."

She wasn't meeting my eyes as she spoke, but I wasn't about to press that, not with her offer hanging between us. The closest we'd gotten to crossing into each other's personal lives was when I'd taken her back to Cory's place

and when she'd invited me over to her mentor's house. This was her taking me to the home she shared with her sister. Granted, Aline wouldn't be there, but considering how Freedom had reacted when I'd simply spoken to her sister months ago, this was a huge deal for her to invite me back to her personal space.

"I'd like that." I put warmth into my words but kept my tone casual. Even though she hadn't mentioned sex when she'd called me about coming tonight, I hadn't been able to stop thinking about it. Around her, I was always thinking about sex.

"Let's go."

We managed to get outside without being stopped, which, based on the fundraisers I'd been to over the years, was a feat itself.

As we handed the valet our tickets, I said, "Get the lady's car first."

While the young man went to do just that, Freedom looked over at me. "There's guest parking at my building. I'll wait at the lobby entrance so we can go up together."

When I nodded, she continued, giving me her address and then asking if I needed her to repeat it. I tapped my temple. "Not necessary. I have a good memory for the things I find important."

Before the silence could get awkward, the valet pulled up in Freedom's car. She didn't wait for me to get mine, knowing I'd follow her as soon as I could. Something in my gut told me that I'd follow her a hell of a lot farther than her apartment, but I didn't dwell on it. Overthinking wouldn't take me any place good.

WE FELL onto the bed in a tangle of bare limbs, our skin already slick with sweat, and we hadn't even gotten to the good part yet.

No, that wasn't accurate.

Every part with Freedom was the good part.

“I want you in my mouth.” Her breathless declaration was followed by her sitting up and reaching for my aching cock.

I put out a hand, lightly touching her wrist. She frowned at me, the question clearly written in her eyes. “I want to taste you too.”

A smile broke across her face. “I think that can be arranged.”

She shifted, putting a knee on either side of my head. As she leaned over, I once again appreciated the fact that the two of us were similar in height. Then her tongue ran up the side of my cock, and I was lost.

I gripped her hips and pulled her down until I could reach her too. The scent of her arousal made my stomach clench, and I let out a satisfied sigh as I licked her sensitive skin. I had to close my eyes when she wrapped her lips around my cock, counting to ten to stop myself from coming right there. The muffled chuckle that came from her made me realize that I’d been counting out loud.

Now, my pride was at stake. I needed to make her fall apart. Every night she slept in this bed, I wanted her to think about how many times I’d made her come tonight. I wanted her to need me here again.

Even with the extreme pleasure coming from where Freedom was alternating suction and pressure up and down my cock, I focused on what I could do for her. I ran the tip of my tongue from her clit to her core, grinning when her entire body shuddered. When I felt a touch of teeth, I cursed, barely stopping my hips from jerking.

Without a word, she’d just issued a challenge. One I intended to win.

I rubbed the flat of my tongue over her clit, rough strokes back and forth over the sensitive bundle of nerves. While my tongue worked its magic, I slid two fingers back into her wet pussy, and despite the awkward angle, found her g-spot. The tips of my fingers grazed over it, and she shivered. Using my tongue and fingers, I played her body, and she did the same for me.

As she took me deeper into her mouth, she cupped my balls, rolled them. A tug on them made me groan, my eyes rolling back. She laughed around her mouthful, and the vibration rocked through me. In retaliation, I took her clit between my teeth, worrying at it just hard enough to make her whimper.

Damn, I loved that sound.

I wanted to hear more.

Every fiber in my body was straining for release, but I refused to come before she did. I twisted my fingers, drove into her harder, sucked on her clit until she cried out. Her hand tightened around my balls to the point of pain, and the pressure inside me reached the breaking point. Knowing I was only seconds away from losing it, I increased my efforts, using every skill I'd ever acquired until, *finally*, she came. And I followed.

Time passed, but it didn't register as we fucked again and again, almost as if we were competing to see who would tap out first. By the time we collapsed next to each other the last time, my cock was almost raw, sensitive to the point where I knew it would hurt to even take off the condom. I didn't regret a single second, but I'd reached my limit.

So, it seemed, had Freedom.

"I'm pretty sure I won't be able to walk until Monday."

The humor in her voice made me look over at her. Her body glistened with sweat, and her hair was a mess. I'd left marks with my mouth and my hands, enough that I winced. The only phrase I could think of to describe how she looked was 'thoroughly fucked.'

"Yeah, me either."

I'd meant it the same way she had, but for some reason, it fell flat, shifting the mood in the room into something awkward. Before it became uncomfortable and Freedom had to ask me to leave, I had to go. My muscles protested, but I forced myself to move, focusing on one specific thing and then another. Take off the condom. Get my clothes. Dress. Leave.

Without a word.

Because I couldn't talk to her. What would I say?

The sex had been amazing, just like it had been before, but what had happened tonight – all of it – made this feel...different. And I didn't know how to handle it. Didn't know what to say. These were not problems I'd

experienced before. Not with anyone, and especially not with women.

Freedom, however, was not just any woman.

And the realization terrified me.

SIX

FREEDOM

IF I HATED PLANNING EVENTS, THE NEXT THING ON MY 'NEVER WANT TO DO AGAIN' list was writing papers. I understood that I wouldn't necessarily use every single thing I'd been taught throughout school, but depending on what I finally decided to do with my degree, there could be times when I'd need to write something, perhaps even a report. Still, I had no plans to pursue any field that required publication, so I was optimistic that this would be one of my last papers.

Unless I decided to move on to a doctorate.

I sighed and stretched my arms over my head, arching my back as my joints and spine popped and cracked. I'd been on my laptop for nearly four hours, working on whatever I could, no matter how far ahead on my syllabuses the assignments were. Before that, I'd scrubbed the bathroom and the kitchen, changed all the bed linens, and done four loads of laundry. Anything to keep my mind off what'd happened yesterday.

I'd called Brody to keep from going to an event by myself, and then I'd needed him to rescue me from Korbin's advances. He hadn't done it in a rude way, but it'd still happened. And how had I reacted to that? I'd invited him back to my home and spent hours having sex with him.

That wasn't me. Not the me I'd always been, anyway. I didn't play the damsel in distress, and I sure as hell didn't need Prince Charming to rescue me.

So, why hadn't I told him to find someone who actually enjoyed that kind of thing?

I hadn't yet come to a satisfactory answer to that question, but a part of me knew it was because I hadn't really looked as closely as I needed to in order to find it. Things with Brody were...different. Prior experiences couldn't really compare. The popular idiom regarding the comparison of apples and oranges came to mind.

"I'm not a fucking apple," I muttered as I rubbed my temples in an attempt to fight off the headache that had been threatening all day. Staring at a screen certainly wasn't helping matters much, but neither would finishing the upcoming week's readings.

I stared up at the ceiling, as if I'd find the guidance I needed written in pretty script letters. I'd always been so independent that I'd rarely needed to ask anyone for advice. The few times I had, it'd always been about school or something as insignificant as needing to call my mother about replacing a bottle of wine for the art exhibit. None of those previous instances had been in regard to personal issues.

Speaking to Dr. Ipres about the situation with Aline's desire to go to Iran had been the closest I'd ever come to inquiring about a personal problem. Sex and relationships had never been the subject matter, not even with my parents. They weren't prudes, but once I'd had 'the talk' from my mom, I'd never really broached the topic aside from the occasional health-based question.

It'd never bothered me before, not talking about these sorts of things, especially after Jack, but now, I found myself wishing I was close enough to someone to talk about what was going on in my head. Because I sure as hell wasn't figuring it out on my own.

The sound of a key in the door had me sitting up and reaching for my laptop again. Aline had texted me when she left L.A., so I'd known she'd be back around now, which was why I'd made a point of making a dinner that could be easily re-heated. If she'd eaten on the way home, we could save what was in the fridge, but if she hadn't stopped, neither one of us would need to put something together. Plus, I'd had work to do.

We exchanged greetings as she came into the apartment, and before she could ask me what I'd done all weekend, I asked how Martina was doing. Since Aline had only one small suitcase, she declined my assistance and answered my questions while she unpacked. I stayed where I was, jotting down random notes about the direction I wanted to take this particular essay. It wasn't until she'd heated up some food and had come to join me on the couch that she finished.

"What did you do while I was gone?" she asked before digging into the chicken and pork stir fry.

I shrugged. "Went to that fundraiser last night for Mom, cleaned this morning, and then this." I gestured at the laptop and books around me.

"Really?" Her eyebrows went up. She finished chewing, swallowed, and continued, "You didn't do anything fun? Not even binging *This is Us* while I was safely out of the tissue zone?"

I managed a smile. "I caught up Friday night."

This is Us was a running joke between the two of us. I wasn't a huge fan of television, and neither was Aline, but we each had a couple shows that we liked to watch. We overlapped on some like *The Magicians* and *Property Brothers*, but there were a couple that one of us liked and the other didn't. For me, it was *This is Us*. Between Aline and me, most people would assume that she was the one who liked a show known for its intensely emotional episodes, but for some reason, she wasn't fond of it. I, on the other hand, had been hooked from the very beginning.

"Are you feeling okay?" she asked, frowning at me. "You look...off."

I forced my smile wider. "I'm fine. A little tired."

Her eyes narrowed, and I found myself on the receiving end of a searching look. "You've been acting strange for weeks."

Okay, that surprised me. "I have?"

"At first, I thought you were just stressing out about school, but that's not it, is it?" She set down her fork, concern in her eyes. "Is something wrong with Mom or Dad, and you guys don't want to tell me?"

“No!” I leaned forward, both hands up in a placating gesture. “They’re both fine. Dad’s last check-up went well, just like we told you.”

A wave of relief visibly washed over her. “Good.” After a moment, she asked, “Then what is it?”

Dammit. I’d hoped that would’ve been the end of it. “I’m fine,” I said.

“So, nothing happened this weekend? Or a few weeks ago?”

She wasn’t going to let it go. I needed to direct her attention elsewhere. Fortunately, I didn’t have to think too hard to find a subject. “Oh, I meant to ask if you’d gotten any updates from Neutral Ground about the trip.”

Her face lit up. “I received an email from Odessa Little. She’ll be the one heading up our team in October.”

With that, she was off, telling me everything about what Odessa said. It would take very little to keep her talking about the trip, and I knew that once she was completely sidetracked, she’d forget about wanting to pry into what was going on in my life. Not because she didn’t care, but because her mind just simply kept moving forward at lightning speed, and the only things that stuck were the ones that excited her. She’d always been that way, and our family had always let her be that way because she was special.

One day, Aline was going to change the world, and I was going to do whatever it took to make sure it happened, no matter how annoyed I got sometimes.

SEVEN

BRODY

FOUR DAYS HAD PASSED SINCE I'D LEFT FREEDOM'S APARTMENT AND DRIVEN home with her scent still clinging to me. Every night since then, I'd dreamed of her. It didn't matter how many times I'd woken up in the middle of the night, the moment I'd closed my eyes again, she was there. Tempting me.

I'd worked my ass off during the day, trying to exhaust myself into dreamless nights, but it'd never worked. I hadn't reached out to Freedom, and she hadn't to me, but that hadn't come as a surprise. We were both busy, after all. And we weren't dating. We didn't need to ask each other how things were going. If the opportunity came up to see each other, that was different. We hooked up because we knew we were good together.

Fuck that. We were *explosive* together.

We could both do a lot worse than each other for fuck buddies. Call each other whenever we needed some stress relief and then go about our normal businesses without worrying about complicated stuff.

I'd had this discussion with myself several times over the last few days, and I hadn't yet talked myself into believing it. I'd had fuck buddies in the past. Friends with benefits. One-night stands. While it had been a while, I'd managed casual relationships in the past. I knew how this worked. I'd done it before.

Except none of *that* was like *this*.

I'd never had a problem getting a woman out of my head until now, and the longer it continued, the more it irritated me. I didn't like lying to myself. I never had.

I'd admitted to myself years ago that I never wanted to risk being in love because I didn't want to experience the things that Da and Theresa did when they'd lost their spouses. I knew it wasn't exactly healthy for me to think that way, but I'd still chosen it. And I hadn't had any issues keeping to it.

Until now.

I wasn't going to say that I was in love with Freedom because that wouldn't be the truth, exactly. The lie I had to stop was that I could be satisfied with carrying on with her the way we had been and that I didn't want anything more.

And I had no idea what to do with that.

Fortunately, I knew who to talk to.

Da had been a little surprised when I'd asked him to meet me for lunch today, but he hadn't asked any questions. He was already at Plucked Chicken & Beer waiting for me, and we made small talk while we ordered. He didn't push, even though he knew that I must've asked him here for a reason; that had never been his way of doing things.

Once we'd both eaten some of our meals, I finally approached the reason I'd asked him to meet me.

"Can I ask you a question about...about Theresa?"

Da nodded, his eyes narrowed in curiosity. "Of course."

"How could you do it?" I held up a hand. "Wait, that didn't come out right."

The slight smile on Da's face said he was waiting to hear everything before speaking.

"You knew what it was like, losing someone you loved. I don't remember a lot from when Ma was alive, but I remember how sad you were after she died." My mouth was dry, and I took a drink. "Even knowing that, you let yourself fall in love again. How could you take that risk?"

He shrugged. “Real love is a gift, and when you find it, you grab onto it with two hands, and life’s the better for it. No matter how much it hurt me to lose your ma, I never regret the time I had with her.”

Was what I felt for Freedom that strong? If it wasn’t now, could it be?

And what was I going to do about it.

EIGHT

FREEDOM

I'D HOPED THAT THE LAST FEW WEEKS OF CLASSES WOULD ALLOW ME TO HAVE tranquil monotony. Just papers to write and tests to take. Double-checking everything I needed to have in order to graduate. Everything nice and boring.

And for the most part, that was exactly how things had gone. Nothing too exciting.

Well, except one thing.

Karina Montoya.

I'd somehow managed to be assigned as the young woman's translator when her family moved to California from Spain. How hard could it be? That was the question I'd asked myself when I'd accepted the position.

I snorted at how naïve I'd been at the time. The girl was wild as a buck and horny for any man who walked in her direction...including one of Stanford's guest lecturers, the very smarmy Dr. Korbin Worthington III.

I'd thought I'd been so clever inviting Karina to have lunch with Korbin and me when the asshole wouldn't leave me alone. Apparently, at some point after Korbin, Karina, and I had gone to lunch, the two of them had connected.

I didn't know which one had reached out first, and with their personalities, it was hard to tell. Turned out that the reason Karina hadn't been reaching out to me over the last few weeks was because she and Korbin had been spending all their time together. And not just their free time either. Karina's attendance at her actual classes had been poor enough that she'd failed everything.

I'd checked in with her, of course, but I'd taken her at her word when she'd told me that everything was fine. Since I hadn't received any more late-night phone calls for rides from drunken parties, I'd assumed that she'd settled into a more productive routine.

She'd had everyone fooled.

Last Wednesday, I'd been woken up by a near-panicked phone call from Dr. Ipres, asking when I'd last spoken to Karina. When I'd told her that I'd met Karina for lunch on Monday afternoon, Dr. Ipres told me that she'd received word from Dr. Josephs that Karina hadn't called her parents Tuesday evening as scheduled. Naturally, I'd asked what Dr. Ipres needed of me and which authorities had been notified.

I'd been a little surprised when she'd asked me to check Karina's social media, but I'd done it. That was how I'd learned that Karina and Korbin had run off to Cancun together. Feeling as if I'd let Dr. Ipres down by allowing this to happen, I'd apologized to her and offered to contact Karina's parents personally to take full responsibility for what had happened.

Dr. Ipres had told me that no one blamed me for Karina's actions. My role had been to ensure that Karina had access to someone who spoke her native language, but it had ultimately been Karina's responsibility to come to me with any difficulties she might have. And none of that ventured anywhere near to her love life. Her parents hadn't placed their trust in me to care for their child.

Even though Korbin hadn't been a member of the faculty, his relationship with an eighteen-year-old student had definitely caused a scandal. The university had made a point of emphasizing that Karina was of age and not under duress, ridding themselves of any liability for their actions. There had been some talk of issues with her student visa since she'd failed her classes, as well as questions regarding her crossing the border into Mexico, but that was well above my pay grade.

While I still held some small amount of guilt for bringing her to Korbin's attention, I'd seen how she'd acted with him, and nothing short of a bodyguard would have kept her away from him. I wasn't responsible for her making poor life decisions. I just hoped she would come to her senses sooner

rather than later.

With my graduation fast approaching, I'd asked Dr. Ipres to let me know if she heard anything about Karina, but I would otherwise be uninvolved in any of the politics and gossip surrounding what had happened. I had enough on my plate, not the least of which was ensuring that Aline had done everything she needed to do.

Then there was this stupid assignment. Accounting for half of my grade, I needed the paper to be perfect. It didn't matter how well I had performed on anything else. If I turned in a poor paper, I could end up losing academic distinctions, ones that would be viewed by prospective employers. Unlike in the past, when I'd struggled with difficult assignments, there would be no possibility of improving my overall grades with future classes. I hadn't needed to do that, but knowing that the option was there had taken off some of the pressure. More than I'd realized until that safety net no longer existed.

"Dammit." I sat back with a sigh.

"Is something wrong?" Aline asked from where she sat on the couch, legs folded under her, book in hand.

"Just this paper," I said. "I'm starting to think that my professor is a closet sadist."

Aline laughed. "One of my first education classes talked about setting lesson plans, and I remember my professor saying that, unless a teacher wants to run themselves ragged at the end of the school year, they should stagger any writing assignments so that they never have more than one class turning in essays or papers at a time, and to never assign them less than three weeks before the end of the term."

I dropped my face into my hands. "I wish Professor Gallagher had taken that class."

"At least it's only a couple pages."

"True."

She was right. It could have been worse. I'd heard that about ten years ago, an entire class of biology majors had gone to the dean of their college to

complain that their professor was demanding a twenty-six-page paper, even though he hadn't given them topic options until two weeks before the paper was due.

"Maybe you need to take a break," Aline suggested. "Decompress a little."

I agreed with her, but I had a problem I wasn't about to share with my baby sister. My usual method of stress relief required me to go somewhere I could find a nameless, faceless stranger who'd fuck me into oblivion. While I could have made some sort of excuse to leave – I'd done that in the past – it wasn't needing to come up with a believable lie to go that had me frowning. No, my irritation was that the idea of fucking some random man did absolutely nothing for me.

When I thought about sex, I could only see one person. Sandy brown hair and blue-green eyes. Tall and athletic with dimples and a pretty-boy face. Scarred but drop-dead gorgeous. And beyond phenomenal in the bedroom.

I hadn't seen Brody since he'd left my apartment a little less than two weeks ago, but I hadn't been able to get him out of my mind any better now than I had any other time since we'd met. I hadn't tried hooking up with anyone else, but I was fairly confident that any attempts would result in a complete lack of interest. Brody had spoiled me.

There wasn't any other reason to explain it.

What it boiled down to was that I could either take the chance on going to all the trouble of finding a man only to be disappointed, or I could take care of it myself.

I chose the latter.

"I think a hot bath and my lavender body wash is just what the doctor ordered."

"That's a good idea," Aline said. "Take as much time as you need and don't come out until you've relaxed."

I had no idea if she understood that my 'hot bath' wasn't really what would give me relief, but even if she did, I wasn't going to let that stop me. Not when I felt like my nerves were stretched to the point of snapping.

Fifteen minutes later, I was in the tub, surrounded by hot water and lavender-scented bubbles. I'd pinned my hair up so the porcelain was cold against the base of my neck as I leaned back, but my skin quickly warmed it. I closed my eyes and tuned out everything except the faint sound of music from the living room.

Trailing my fingers across the tops of my breasts, I concentrated on the warm water, the gentle touch. My other hand moved over my stomach and then down between my thighs. I tried to keep my mind blank, focus on the sensations alone, but other thoughts crept in.

Stronger, thicker fingers than mine slipping between my folds, finding my clit. The entire length of the digits passing over that bundle of nerves with just enough friction to make me shiver, then sliding into my core. A large hand cupping my breast, thumb and forefinger plucking at my nipple until it was a tight little bud. Increasing pressure until I had to bite back a moan.

His face appeared in my mind, every curve and line that I'd unconsciously memorized. The bright spark of intelligence and fun in blue-green depths. Lips just shy of being too full to be masculine, and a smile that made my knees weak. A wicked mouth that could say the most decadent things and a tongue talented with more than words.

My usual fantasies came with faceless, nameless men, and only if I really needed them. Flashes that fed my imagination. I'd never brought a real person into my head, pretending that it was his hands and mouth on me, and certainly not one I knew well enough to conjure up exactly how he would feel and what he would do. I hadn't even done that with Jack.

I didn't fight it, though. I needed to get off, and if fantasizing about Brody was what it took, I was willing to go along with it. Fortunately, he'd given me plenty of material to draw from.

His hot, wet tongue circled my clit, then moved lower to dip inside me. His fingers were there too, penetrating me with short, quick strokes. He twisted the digits with each thrust, his knuckles rubbing against different parts of me even as his other hand continued playing with my breast. Pressure and pain sent conflicting signals across my nerves, merging with promised pleasure. He sucked on my clit, flicking his tongue back and forth across the top until I

exploded.

I bit my bottom lip, my back arching as I came. My body stiffened, heart thudding against my ribcage, and I rode the wave of sensation, clinging to it for as long as I could. Because when it was over, the real world waited just outside that door, and while I normally thought of myself as someone who had her feet firmly on the ground, a not-so-small part of me yearned to stay here, in this moment, suspended in a place of tranquil bliss.

NINE

BRODY

WHILE I'D SEEN LEON JESSUP ON TELEVISION FROM TIME TO TIME, competitive surfers didn't get the airplay other athletes did. Even so, the increase of channels focusing on more obscure sports had at least given me the chance to keep up with his career. Even those occasional interviews, however, hadn't really shown how much he'd changed since the last time I'd been face-to-face with him four years ago.

Young men in their early twenties generally bulked up, and athletes more so. Leon had been strong but lean back then. He hadn't just packed on muscle, though. He'd grown at least an inch, though he still wasn't quite six feet. At twenty-four, he was a man, but I couldn't help but see him as the ten-year-old kid I'd met in Australia.

"It's good to see you." I drew him in to a back pounding hug. "Thanks for taking the time to come see me. I know you're busy."

"Glad I could make it," he said with a grin. "I don't usually have any free time while I'm in the States. Bette always has me running ragged, but since you said you had 'an opportunity' to discuss with me, she said I could have today."

I shook my head and laughed. "I told you she was a bulldog."

He joined in, teeth flashing white against his tanned skin. "She's the reason I've got so many endorsements, so I'm not complaining."

“An endorsement is why I wanted to talk to you.” I gestured for him to sit down. “But lunch first.”

Adela came in a few minutes later, and I invited her to join us as a thank you for bringing us lunch when she usually only worked a half-day one Saturday a month. To my surprise, she agreed. The three of us talked as we ate, the conversation moving from Leon’s Australia accent to how Adela had come to work for me, and then, eventually, to Adela asking how Leon and I knew each other.

“I’m not surprised he hasn’t told you the story,” Leon said, dark eyes glinting with good humor. “He doesn’t like to talk about it.”

I glared at him. “It’s not a big deal.”

Adela raised an eyebrow at me and then turned to Leon. “That just means it’s a really big deal.”

He chuckled. “You know him well.”

“Apparently not as well as I thought,” she said dryly, “if I don’t know this ‘big deal.’”

The last thing I’d expected when I’d invited Adela to eat with us was Leon bringing up *that* story. I supposed it was because it wasn’t one I thought of very often, despite the lasting effects.

“My scars,” I said, keeping my voice even. “I told you that I got them in a surfing accident. Leon and I met at that tournament.”

I hoped that would be enough for her, but before she could say anything, Leon took it on himself to...expound.

“It wasn’t exactly a surfing accident. He was in a competition at Snappers Rocks. Wiped the floor with everyone.” He pointed at me when I opened my mouth. “You did.” He turned back to the story. “And it got a decent amount of coverage too. But the real story happened the day after the competition when a stupid ten-year-old boy tried to imitate what he’d seen the surfers doing and was pulled under near a coral reef.”

I'd never heard Leon tell the story before, and to my surprise, it pulled me back to that day.

The thrill of being on the waves. Suddenly realizing that a child was fighting the current. The fear that I wouldn't be able to reach him in time. The pain as the coral tore at my skin.

And then grim triumph when I finally managed to get a grip on his arm.

"He'd just gotten me on his board when the undertow caught him." Leon shook his head. "Everyone thought for sure he was a goner. Ripped up by the reef. But he came up and managed to get the two of us back to shore before he collapsed into a bloody mess."

I barely remembered the trip to the shore, only that I'd kept praying that there weren't any sharks because I'd known I'd been bleeding a lot. I hadn't even known that Leon was safe until I'd woken up in the hospital a couple hours later.

"He saved my life," Leon said.

Adela gave me a hard look. "And, let me guess, he didn't want any credit for it."

"It's like you know him or something," Leon said, winking at her. "Reporters were all over, wanting to talk to him, get his picture, but he didn't want anything to do with it."

"I just did what anyone would've done." My face was hot, and I just wanted to be done with this conversation. "And now that you two have had your fun, it's time to talk business."

Adela pushed to her feet. "And that's my cue to get going."

"You're welcome to stay," I said. "You do own a percentage of the company."

Adela made a dismissive gesture. "Just clean up your own trash." She turned her attention to Leon. "It was nice to meet you."

Leon stood and put out his hand. "You too."

The handshake seemed to linger, and the way Leon watched Adela leave made me wonder if he was attracted to her. A little surprising, but nothing wrong with it. There were eight years or so between the two, but they were both adults and all-around good people. If they wanted to pursue something, I wished them all the best.

“You said we have business?” Leon asked as he sat back down.

“I’m looking for a spokesperson for Shannon’s,” I said. “I want someone I know and trust. Someone I don’t have to worry about pulling stupid shit and dragging the name through the mud.”

Leon leaned back in his seat. “Wow. I...I’m honored. I know how much Shannon’s means to you.”

“And that’s why you’re the one I want.” I was pleased by how stunned he appeared. He was the right choice. “I’ll be working with a marketing team, and I’ll have legal draw up a contract for Bette to look over, but I wanted the offer to come from me first.”

“I won’t let you down,” he said.

“I never thought otherwise.” I stood. “Now, what do you say to a sample?”

We drank a couple fingers of my favorite whiskey and discussed how Leon’s career was going. Nearly twenty minutes passed, and then my phone rang. Da’s name was on the screen, and my stomach clenched. Ever since Eoin had been hurt, every call from my father brought a wave of anxiety.

“Excuse me for a minute,” I said to Leon as I picked up my phone. “Da?”

“Everything’s fine, lad.”

It still amazed me how well he knew me. With as many of us kids as there were, no one would’ve been surprised that his attention had to have always been spread thin, but it’d never felt that way. I could only hope to be as good a father someday.

“Eoin’s official discharge date is coming up,” Da continued, “and he’ll be leavin’ Camp Parks on June tenth. I was wonderin’ if you would be able to pick him up. He’ll be livin’ here for a while, but I thought he’d prefer one of

his siblings gettin' him to Theresa or myself.”

Da's reasoning made sense. Eoin had joined the military right out of high school, and I had no doubt it would chafe to live under our parents' roof again. It was necessary at this point, but that didn't mean we couldn't do whatever we could to make it clear that we didn't see him as being dependent.

“It's a Monday afternoon, so if you can't, I understand.”

“No, Da, it's fine. I'm happy to do it.” I meant it too.

While thinking about what had happened to Eoin dampened my enthusiasm, I looked forward to spending some time with him. Maybe I'd even be able to feel him out a bit about how he was doing and get an idea of any ways I could help him.

TEN

FREEDOM

I SHOULD HAVE FELT DIFFERENT NOW. AT LEAST, THAT WAS THE THOUGHT repeating in my head since graduation twelve days ago. I shouldn't have felt like the same young woman who'd come to Stanford right out of high school. I was in my mid-twenties and had lived on my own for years.

Technically, Aline and I had lived together for a few of those years, but it wasn't as if she'd taken care of me. I'd felt the difference between high school and college. Moving from university life to real life, however, didn't seem to have the same clear-cut distinction.

I remembered very clearly the day I graduated from high school. It had been a good day, and I had pleasant memories of the things I'd done, but what stood out the clearest, even now, was waking up that morning with a rush of knowledge that this time the next day, I would officially be out of high school.

I hadn't felt that on June first.

There'd been no dread or disappointment on that day. It had been a good one. The four of us had had a great time together. After Dad's heart attack in the spring, it had been extra special having him there. The memories were good, but that feeling of a change transitioning me from one part of my life to the next hadn't been present. And it still hadn't shown up.

Maybe it hadn't happened because everything I'd thought I'd be doing shortly following graduation wasn't turning into reality. Aline and I should have just been returning from a short vacation, ready to start our respective

jobs, jobs that we would have already vetted, positions we would have accepted. If I'd just been going into my last few free days before starting my career, I'd feel that looming. I was sure of it. But when I looked toward next week, the only thing I could see were days upon days stretching out in front of me.

The last couple days, I'd spent time helping Dr. Ipres set up her curriculum for her summer courses, during which we talked about world politics and the stranger and more difficult politics involved in education. I learned who was up for tenure, both at Stanford and several of the other top universities.

And I heard other gossip too.

Such as the fact that Korbin Worthington III was now in complete disgrace as opposed to the partial disgrace he'd been in when he left Stanford with Karina. Apparently, they'd stopped in Las Vegas on their way to Cancun, which was only discovered when Mexican authorities questioned Korbin about 'kidnapping' a college student. Karina had flashed a diamond ring and Korbin had held up a marriage certificate. Both sets of parents had found out about the marriage by seeing it splashed across social media.

That had been the most shocking news to me, though Aline and I telling our parents about our plans for October had definitely been the most shocking news to them. If Aline hadn't been so excited about it, they probably wouldn't have handled it as well as they had. Still, I'd managed to avoid being alone with them the entire five days they been here. I'd have to do the same when Aline and I went to visit them in September, or I'd end up getting an earful for certain.

Between now and that trip, however, I had a shitload of nothing to do.

I'd known about the gap between graduation and the Iran trip for months, but I hadn't made any plans. Maybe a part of me had thought that Aline would change her mind or that something would come up to cancel the trip. Heaven knew there were enough issues going on in that area that anything was possible. Denial could be a strong thing.

Or maybe I'd been too preoccupied with other...things.

I needed to put together a plan.

I had that thought in my head as I moved about the kitchen, preparing breakfast for Aline and myself. This was a good time for us to talk. We could still take a long weekend, do something fun, and then get to work. I had a bit of an idea about something we could do that would not only occupy our time but would also look good on our resumé. Plus, I could pitch it as something Neutral Ground would admire.

I supposed that meant I did have a plan. At least, the beginning of one.

Twenty minutes later, Aline and I were halfway through our breakfast, and I prepared to bring up my idea.

She beat me to the verbal punch. “Martina’s coming up tonight.”

Not what I’d expected her to say. “Oh. Okay.”

“When I went to visit her last month, she and I talked about how we both needed a break from real life for a bit. I knew I couldn’t really go anywhere before we graduated, and then we were going to see Mom and Dad.” She made a dismissive gesture. “Anyway, that’s not really important. What is important is that we’re taking a vacation. We’re leaving tomorrow and will be back on the twenty-ninth.”

I just stared at my sister. My brain told me that I must still be dreaming, because this was too weird. A trip to New York for a weekend was one thing. Two weeks was something else.

Our parents were going to flip.

If she even told them.

“We just got back from L.A.” I finally found my voice, but I had no idea why that was my first response.

“It wouldn’t be much of a vacation for Martina if we were only going back to L.A.” Aline’s eyes gleamed with good humor. “Tomorrow morning, we’re flying out to Las Vegas.”

My jaw dropped. “You’re going *where*?”

“Vegas!” She was beaming. “Isn’t that a great idea for a vacation? I mean, everyone talks about going to Las Vegas. Martina’s never been either, so it’ll

be new for both of us.”

I leaned back in my chair, completely stunned. She’d planned a two-week trip to Sin City with a childhood friend she’d apparently reconnected with at some point, and I hadn’t noticed. How had I not noticed? How had I not figured out that her trip to see Martina meant the two of them had been talking? How had I not known that Aline had been planning this?

Had she intentionally kept it from me? Hidden what she was doing? Why?

Had...had she not wanted to risk that I’d invite myself along?

The thought hit me like a punch to the gut.

She didn’t want me to go with her. She just wanted to be with Martina.

“And don’t worry, I already scheduled a car to pick us up in the morning, so you don’t need to worry about us needing you to take us to the airport,” she continued. “We have to be there early...”

Her words faded into the background as I struggled to process how I felt about this. It should have been a simple ‘go have fun and I’ll enjoy the quiet’ kind of thing. That’s how it would have been if Aline had been an average twenty-one-year-old, but she’d never been average a day in her life.

She’d always needed someone to help her with normal life sort of things. That was why we’d never considered any other living arrangements for her when she came to Stanford. That was why I was going to Iran with her.

So, why had she cut me out of this trip?

Annoyance crept in with the hurt. I’d changed all my after-graduation plans so I could go to Iran with her because that was what she wanted to do. It’d been just as long for me as her when it came to doing something fun. But when she decided to take a vacation to Las Vegas, she chose a friend she’d seen only once or twice over the last several years.

I always dropped everything for her, and now she was leaving me behind.

“Freedom?”

The frown on Aline's face made me realize she'd probably said my name more than once.

"Sorry." I forced a smile. "Still waiting for the caffeine to kick in."

"Of course." Aline stood up. "Let me get you a refill."

As I watched her take my mug back to the coffee pot, guilt flooded me. Aline could be forgetful and often clueless about things outside of her attention field, but she wasn't malicious. She didn't have a cruel bone in her body. If Martina had suggested that she and Aline go to Las Vegas, Aline would've gone along with whatever plans Martina initiated. And Martina had never disliked me, but I wouldn't have called her a friend, exactly, so she wouldn't have necessarily thought of me going with them.

I used drinking a second cup of coffee as a reason to not talk, still sorting through everything I was feeling. No matter how frustrated I was at Aline, I wasn't going to ruin how excited she was simply because I was having a little pity party for myself. And that's what this was.

I loved her, and I didn't regret everything I'd given up or delayed so I could take care of her. It could just be a little overwhelming at times.

By the time I finished my coffee, I was able to offer a sincere smile as I listened to Aline telling me about her and Martina's plans. When she was done, I'd ask about what our parents thought, but if she wanted to do this herself, she could handle them too. For once, I wasn't going to get involved. If she wanted the fun, she needed to take at least some responsibility.

ELEVEN

BRODY

SEATTLE WASN'T KNOWN FOR ITS SUNSHINE, BUT IT DID APPEAR FROM TIME TO time, so I'd promised my niece that the first sunny day during my trip here, she and I would have a day out. According to the current forecast, tomorrow was supposed to be that day, and this was Alec's weekend with Evanne, so it worked out well. She and I would spend the day together, and then I'd spend the rest of the weekend with them, flying home on Monday.

I'd spent my business days at a hotel so I wouldn't be distracted by my family and end up falling asleep at a meeting or something equally embarrassing, but my last meeting had been earlier this afternoon, and I was now out to find something to do to start the 'vacation' part of my trip off right.

Since my hotel was downtown, I left my car in their parking lot and walked to Elliott's Oyster House. If it'd been cooler, the light mist would've made the walk uncomfortable, but it was warm enough that the moisture was nice. After a good dinner, I headed back outside to decide if I needed to call a cab or if I was close enough to walk somewhere interesting.

With Alec and Evanne living here, I came to Seattle almost as often as I went to Los Angeles, and I knew my way around this city pretty well. Which meant I had an idea of where I might want to go. Only a few blocks from the restaurant was a place I'd gone to a few times after I'd stumbled onto it by accident a couple years ago.

Relief Bodywork was a massage parlor that also offered some...other services. It wasn't a sleazy place where trafficked girls were forced to provide customers with sex. The owner ran it more like a high-priced escort service, and it was all consensual. I wouldn't have gone to it if I thought for a single moment anyone was being forced to be there or do something they didn't want to do.

Every man and woman was trained in professional massage, and they could choose whatever they would or wouldn't do beyond the massage part. They could pick who they were willing to provide 'happy endings' to and were allowed to change their minds at any point.

I knew all of that because every single customer was required to sign a statement of understanding that also included a non-disclosure agreement on both sides. After having gone to The Black Masque and Club Privé, I better understood the need for, and prevalence of, such paperwork when sex was involved.

It wasn't this new understanding that made me a bit hesitant, though. I actually found it reassuring. It was the fact that, when I thought about sex, it was Freedom's face that popped into my mind, not a random stranger. She'd been the only one in my mind every time I'd gotten myself off pretty much since that first night. Sometimes, I hadn't even realized that I was thinking of her until after I was done.

The weather was still holding, so I turned toward the massage parlor and started walking. Other people were out too, some alone and some in pairs or groups, and even a couple families. I smiled and nodded at anyone who looked my way, but it was the sort of absent politeness that had always come easily to me, something that came without any real thought or effort. No connection necessary.

As a kid, I'd learned young that if I kept a pleasant expression and nodded acknowledgment when adults looked my way, they generally thought I was paying attention to whatever was going on. To this day, I had no idea if my parents, or anyone else for that matter, had a clue how often I'd tuned everyone else out. Or the fact that I still did it from time to time.

In the short time it took me to reach my destination, the light mist had become a steady drizzle. Not quite enough to soak through my clothes, but enough that I'd be taking a cab back to my hotel after I finished. The scent of incense mixed with the smell of rain was pleasant without being overpowering. The lobby was nice, nothing too flashy, but done up in such a way that it was clear this wasn't some cheap disguise for a brothel.

The lobby was empty as I walked up to the desk and smiled at the young man behind it. After I returned his greeting, I said, "I don't have an appointment, but I'm hoping you have room for a walk-in."

"You're in luck," he said. "We have a few openings. Do you have a specific person you'd like to see?"

I shook my head. "I'm from out of town, but I've been here a few times before. Never the same woman, though."

"Is that your preference this time as well?" he asked. "A female masseuse?"

"Yes, please." I paused for a moment. What the hell. Freedom and I weren't dating. I added, "And I'd like the special package."

He didn't ask if I was certain or if I knew what I was asking for. Hell, he didn't even blink. He simply tapped away on his computer for a few seconds and then asked, "Has it been more than a year since you were here last?"

I thought a moment before answering, "Yes, probably closer to eighteen months."

"All right." He held out a piece of paper. "I need you to fill out a new form and then choose an option for your session this evening. While you're doing that, I'll let Clare know that she has a client."

As I skimmed the document, I saw that nothing had changed, which meant I'd be getting option number one. Despite knowing that everyone here made the choice to do what they did, I'd never felt comfortable getting anything more than a hand-job here. Not because I thought more than that was wrong.

After going to Club Privé and The Black Masque, I understood more than I had before about the nuances of what a person liked or disliked. I'd had the knowledge, more or less, but knowledge and understanding weren't always

the same thing.

I finished filling out the form and handed it back over to the desk clerk. Less than five minutes later, I was shown into a room. A minute or so after that, I was naked and face-down on the table. The soft click of a door was the only indication that someone had joined me.

“Good evening. I’m Clare.”

She had a nice voice, but I didn’t say it out loud. I wasn’t here for conversation. And I certainly didn’t want to think about how Claire’s voice compared to Freedom’s sultry tone, especially when she was turned on. When she begged me to fuck her.

Dammit.

I was getting hard, and Clare hadn’t even touched me. In fact, she was still talking, and I hadn’t heard a single word she’d said.

“I’m sorry. My mind wandered a bit.”

She chuckled. Another nice sound. “No apology necessary but thank you. I only asked if you preferred scented or unscented oil.”

“Unscented.” I wanted relief, but this wouldn’t be an experience I planned to dwell on in the future. I didn’t want a specific smell connected to memory, causing me to remember this moment each time I encountered it.

“Any particular area giving you problems?”

I had a feeling some men might’ve answered with the obvious sexual response, but I really did want a massage too.

“Between my shoulder blades.”

“All right. I’ll start there.”

Her hands were warm, and I closed my eyes as they settled on my shoulders. Clare had a nice touch, with strong fingers that dug into my tight muscles instead of feather-light caresses that were just a precursor to the sexual part of the evening. She worked on the knots between my shoulder blades, the muscles at the small of my back and up my spine.

I let my mind wander, tried to relax into her touch. When she started to work on my ass, I waited to feel that familiar heat. Arousal. I waited to want her touch to become something sexual. She moved my legs apart, and her fingers played along the more sensitive skin of my inner thighs, brushed my balls.

And nothing.

Not even a little stirring.

Maybe I was thinking too hard. Concentrating on being turned on instead of just letting nature take its course.

Clare knew what she was doing. She was willing, and here, and I knew there'd be no strings attached. It was a business transaction. Two willing participants. Nothing more. I didn't even need to know what she looked like if I didn't want.

“Roll onto your back,” she said. “Once I get everything taken care of, we'll give you that special package you paid for.”

Polite. Sweet.

And all I could think was that I didn't want polite and sweet.

Dammit.

I pushed myself up and shook my head. “I've changed my mind.” I couldn't look at her. “You've been great, but that's all I need right now.”

“All right.” Clare sounded surprised but didn't argue. “I'll leave you to dress.”

As the door shut, I dropped my head into my hands and sighed. What the hell had Freedom Mercier done to me?

TWELVE

FREEDOM

SINCE ALINE HAD JOINED ME HERE AT STANFORD, I'D NEVER BEEN ALONE IN our apartment for more than a long weekend, and those had been few and far between. The only other times I'd been given any real solitude for more than that had been the times I'd house sat for Dr. Ipres and had stayed at her place. That wasn't the same as being alone at home, having the entire place to myself again.

Aline wasn't really *gone*, of course, and her things were in their usual places. Her creepy otter slippers were still in the middle of her doorway, those damn beady eyes freaking me out every time they caught the light. One of her favorite books sat on the table next to the couch, a tissue between the pages because she'd misplaced yet another bookmark.

And I knew I wasn't actually alone since I could still hear our neighbors from time to time. Same with the sounds that came from outside. But all of those were muffled, the usual kinds of background noise that filled every day. The silence came from inside. On an ordinary day, appreciation was how I acknowledged the quiet because I knew it never lasted long. Inevitably, Aline would come in, all smiles and sunshine, being her normal bubbly self.

It wasn't that she was loud, exactly. When she had her nose in a book, she wouldn't speak for hours. I kept trying to put a name to what was missing, and it'd finally hit me that I couldn't. It was just Aline. Something that she brought into a space with her, and it didn't matter when she annoyed me or when she didn't really think things through. I loved her.

Even when she made me tired.

That was what her vacation could be for me, a time I could rest and relax without being responsible for another person.

Okay, so I'd only come to that conclusion after I'd talked to our parents, wanting to know if they'd even tried to talk Aline out of going alone, and after I'd texted her to make sure she'd gotten to Vegas safely. That was just me wanting to make sure she was okay. It wasn't cutting into my rest and relax time if I was just checking in with her to ensure that nothing had gone wrong. I could enjoy the time to myself and still be a good big sister.

Except I hadn't realized just how often Aline pulled me out of my own head.

By the end of the first week, I was climbing the walls.

Only a few of my friends were still in Palo Alto, and all of them had either work or a significant other to keep them busy. I knew that if I reached out, someone would invite me to dinner or would accept my invitation for the same, but I'd be a third wheel with any of the couples, something I hadn't needed to think about since before Aline had come to Stanford. And, of course, no matter who I spent time with, someone would inevitably ask what I was doing now that I'd graduated.

Both Aline and I had agreed that we wouldn't tell our friends her plans for the fall until after we'd told our parents, which meant none of them knew about Neutral Ground because we hadn't told Mom and Dad until after graduation, and I hadn't talked to anyone else since. If I spent time with any of them, the first thing they'd want to know about would be my future.

And there was no way in hell I wanted to tell everyone that I was sitting on my ass because there was no point in getting settled at a job and then expect them to just let me go to Iran for a month in the fall. Oh, and my little sister was vacationing in Vegas with a childhood friend while I stayed here.

I closed my refrigerator door, muttering a curse under my breath. I'd finished some leftovers from last night, so there wasn't much clean-up for me to do, and I knew after I was done, I had nothing to look forward to for the rest of the evening. I'd finished all of Aline's Ericka Summers books – a secret I'd take to the grave – and binged all three seasons of *Unreal*. I needed

something a little more...stimulating.

It was Friday evening.

I needed a drink...and some company.

By the time I showered and dressed, I was feeling good about how I looked. A sleek little black dress that I knew looked great on me and a pair of heels that made my ass and legs look amazing. Not a lot of makeup, but just enough to highlight my features. A simple updo that kept my hair off my neck but wouldn't be problematic when things got hot and heavy.

Because that was the end goal. Sex. Sweaty, no-strings-attached, no-names-asked fucking. I wanted to burn some excess energy and not have to think while I did it. What I didn't want was a face appearing every time I closed my eyes. A touch I could still feel. I wanted an experience that would blot out everything else in my past. *Everyone* else.

I wouldn't think his name, though.

That would've defeated the entire purpose of going out tonight.

Forty minutes later, a hot, hard body was pressed against mine as we danced. I'd taken a cab so I could drink as freely as I wanted, which meant I'd had a couple shots and was feeling much more relaxed than when I'd arrived.

Progress.

And if the way this guy moved on the dance floor said anything about how well he'd move in other ways, he'd manage to get me the rest of the way there.

Strands of hair stuck to the back of my neck and my forehead, my skin glistening with sweat despite the air conditioning blasting. Music pulsed through me, reverberating in my chest, loud enough that my partner and I hadn't talked beyond a 'want to dance.' No names. No questions about why we were there or what we did for a living. He was here for the same reason I was. It was perfect.

Still, I felt my attention drifting. It was time to move things forward. I caught the front of his shirt in my fist and backed us off the dance floor. When I let

go and turned, he put his hand on my waist, and we made our way toward the exit. As we stepped out into the humid night, I paused just outside the door and pulled my phone from my purse.

“Did you drive?” I asked the guy standing next to me.

He grinned. “Camaro, baby.”

Great, he was one of those. I just hoped he wasn’t overcompensating too much.

“You want me, then I need a picture of you, your car, and your license plate.”

He seemed surprised but not offended, which was a point in his favor. “Go for it.” His smirk reappeared. “Anything specific of mine you want to photograph?”

I really wanted to tell him to just stop talking, but he was hot, here, and not asking personal questions. I snapped a quick face shot and then followed him to a – no surprise here – bright red Camaro. Two more photos, and then I looked at the guy expectantly. After a moment, he realized what I was doing and opened the passenger’s side door.

“I’m on top.”

Another look of surprise, but this time it was accompanied by lust. Perfect.

He got into the car and put the seat back all the way.

I liked a man who did as he was told enough for it to make up for the cheesy lines and flashy car. I straddled his lap and told him to close the door. He did. Now it was time to see just how well he took non-verbal directions.

I leaned down, and his hands settled on my hips. His lips were soft against mine, and I increased the pressure, nipping at his bottom lip. He groaned, fingers flexing but not moving. I deepened the kiss, tugging at his shirt until I could get my hands on what felt like a six-pack.

My nails lightly scraped on his chest, and that must have encouraged him because a hand was suddenly on my breast. The other went to my knee and then slid up my thigh, delving under my skirt.

A faint heat spread through me, and I rocked against him, desperate to find that same fire I'd had...I stopped the thought right there. No comparisons.

Except the stranger's mouth wasn't the right shape. He didn't know where to kiss or bite. How to touch me. Even the erection beneath me didn't feel right.

Dammit.

I tried again, my movements almost frantic, but it took less than a minute for me to realize it wasn't going to work.

Fuck.

I sighed and leaned back. "Dammit, I'm sorry. You're great, but this isn't going to happen. I can't stop thinking about this other guy."

The guy sighed too, but this one sounded more like relief. "Oh, thank goodness. I thought I could do this, but I can't." He gave me a slightly embarrassed smile. "I was thinking about Nico Tortorella."

I burst out laughing. "Good choice." He joined me, clearly understanding I wasn't making fun of him, just laughing at the situation.

"Let me drive you home," he offered. "It's the least I can do for you not slapping me when I said I was fantasizing about another man while I was making out with you."

"You weren't the only one," I reminded him as we untangled ourselves. "A ride home would be great. Thanks."

THIRTEEN

BRODY

WHEN I WAS EIGHT YEARS OLD, DA AND THERESA HAD PLANNED A SHORT vacation for the whole family, which, at the time, had meant twelve kids under the age of eleven, two of which were twins only a year or so old. Chaotic didn't even begin to describe it.

I couldn't remember the name of the hotel or of the theme park we'd gone to, but I did remember what had happened when I'd decided to assert some independence and run ahead of the group. I'd had a map clenched in one grimy fist and the absolute confidence of a child that I knew exactly where I was going.

I'd been thoroughly lost in just a few minutes and on the verge of tears. Fortunately for me, a security guard had been nearby, and he'd found me before I'd panicked. My sense of direction and ability to read a map had improved enough since then that I felt comfortable taking Evanne to Woodland Park Zoo even though I'd never been there before.

My own skill ended being completely inconsequential.

Evanne had picked up a map as we entered and looked up at me with a serious expression, saying that if we wanted to visit everywhere, we needed to find the best path before starting. I'd been mildly amused at first, going along with it for no other reason than the fact that it made her happy. Then she'd spread the map out on the table and explained that, since we'd parked in the Otter Lot, it would be best if we started off with the penguins and then around the tropical rain forest where we could see lemurs and gorilla, among

other things. Finally, she brought our trip all the way to the historic carousel where we'd take a ride before leaving at the same area where we'd entered.

I'd been thoroughly impressed and told her so, which had made her entire face light up. Even now, as we took a short break to get something to eat at the Gather and Graze Café, she was still smiling. She'd been here before with a school trip and seemed to be enjoying telling me all about each of the exhibits. She read every sign for every animal out loud, earning more than one entertained smile from other visitors.

I made a mental note to be sure to tell Alec about this part of our visit if Evanne didn't. No one outside of the family – at least as far as I knew – knew that Alec was dyslexic, and even though he'd never said anything, I had no doubt that he worried that Evanne would have the same difficulties.

A pang of guilt made my smile dim. When we were kids, I'd made fun of Alec for his dyslexia. I'd only done it that one time and I'd been fairly young, but I still felt guilty any time I thought of it. The scar Alec had above his right eye had come from the fight we'd gotten into because of it.

“Are you okay, Uncle Brody?”

Evanne's question brought me back to the present, and I pushed away the past before it could shadow our day together. I'd long since apologized to Alec, and he'd forgiven me, but I'd never forgotten it. I didn't want to, honestly. I might say something without thinking even now, but I'd had a clear mind back then. I'd been intentionally cruel, and that was something I'd strived to never duplicate again.

“I'm good.” I stretched my legs out in front of me. “My mind just got away from me for a moment.”

“I understand,” she said solemnly. “That happens to me in school sometimes. My teacher says I need to learn to pay attention better.”

I couldn't help smiling. “You probably get that from me. I didn't always listen as well as I should have.”

“Did you get in trouble?”

“Sometimes,” I admitted. I tossed my wrapper into a nearby trashcan. “I could have done better than I did. Do you always work your hardest?”

Evanne nodded enthusiastically. “I got straight A’s all year.”

I held out my fist, and she bumped it with hers. “You keep doing that and don’t distract anyone else, and your teachers won’t care so much when you get older.”

“I’ll be nine in November,” she informed me. “That’s almost ten.”

“So it is.”

She appeared to be thinking about something for a few seconds before asking, “How old are you? Daddy says I’m not supposed to ask people that, but I think he means strangers, and you’re not a stranger.”

“I’m thirty-one right now.”

Her eyes widened. “Is that older or younger than my dad?”

“Younger.” Ancient for a child not yet in double digits.

She nodded and finished her food without talking, making me think that her thoughts had moved on to something else. She surprised me, however, by the matter-of-fact statement she made while getting up to throw away her trash.

“I think I’d like a little brother or sister.”

My eyebrows shot up. I’d love to be a fly on the wall when she told Alec and Keli that one. And she wasn’t done yet. “Oh?”

“Maybe more than one, but not as many as you and Daddy have. I don’t think I’d like that many.”

“You don’t?”

“Do *you* like having that many brothers and sisters?”

“Most of the time,” I answered honestly. “I like having a niece, and you can’t have one of those without a sibling.” I stood up. “Ready to keep going?”

She grinned at me, big blue eyes sparkling, and grabbed my hand. “I’m chuffed.”

I laughed and shook my head. “Where did you hear that word?”

“Grand-da. I like when he teaches me funny words.”

“And what does your mom think of that?” Maybe it was a little petty of me, but Keli got under my skin in a bad way.

“She says it’s nonsense, but it’s better than picking up dirty words from the big kids at school.” Evanne shook her head and sighed. “I didn’t tell her that I already know all the dirty words. It would break her heart.”

I was even more glad that I’d decided not to leave until Monday. This was turning into one of the best days I’d had in a long time.

I PULLED up to the house and parked behind Da’s car. I’d gotten home yesterday evening, and as soon as I’d sat down on the couch, I’d been exhausted. On Saturday, after Evanne and I had finished our day out, we’d gone back to Alec’s and had eaten dinner, after which Evanne had kicked our asses at Monopoly. Alec had been thrilled. I had been thrilled too. Well, until she’d woken me up at the crack of dawn on Sunday and had run me ragged playing games and cooking.

I had a new respect for parents, especially mine. They’d raised kids every bit as precocious and high energy as Evanne, and all at the same time.

Today was their twenty-fifth anniversary.

Sometimes, it felt like it was only yesterday that my mother died and Da became a single father. Other times, it felt like it’d been centuries since he’d sat us all down to tell us about the woman he’d fallen in love with and wanted to marry.

I hadn’t been happy during the wedding, not until I’d seen Da smile at Theresa, a smile I hadn’t seen since before my mother died. I hadn’t liked that he was smiling at someone else like that, but I’d hated seeing him sad.

Theresa made him happy.

I picked up the bag Alec had given me and the box I'd wrapped last night. Usually, when I gave my whiskey as a gift, I used one of the fancy Shannon's bags we offered. While Theresa had never been weird or awkward when it came to my mother, I felt like an anniversary gift with my biological mother's name on it would be inconsiderate at the least, so I'd opted for a nice box with no writing at all.

The label was one I'd made exclusively for this bottle, the first of a new batch that I'd intentionally scheduled for release next week so that Mom and Da would have it before anyone else. It had, after all, been inspired by them. I called it Silver Grace.

I knocked on the door, even though my parents usually had an open-door policy. Today was their anniversary. I was *not* going to repeat what had happened to Xander when he'd tried to surprise our parents on their anniversary two years ago. None of us know the extent of what he saw, but he never opened a closed door without knocking first. Loudly.

"C'mon in, lad." Da chuckled as he opened the door. "You're right on time."

"How was Seattle?" Mom called from the kitchen.

I followed Da, waiting until we were closer to answer the question, so I didn't need to yell. "Best weather I've ever had there."

"Perfect for the zoo," Mom said as she set a plate of chocolate chip oatmeal cookies on the table. "Evanne did a video chat this morning to wish us a happy anniversary."

I put the gifts next to the cookies and took the closest chair to me. The kitchen one couldn't even fit half of our family at it, which meant we used this one on the occasions when only a few of us were over at a time.

"We had a lot of fun together," I said with a smile. "I'm sure she told you about how she beat Alec and me at Monopoly."

"Oh, she did indeed." Mom laughed. "In pain-staking detail while Alec sat next to her."

“Did she tell you about the talk she and I had about siblings?” I hadn’t mentioned anything to Alec even after we’d been alone. He’d needed to vent about some recent issues with Keli, and I’d had a feeling that bringing up siblings when he was pissed at his ex wouldn’t be the best idea.

Da’s eyebrows shot up.

“Please tell me Alec and Keli—”

“Oh! No! Shit!” I scrambled to clarify. “They are *not* back together, and they’re *not* having another kid.”

Mom looked relieved enough that she didn’t feel the need to bring attention back to the fact that I’d cursed.

“In fact,” I continued, “Alec seemed more annoyed at Keli than usual.”

Mom shook her head. “I know she’s the mother of our granddaughter, but I really do not like that woman.”

“I dinna think any of us do,” Da said dryly. He picked up a cookie. “Now, son, what’s this about siblings?”

As I shared the conversation, Da reached over and put his hand on Mom’s. It was a simple gesture, something he’d done at least a thousand times before. I’d probably seen it before too, but this time was different. Maybe it was because it was their anniversary or because of what had happened at Relief Bodywork, but the way Da looked at Mom, it twisted something inside me.

For the first time in my life, I wondered what it would be like to have that with a woman. To be sitting next to the same person for a quarter-century and still be looking at her like that.

I didn’t have anyone specific in mind – which was what I kept telling myself – but the thought was still there.

“I know Alec loves Seattle, and with Evanne living with Keli there most of the time, it makes sense for him to live there, but I can’t help wishing we were closer.” Mom’s smile was wistful. “She *is* my only grandchild.”

Da started to laugh and then turned it into a cough.

“Subtle,” I said.

Mom just smiled at me innocently.

“I think this is a good time for you to open your gifts.” I shifted the conversation, and they let me.

The new direction my thoughts had been going recently wasn't something I was ready to discuss with them. Hell, I'd been blind-sided by it myself. I needed to think and figure out exactly where my head was before I could even begin to think about telling anyone else. But this wasn't the time or the place for introspection.

I'd deal with all that later.

FOURTEEN

FREEDOM

ALINE WAS COMING HOME TOMORROW EVENING.

I knew she'd been having fun, and I was happy for her, but I couldn't help anticipating her return, if only because I'd be able to know for certain that she was safe. No matter how frustrated or annoyed I became when watching over her, I would still protect her and take care of her because that's what big sisters did.

Logically, I knew that she was an adult, but I still had memories of when I'd gone to see her at the hospital not long after she was born. I'd been four years old, but it had been traumatic enough for me that those images had burned themselves into my brain.

The diaper that hadn't fit correctly because she'd been too small. How thin her arms and legs had been. Skin I'd almost been able to see through. And tubes. So many tubes.

The first three nights she'd been home, I'd fallen asleep next to the crib, and my dad had carried me back to bed at some time during the night. It'd only been after he'd promised to sit in the nursery night after night that I'd finally stayed in my own room. Years later, I'd found out that he'd spent every night for two months sleeping in a chair next to Aline's crib.

Most kids didn't have much in the way of attention spans, and usually, things out of sight stayed out of mind. It wasn't selfishness but rather a simple lack of brain maturity. But Aline's well-being had been such a central part of our family that I'd never lost that protectiveness. Very few of my family-oriented

memories didn't include her.

When she'd started walking, I'd wanted to hold her hands the whole time to ensure she hadn't fallen. Her first day of school, I'd begged Mom to let me miss my classes so I could go with her to make sure she was okay. The year that our parents had bought her a bike for her birthday, I'd researched the best protective gear and given that to her as my gift. When Florence Needlemeier had pushed Aline on the playground, resulting in scraped knees for my sister, I'd gone to Florence's house and told her that if she ever touched my sister again, I'd put dog poop in her backpack so everyone would think that she smelled. I'd been grounded for a month after her parents had called mine, but the only lesson I'd learned was to be more subtle.

Fortunately, protecting Aline from bullies wasn't something I had to do often. She was the sort of person who could charm anyone. People just wanted to be near her because she made them feel special. That was one of the qualities I'd always thought would make her an excellent elementary school teacher. The kids were old enough to know when someone genuinely cared about them, but for the most part, not so old that they'd become jaded.

I stretched out on the couch and turned on the TV. There had to be something I could watch that Aline wouldn't be interested in. Wasn't that the positive spin I'd put on being here alone while she was in Vegas? I could lay on the couch however I wanted and not need to think about whether or not Aline would want to sit here too. I didn't need to consider if she liked a show or movie.

Nothing looked appealing.

I'd never been a person who watched things just to have something to do. If I saw a story that interested me, I'd check it out, but I'd never seen the point of having the TV on for just background noise. If I wanted to listen to something while reading or doing whatever, I'd play music, but I couldn't think of anything I wanted to read or do right now. I didn't even have anything I *needed* to do.

I'd cleaned the entire apartment, floor to ceiling. Washed every item of clothing I could find. Remade both beds and washed all those linens. I'd baked. A lot. Bread. Cookies. Pie. I prepared and froze a few different things

for future meals. A couple kinds of soup. Hamburgers with onions and green peppers chopped into the meat. Lasagna. Waffles – made from scratch and then frozen.

Aline and I weren't going to have to cook for at least a month, and that was a good thing because I was sick of cooking for a while. Case in point, I'd ordered Thai for lunch and planned on reheating it for dinner.

I sighed. How sad was it that the only thing I had to look forward to on a Friday evening where I had no responsibilities was reheating Thai?

Maybe the reason my life wasn't following the plan I'd carefully laid out had less to do with Aline's lack of consideration and more to do with my own lack of...something. I frowned at the thought. I'd always thought of myself as ambitious and sure of what I wanted. After all, I had a master's degree in the field of my choice, a resumé that included dozens of extra-curricular activities. Leading a workshop last year. Organizing the art exhibit. Translating for Karina.

Well, I was still debating on putting that last one on my official resumé. While I couldn't actually be held responsible for Karina running off with Korbin, I wasn't sure that the positive of what I'd done would balance out the negative that would come with being associated with the scandal.

While that particular situation had quieted down to the point where it wasn't making headlines, if I searched for a job around here, chances would be that my prospective employer would still know the story. Granted, I wouldn't put Karina's name on my resumé, but if they asked questions about that particular experience, I couldn't guarantee that the name wouldn't come up.

One of the other things I'd done this past week had been polishing my resumé. With the exception of my ongoing internal debate about Karina, it was ready to go.

But I didn't have anywhere for it to go. I knew that there was always a possibility that any potential employer would drag the hiring process out long enough that a job I applied for now wouldn't start for weeks or months. They might be willing to wait until October or give me the time off due to the nature of my trip. But I couldn't count on it, not with how small that chance was. Or with the risk it posed.

If I applied for a job and was hired and then had to tell them that I couldn't start until the fall or that I'd need an entire month off, it could do colossal damage to my reputation. Waiting was smarter. I'd even determined that I didn't need to wait until after we returned from Iran. If I sent in resumés the week before, I could include in my cover letter my trip with Neutral Ground. A month would be a lot more reasonable of an ask, especially with the reason right there.

That was my problem, I realized. Because of Aline's impetuous decision, I had nothing to do until we left.

I sighed. That wasn't actually true. I'd come up with a nice schedule of projects Aline and I could do until when we left. Charity work, a new organization every week, beginning after the Fourth of July. We'd start with a food kitchen and then move to collecting clothing donations for one of the local missions. Then there was a summer program for kids that had a week focused on teaching kids how to cook healthy food. A Habitat for Humanity project for two weeks in a small town to the north. A week of delivering meals to shut-ins. Fundraising for a woman's shelter. An adoption drive for an animal shelter.

Aside from being able to help that many great organizations, we'd also make connections that could benefit our careers as well as providing us with resources we could use in the future. While Aline would be teaching elementary students, our family had always been big believers in teaching children to do good from a young age. I had no doubt she would convey this same attitude to her students. I could see her doing something along the lines of having her students make cards or gifts for children who spent their holidays in shelters.

I smiled at the thought, and a memory came forward, one that I hadn't thought about in a long time.

"Freedom! Look at this one!" Aline grabbed a stuffed unicorn from the shelf and nearly fell with it on top of her.

"That's too big," I said, reaching out a hand to steady her. "We have to get things that the kids can carry around with them."

Aline frowned, and it was strange to see her like that because she never frowned. She was always laughing and happy, and I didn't know how to fix it.

"Let's look for medium-size ones," I suggested.

"But if the kids don't have a lot of presents, I want to give them the biggest ones."

For a six-year-old, she made a good argument. But I was ten, and I knew that just because that was what we wished we could do, that didn't mean we could do it. One day, Aline would understand.

A thought hit me.

"I have an idea," I said. "Let's buy the smaller toys to give to each kid and then buy big ones to put in the shelter playroom."

Her face lit up, and a stab of pride went through me. I'd made her that happy. Not anyone else. Me. And then she looked up at me, eyes shining, like I was her hero. That meant more to me than anything else in the world. I never wanted her to see me as anything but the big sister who could do everything, who could always make things right.

"Let's go tell Mom." I took my sister's hand, and we walked down the aisle to where our mom was talking to a salesperson. I couldn't wait until she heard my idea and how much Aline loved it.

Even though we'd be working over summer and into fall, we might be able to find some sort of gift-giving project where we could do a bit of reminiscing. Or maybe I'd suggest to Aline and our parents that we adopt a shelter or a group home or something along those lines and purchase children's gifts for the holidays. Perhaps I'd even speak to the leaders of Neutral Ground about something similar in areas where they'd be working around that time. Aline would like that.

I made a mental note to add that to the list of things I wanted to talk to her about when she got home. Once we talked, I'd feel more like I was on track again. Yes, it was a slightly different track than the one I'd imagined, but it would be a plan, nonetheless.

Even with that fixed firmly in my mind, however, I couldn't shake the feeling that this wasn't going to fix the restlessness I'd been feeling more with each passing day. Again, I was struck with the uncomfortable idea that the real reason I felt so off was because of me. Decisions I'd made rather than them having been made for me.

This was not a rabbit hole I wanted to travel down.

And I only knew of one thing that could stop me.

I reached for my phone and pulled up the number I'd never been able to erase.

He answered on the second ring. "Freedom?"

"What are you doing right now?"

FIFTEEN

BRODY

I HADN'T MADE PLANS TO SEE FREEDOM, BUT THE IDEA HAD BEEN THERE IN the back of my head since my visit to my parents' house. Work had kept me busy catching up with all I'd missed while I'd been in Seattle, but at this point, being too busy was no longer a real reason.

Everything with her had been so different from anything I'd ever had. Or wanted, for that matter. Before I reached out to her, I wanted to have a better idea of what I was looking for, because my gut said that if I wasn't sure, things could go very badly.

But then I saw her name on the screen of my phone, and I knew I couldn't ignore her. Even if this thing between us blew up in my face, I couldn't just blow her off. And if she asked me to, I'd go to her. No matter how confused I was about anything else, one thing was certain and had never changed.

I wanted her.

“Freedom?”

“What are you doing right now?”

The question was clipped, but she didn't sound angry.

It took me a moment to figure out the tone of her voice. Needy. Not in a clingy, Glenn Close kind of way. More like there was something only I could offer her, and I had no illusions about what that was.

“Trying to figure out what leftovers I want for dinner.” That was noncommittal enough, I thought.

“Aline took a trip and won’t be home until tomorrow.”

Freedom paused, but I didn’t say a word. I thought I knew where her thoughts were, but I wouldn’t make the mistake of putting words in her mouth. Not when I had questions of my own about what this was...or what it could be.

“If you didn’t have any plans, I was wondering if you wanted to...spend some time together.”

Her word choice caught me off-guard, making me glad she couldn’t see my face. Controlling my voice was easier than my expression. “Is there anything you need me to bring?”

“Condoms.”

Well, that answered at least part of my question. “I can do that. I can be there in a little over an hour. Does that work for you?”

I felt like we were setting up a business meeting.

“Perfect. Do you need directions?”

“No, I remember where you live.” I wasn’t sure if saying that was smart, but it was the truth. “I’ll be there soon.”

Awkward silence stretched out for several seconds until she said, “All right. I’ll see you then.”

I stared at the phone for a good minute after the call ended. We hadn’t spoken for weeks and then, suddenly, she called me because her sister’s out of town? Was this like what’d happened before? Essentially a booty call? It wasn’t as if she couldn’t find a man who lived closer to her.

My stomach knotted at the thought. I’d tried to move on from her, but as my disastrous massage session had proven, it’d been easier said than done. Maybe she’d been experiencing the same sort of thing. I didn’t know if that meant she’d decided to stop even trying and go with what she knew would work, or if, like me, she was trying to figure out what she really wanted.

And maybe I was wasting time overthinking the situation, and I needed to get my ass in gear before she changed her mind.

An hour later, I turned down her street, my pulse speeding up at the realization of how close I was to her. I'd chosen to clean up and drink a protein shake while driving rather than eating at home and forgoing a shower. I'd also packed an overnight bag even though she hadn't said anything about spending the night. For the tenth time, I wondered if that had been a good idea. I didn't want her to think that I was inviting myself to spend the night, but I also wanted to be prepared if this was going to be something more than a quickie. If she asked, I'd tell her that I'd rather get a hotel room than drive home tired, but if she offered the option to stay with her tonight, I wouldn't turn it down.

My skin felt too tight, my heart moving too fast. I was on edge in a way that I usually only experienced when I was doing some crazy, adrenaline-pumping daredevil stuff. No woman had ever made me feel like this, and if I'd been home alone, admitting that might've freaked me out, but right now, the only thing I wanted was to get to her.

She must've felt the same way because I hadn't even dropped my hand from knocking before the door was open, and she was pulling me inside. Her mouth was on mine before I could say a word, and I dropped my bag. One arm went around her waist to pull her flush against my body, and the other reached back to push the door closed.

When we finally came up for air, I could feel that my face was as flushed as hers. I didn't let her go, instead resting my forehead against hers as I caught my breath.

I broke the silence once I could breathe. "That's a hell of a greeting."

She laughed, and I let her go. We stepped apart, and I finally saw what she was wearing. My jaw dropped.

Scarlet lace and ribbon provided tantalizing peeks of porcelain skin. The corset-style top could barely contain her breasts, and the tiny triangle of fabric between her legs was somehow hotter than if she'd been completely nude. A pair of sheer stockings, matching garter belts, and what I could only call fuck-me heels completed the look. And no robe this time, either.

“Well damn,” I finally managed to say. “I don’t think there’s a word accurate enough to describe how incredibly sexy you look.”

Her cheeks turned pink. I had a feeling she didn’t blush often, and my male ego definitely liked that I’d managed to get that reaction. It also liked that she’d dressed up for me again. Though that led to the question of whether or not she’d ever worn anything special for any other man. I shut down that particular thread before it could derail everything else. The past didn’t matter. We were here together, and that was all that counted.

“Turn around.” My voice had an edge to it that was equal parts lust and possessiveness, with maybe a little jealousy thrown in. “I want to see the whole picture.”

A smile that could only be described as smug curved her full mouth. She did as I ordered, moving at a lazy pace to give me all the time I needed to enjoy the view. And it was quite a view. I’d always been able to appreciate the beauty of the female form in all its diversity, and how a woman was built had never been the sole factor for attraction for me, but I’d have been lying if I said I didn’t prefer curvy women.

And Freedom had curves.

Breasts that were more than a handful and an ass made for handling. She was strong but had a softness to her body that fit perfectly with all the hard places on mine. She could take everything I had to give and not break. Hell, she gave it back just as good, and not just with her body. She was one of the strongest women I’d ever known, and considering the women in my family, that said a lot.

“Brody?”

My attention jerked back to the present. “Sorry, you’re quite...distracting.”

She laughed, blue eyes dancing. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It was meant as one.” I reached out and ran my finger along the neckline of her corset. “I can’t decide if I want to tear all of this off or have you leave it on while I fuck you like I did last time.”

“While I appreciate the sentiment behind ravishment, I really like this outfit.” Her words were a little faint, as if my touch was keeping her from drawing a full breath. “So, if you don’t want to remove it properly, I’ll take option number two.”

I locked eyes with her and curved my hand around the back of her neck. My thumb rested on the pulse point in her throat, and I could feel her heartbeat fluttering there even though her expression was calm. I bent my head unhurriedly, letting the electricity between us grow until it felt almost alive. When my lips finally touched hers, she made a soft sound, and my stomach clenched.

It took far more self-control than I’d anticipated to take my time and not just dive into the kiss. I explored her mouth leisurely, relearning it, savoring it. I felt like a man who’d been starving and hadn’t realized it until he’d found the one thing he needed to sustain himself.

Freedom grabbed the front of my shirt and tried to speed things up. I chuckled and bit her bottom lip, breaking the kiss to say, “Patience.”

She dropped a hand and cupped my dick through my pants. “No.” She squeezed just hard enough to make me growl. “Fast now. Patience later.”

How could I refuse?

I took a step back and quickly looked around me to find the closest suitable piece of furniture. Walking backward, I used the hand still holding my shirt to bring her with me.

“Bend over.”

She obeyed, heat flashing in her eyes. Her elbows and forearms rested on the table, the extra height of her heels putting her at a different angle than if she’d been barefoot. An angle that showed off that sweet ass of hers to perfection.

While she waited, I dug a couple condoms out of my bag and put them next to her, then stripped out of my clothes. Sinking to my knees behind her, I nudged her legs apart until I could position myself where I wanted. That was when I discovered that her outfit had a feature I hadn’t seen yet, one that would make it much easier to do everything I wanted to do without undressing her yet.

“You’re just full of surprises, aren’t you?” I licked the bare skin, and she shivered.

Since she wanted fast, I didn’t draw things out but went straight for her clit. Short, rough strokes with my tongue had her moaning in seconds. As she rocked her hips, trying to control the pressure and friction she was getting, I pushed two fingers inside her. She gasped, body stiffening in surprise. Without giving her the chance to adjust, I twisted my fingers and sucked on her clit, pushing her right over the edge. She cried out, and her knees almost buckled. I held her, changing my grip as I got to my feet.

Getting the condom on while ensuring that she didn’t fall was tricky, but I managed it. I repositioned her and then buried myself in her pussy with one quick thrust. She cried out again, my name this time, but I couldn’t respond. Couldn’t do anything but squeeze my eyes shut and start reciting idiotic trivia until I no longer felt like I’d come the moment I moved. I rocked back and forth once, a shallow thrust to test my control.

“Brody, please,” she pleaded.

I ran my hand up her spine. “I like hearing you beg.” The hand I had on her hip tightened. “I’m going to take you fast right now and make you come again.”

“Yes.” She pushed back against me. “Yes, please. I want it. I *need* it.”

Fuck. She was driving me crazy.

“When we’re done, we’re going to your bedroom, and I’m going to use whatever toys you have to make you truly beg to come.” I moved until only the tip of me was still inside her. “I’ll take you to the edge and stop over and over until you’re ready to cry.”

She made a needy little noise that made me even harder.

“Does that sound good?”

She nodded.

“Say it.”

“Yes!” She practically spit out the word. “Yes! Please, just fuck me now. Plea—”

I slammed into her, and the word turned into a scream. I had a moment to hope that her neighbors didn't call the cops on us, and then all I could think about was her. How good she felt around me. How good I made her feel. I lost myself in it, focusing only on making her come one more time before I did the same. In this moment, this time and place, she was all that mattered.

SIXTEEN

FREEDOM

“AGAIN?” THE WORD CAME OUT AS A HALF-MOAN, HALF-GROAN.

Brody’s laugh sent vibrations across my already over-sensitive nerves, making my entire body shiver. My eyes opened as wet heat moved over my clit, and my gaze automatically locked with those beautiful blue-green irises peering up at me from between my legs.

Without looking away, he lightly sucked on that swollen bundle of nerves, and even that gentle touch was almost too much after all the attention it had gotten last night. He’d been true to his word about making me beg. Using my favorite bullet vibrator, he’d taken me to the edge more times than I’d been able to count. I’d actually passed out when he’d finally let me come.

He flicked his tongue against the tip of my clit, and I jerked involuntarily. His hands tightened around my hips, holding me in place. Alternating circles and rapid back-and-forth movements, he pushed me toward familiar territory, the pleasure so intense that my back arched and my hands scrabbled for a grip on something. Anything.

Then, without even realizing he had moved, his hand was there, fingers lacing between mine. Spots danced in front of my eyes, and I clung to his hand, to the knowledge that he was right here, and I was safe. The strength in his fingers kept me tethered even as I let myself go.

I was barely aware of Brody letting go of my hand and climbing off the bed. I didn’t worry about it, though. I trusted him and whatever he was doing. I was happy simply floating here with what I assumed was a sappy smile on my

face.

“I ran you a bath.”

I sat up, not bothering to reach for anything to cover me. He’d already been up close and personal with my anatomy. I didn’t feel the need to hide from him. Besides, what he’d said had grabbed my attention.

“You did what, now?”

“Ran you a bath.” He smiled, looking rather pleased with himself. “And while you’re relaxing, I’ll make us some breakfast.”

My jaw dropped. Us falling asleep together hadn’t really surprised me since we’d basically exhausted ourselves. I didn’t blame him for not wanting to drive home or to a hotel in the early hours of the morning. I even had a dim recollection of him having brought an overnight bag with him. I was a little surprised, however, that Brody’d chosen this particular route rather than waking me up to tell me he was going. Or just leaving me a note.

“Go.” He leaned over and kissed my forehead. “I’ll make French toast.”

He actually whistled as he walked out of my room.

What the fuck was *that* all about?

I enjoyed my bath, but not as much as I might’ve if I hadn’t been still trying to figure out what was going on with Brody. I’d only been able to come up with two possible scenarios that didn’t involve some sort of pod people or brainwashing.

One...Brody had decided that he was hungry and didn’t trust my cooking. Or two...he and I were no longer on the same page when it came to what we were looking for in a relationship.

Shit.

Relationship.

I’d said it. Only to myself, granted, but I’d still said it. Because I’d been thinking it too. No matter what I labeled this thing he and I had, it was the longest I’d been with only one man since Jack. If I counted from the first

time Brody and I had slept together, I'd technically been with Brody longer.

Shit. *Shit!*

How had I been in a *relationship* for half a year and not seen it?

Okay, at the beginning, I'd been sure it'd just be one night. Even after the incident in his car, I could've moved on. Two times fucking him could've been just a fluke, brought on by coincidence and stress. Except those coincidences kept happening and having him in my face had just made it easier to go to him for sex because I knew it'd be good. Great, to be honest. Why hunt for something that might disappoint instead of taking advantage of a sure thing?

But had that been all it was?

I sighed and climbed out of the tub. I should've emptied the tub and taken a quick shower so I wouldn't have had as much time to think. Thinking too much about my sex life was never a good idea.

By the time I entered the kitchen, I'd managed to stop thinking so much. If the reason Brody was doing all of this was because he wanted to change things between us, then he'd bring it up, and we'd talk about it. If he wanted to keep living in the moment, I'd enjoy a breakfast I didn't have to cook and conversation with someone I liked. It'd be a nice way to finish out the last of my time without Aline.

With my head in the right spot, I sat down at the table and thanked Brody as he put a plate of French toast in front of me. I poured the maple service liberally over my food before handing the jar over to Brody. The first bite made me moan in a way I usually reserved for sex.

"I'm not sure if that speaks well of my cooking or poorly of my skills in bed if I get an equal reaction," Brody teased.

"Funny." I pointed my fork at him. "I would suggest that it means you're equally good at both, but I think that might just stroke your ego."

"I could let you stroke something else if you want." He grinned at me.

“Ah, I see what you’re doing.” I laughed, and the sound made me smile as much as anything else.

I liked this. Banter over breakfast. Letting the conversation flow without having to think about discussing plans for the day. The light-hearted sort of flirting that might or might not turn into more. The actual option to take him back to bed.

Or fuck him right here at the table.

I had a sudden flash of straddling him in that chair and riding him until we both came. My core clenched at the thought. Maybe after we were done eating, I’d double-check Aline’s flight time and then make that fantasy a reality.

“How do you like being done with college?”

Brody’s question made my smile slip for a second. He didn’t mean anything by it. I could see that on his face.

I shrugged. “Honestly, it’s been boring.”

He gave me a puzzled look. “No ‘new job’ excitement?”

My expression tightened. “No new job.”

That seemed to surprise him, but to his credit, he didn’t show any other reaction. And no additional questions either.

Maybe all the great sex had made my mind go soft, or I was still half-asleep, but whatever it was, I found myself telling him the truth. “Aline and I are going on a trip in October, and we didn’t think it was a wise idea to get new jobs that we’d need to ask for a vacation from after just a couple months.”

“Oh.” A slight pause followed, and then he asked, “Where are you going?”

I could hear the curiosity and wondered how much of it was related to the question and how much came from him wanting to know why I’d make the decision to postpone getting a job. One of the few things he knew about my personal life was that my career was important to me.

“Iran.”

His eyebrows shot up. “What?”

“I know, not exactly a vacation destination.” I shook my head. “Have you heard of an organization called Neutral Ground?”

“I don’t think so.”

He still sounded slightly stunned, and I didn’t blame him.

“They’re an international group that goes all over the world and helps with everything from education to medical clinics to digging wells. One of Aline’s professors put the idea in her head, and my sister doesn’t do well waiting.” I sighed. “She called them up and apparently asked for the first trip that needed a teacher.”

Brody frowned, confusion flitting across his face. “I didn’t think you were going into education.”

“I’m not. I’ll be going to assist with translation in Aline’s classes.”

“I’m surprised the company doesn’t provide translators.”

“They can, but they’re always willing to take a volunteer. I’ll be able to take care of Aline’s classes, giving the other translator more time with the other volunteers.”

“What sort of security do they offer?” Brody’s easygoing expression and tone had disappeared. He leaned toward me, something fierce in his eyes. “Some of these groups just hire anyone, and they basically sit on their asses all day like they’re working at a 7-11. That doesn’t work in a place like Iran.”

“I did my homework.” My smile felt tight. “I’m not naïve.”

His fingertips pressed into the top of the table so hard the bed of his nails began to turn white. “You don’t understand what it’s like for women over there. One wrong word. One misunderstood custom. Being a U.S. citizen won’t account for much. I’m actually surprised that Iran is letting in an aid group at all.”

My smile disappeared. “Neutral Ground is called that because they don’t claim any specific country. And this isn’t their first trip into a dangerous country.”

“Then they should know better to take women with them.”

“I’m not having this discussion with you.” All the tension that had been gone when I woke up was back, and it had brought a boatload of friends. “You asked why I didn’t have a new job, and I told you why. I’m going to Iran in October.”

“It’s too dangerous,” he snapped.

“And that’s exactly why I’m going,” I snapped right back. “Aline’s determined to go, so that means I have to go.”

“No, it doesn’t. Your sister can make her own stupid decisions. It doesn’t mean you have to mindlessly go along with them.”

I sucked in a breath, several heavy seconds hanging between us until I stood. “I think you need to go.”

He stood as well. “I’m just worried about you.”

“I’m quite capable of taking care of myself and my sister.” I took several steps back and folded my arms across my chest. I was more pissed than I had a reason to be, and the words refused to stay behind my teeth. “And it appears that you’re *not* capable of minding your own fucking business. Get your shit and get out. This thing with us, whatever it is, is done. I don’t want to see you again.”

He didn’t apologize, and he didn’t argue. He simply walked to the bedroom and came out a minute or so later with his bag and walked out. Not a word, nor a glance.

It was over.

SEVENTEEN

FREEDOM

ALINE AND I HAD MADE IT THROUGH ALL THE SCANNERS AND CHECKPOINTS with plenty of time to spare before our flight left. We'd had to get up extremely early, and I knew jet lag would hit us hard, but I couldn't deny that I was actually looking forward to finally going. We'd worked with every charity on the list I'd made and had accomplished some great things, things we could be proud of, but this had always been there on the horizon. Everything had been planned with this in mind.

I glanced at my phone and then gave myself a mental slap. For months, I'd been trying to break myself of the habit of checking my phone every hour or so to see if I'd gotten any texts. Sometimes, I'd been able to convince myself that I was only worried about my parents or trying not to miss a message from any of the people Aline and I were working with. In the back part of my mind, though, I'd still known who I was actually hoping to hear from.

I didn't want or like that hope.

I didn't want to still be thinking about Brody, wondering what he was doing, if he had been thinking about me in the months since we'd last seen each other. If he'd moved on. Found someone else to sleep with. Hell, more than one someones, for all I knew. It wasn't as if he'd have any difficulty finding a woman to warm his bed.

I had first-hand experience in that, after all.

I shouldn't have had any problems doing the same. I probably wouldn't have if I'd actually tried. Since kicking Brody out of my apartment, however, I'd

been far too busy to hook up with anyone. The few times I'd needed that sort of release, I'd taken care of it myself.

And so what if Brody had had a starring role in the fantasies that helped me get there? He'd just been my most recent partner, which meant it made sense that his face would come to the front of my mind. It might've also been because he was the best sex I'd ever had. Who'd want to think about something mediocre if they had a perfectly accessible memory of toe-curling orgasms?

I was well aware that thinking of him like that didn't make it any easier to forget him, but even that knowledge hadn't been able to stop me. Not from remembering and not from continuing to look at my phone.

Honestly, I wasn't sure what I would do if he actually did text me. I knew what my half-asleep almost-dreams would have me say if he begged me to forgive him. Sometimes, my brain would want me to tell him it was too late. More often, I'd find myself telling him that I had a long list of things that he needed to do to show just how sorry he was.

"Freedom." Aline tugged on my sleeve. "We're in the way."

With a start, I came back to myself. An annoyed-looking man pushed past me before I could do anything more than take a step out of his way. I swallowed the apology I'd been ready to offer. The guy only went to the closest empty chair and sat down, so it wasn't as if the short delay I'd caused him would make him miss his flight.

"Nice guy," Aline said to me, not bothering to keep her voice quiet.

The guy immediately glared at her, and I moved into his line of sight, blocking him from my sister. When I looked down at her, she was grinning at me, her eyes sparkling.

"What are you going to do if he's near us on the plane?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Repeat my sentiment that he's a nice gentleman."

I laughed, shaking my head. "Let's find somewhere to sit while we wait. You can finish downloading those new books onto your Kindle before we get on the plane."

As she followed me over to the seats I'd spotted, I found my mind wandering back to Brody. Again. I supposed the reason he was more in my thoughts today was because Aline and I were on our way to Iran, which was the straw that had broken our very tentative relationship's back.

I'd also been thinking about what would have been different if Aline and I hadn't made these plans. Whether or not he and I would have still been hooking up. If it would have fizzled out instead of exploding. Or if we would have ventured into something more.

It was the last thought I hadn't been able to shake. The memory of how things had been going before the conversation had taken a turn made me wonder *what if*. Half the time, I was pissed at him for the argument, and the other half, I was second-guessing myself, thinking that maybe I should have made an effort to talk things through instead of going straight for the self-destruct button.

The worst of it had come a few weeks ago when, for some reason, I'd suddenly remembered what he'd said about his brother nearly having been killed in Iraq. I wasn't sure I could really blame him for freaking out after taking that into consideration. Granted, I couldn't completely excuse him for acting as if he had a right to tell me what to do, but it did make me think that maybe I should've given him some leeway.

I needed to stop.

I needed to get my thoughts away from him and onto the future. Contrary to what Brody had thought, I did know that Iran was a dangerous place, so I couldn't afford to go into this assignment distracted. From this point on, I would not think of *that man* again. I would focus on the job at hand and keeping Aline safe. And then, when we were down to the last few days, Aline and I would talk about what we would do when we arrived home again. We'd finally be ready to move on to our real adult lives.

And certain Scottish men who made whiskey wouldn't be a part of any of that.

EIGHTEEN

BRODY

PRODUCTION HAD GONE UP SINCE LAST WEEK BUT COMPARING THE GROWTH over the past year showed that things were plateauing. I'd expected it. Hell, I'd been sure it would happen over the summer. It might have, actually, if I hadn't spent all of July perfecting a whiskey that I would only offer at a limited number of exclusive sex clubs. Club Privé and Black Masque, of course, had been at the top of my list, so I'd returned to New York and San Antonio with a bottle for each of the owners.

August and half of September had been spent traveling all over the world, including to Gavin and Carrie Manning's club on the French Riviera and one owned by someone they knew in Rome, Italy. The Mannings had also helped me find club owners who enforced age limits, forbidden drugs, and had rules in place to ensure consent. Some people might've had problems with my doing business with sex clubs, but in my mind, the only way I'd be ashamed of my decision would be if the clubs I dealt with had shady shit going on.

When I'd finally run out of places to visit, I'd come back home to San Ramon. That had been about a month ago, and I'd been working every day since. Ten- to-twelve-hour days were the norm, but I'd put in more than one fourteen-hour day in the last few weeks. I might've been tempted to sleep in the office if I hadn't wanted to get in an hour or two of exercise before I went to bed. The only way I could actually fall asleep was to exhaust myself both physically and mentally.

And sometimes, even that didn't work.

Sometimes, nothing could get her face out of my head. Nothing could stop me from hearing that last conversation. The fury on her face when she'd told me to get out.

How much I'd regretted all of it the moment my head had cooled down enough to actually think.

I wasn't a hothead by nature. In fact, I could count on one hand the number of times I'd lost my temper in my life. I hadn't even gone through the anger stage of grief when my mother died. The thought of Freedom being so reckless with her safety, however, was more than I'd been able to take.

Even now, sitting in front of my computer working on spreadsheets, the knowledge that Freedom was probably already in Iran made me pause, my hands curling into fists. I closed my eyes and counted to ten. I needed to focus if I wanted to finish this before I finally left for the day. I had an accounting firm that took care of the books, but I always did them too, preferring to have two sets of records to make sure everything was above board.

The headache I ended up with when I did them, however, was making me lean toward hiring an accountant for Shannon's who could work with the firm to maintain the dual bookkeeping. This would be a job I wouldn't mind delegating.

I jotted a note to remind myself to discuss the matter with Adela. If we could start this week, then I could start reviewing resumés and having Adela schedule interviews as early as next week. That and training would keep me busy until I started getting holiday orders. I'd be busy through the first of the year, and then I could start everything new.

I'd just make certain I was nowhere near Palo Alto on New Year's Eve. No need to repeat past mistakes.

I sighed and leaned back in my chair. Closing my eyes, I rubbed my forehead. Concentrating on numbers was supposed to keep me from thinking about Freedom. It had been months. Why the hell couldn't I get her out of my mind?

That was a question I didn't want to answer, and this wasn't the first time it'd come to me. Each time, it was harder to set aside, and I knew that if I couldn't stop it from popping up, I'd eventually need to answer it. Or, rather, acknowledge the answer that I knew was swimming right there, just below the surface of my mind.

A knock came at my door, and I opened my eyes. Adela stood in front of me, concern on her face. I knew what she was going to say before she opened her mouth, partly because I knew her so well but also because she'd approached me like this before.

"Still here, I see." She came into my office and perched on the edge of the chair on that side of the desk.

"So are you," I pointed out.

"I haven't been here since four-thirty this morning."

China blue eyes shouldn't be able to look that hard.

She lifted a finger. "And don't tell me that you're staying to talk to the night shift when they come in because I know you talked to them on Friday."

"I want to finish up these spreadsheets," I said honestly.

"And last week, you wanted to inspect every barrel, including the ones you'd already looked at the week before." She gave me a searching look. "What's wrong, Brody? Something's been off with you for a while. You've always worked hard, but you enjoyed it. Even when you were doing things like the account work, you always had this optimism. But I don't see you enjoying anything like you used to."

Shit.

I knew I hadn't been hiding my emotions quite as well as I'd hoped, but I'd thought I'd be able to pass off working so much as ambition. I had, after all, started the expansion of Shannon's into clubs before things had blown up with Freedom, and even though I didn't intend to tell Adela about Freedom, I knew the exact moment things had changed for me.

And I knew I needed to move on.

“You’re right,” I said. “I’ve been pushing myself hard, and my heart’s not in it like it once was. I’m burned out.”

All of that was true. The only thing missing was the catalyst for it.

“The holidays are coming up, and we’re always busy then,” she said. “I think you should take it easy while you can, or you’re going to be exhausted and sick from Christmas to New Year’s.”

I nodded my agreement. “I’ll leave the accounting for tomorrow, and I want you and I to talk about looking for an accountant for Shannon’s.”

“No more early mornings or late nights? At least not until closer to Thanksgiving?”

“Not until closer to Thanksgiving,” I promised.

I’d keep that promise, but I wasn’t interested in finding a woman, not when every fantasy I’d had for the past year included Freedom, but there were other things I could do to blow off steam. I’d schedule time with my family, especially Eoin, and I’d start doing some of the adrenaline-inducing activities I used to do. Skydiving. Surfing. Rock climbing.

Maybe, then, I’d be able to move past Freedom and get a little bit of a semblance of my old life back.

NINETEEN

FREEDOM

A FAINT BREEZE BLEW ACROSS MY OVERHEATED BODY, SENDING A WAVE OF goosebumps across my skin. My nipples hardened, though I didn't know if that was due to the chill in the air or the man devouring me with his gaze. The heat in my core, the fire smoldering in my gut, those were both due only to him.

I ran my hands over his body, savoring the way the muscles jumped under my fingers, the sharp intakes of air that betrayed just how much I affected him. Knowing it in my head was one thing. Feeling all that barely restrained power and knowing that it was for me was as much of a turn on as his looks.

He rolled me onto my stomach, his hands sliding up the backs of my calves and higher, moving my legs apart as he went. I let out a shaky laugh as his thumbs moved over the sensitive skin of my inner thighs. He palmed my ass, squeezing the cheeks before lowering his head to bring his mouth to my pussy.

The first pass of his tongue made me moan his name, and every sound that followed was pure noise, not a single syllable that could be construed as a word. He explored every inch his tongue could reach and then slid two fingers inside me. I gasped in surprise as his mouth went somewhere new, the tip of his tongue tracing around my anus before pushing against it. A shiver went down my spine at the foreign sensation, and he laughed, that rich, full laugh that I loved so much.

An increase of pressure registered before I realized that he'd removed his fingers. Now, one was at the tight ring of muscle, its way slicked by his tongue and my own arousal. His other hand was underneath me, playing with my clit. The sensations mixed, becoming something heavier, more intense. I felt a faint burn as his finger penetrated me, but it wasn't pain, not really.

"So hot," he murmured as he worked his finger in and out of me. "So tight."

I could only imagine what he saw, and I felt a pang of jealousy. Maybe I'd talk to him about recording us together so that I could see everything he did. I wanted to know the visual to go along with what I felt. In the past, I never would have even entertained that idea, ever cautious of the things that people could do to each other when relationships ended. I wasn't worried about him, though. I knew I could trust him, that I was safe with him.

"Does this feel good?"

I nodded and then whimpered as he pushed a second finger inside, a flare of pain cutting through the pleasure. My muscles clenched, protesting the intrusion, and his movement stilled, giving me the time I needed to adjust.

"I'm going to make you come like this," he promised. "And then I'm going to fuck you into another orgasm. When you're still riding that high, I'm going to put my cock in your ass. Nice and slow until you're begging me to put it all the way in."

I bit my bottom lip, barely able to stop myself from squirming. The images his words painted were as much an aphrodisiac as anything else he'd done.

"You're going to love getting fucked in the ass." The promise caressed my skin as if the words had physical weight. "But you'll probably like having both holes filled even more."

A shudder ran through me. A small voice in the back of my mind asked if I really wanted to be with someone else, but I dismissed it quickly, knowing that he would never share me. However he planned to do it, he wouldn't bring another person into our bed.

"Are you ready?" he asked. His teeth lightly bit my shoulder. "Ready to come with my fingers in your ass?"

I nodded.

“Speak, Freedom. Use your words.”

“Yes,” I said immediately.

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, I’m ready to come.” A beat of silence, and then I added, “with your fingers in my ass.”

“Good.” He pressed a kiss to my spine. “Let’s see how fast I can get you there. My cock’s eager for its turn.”

He continued to talk to me as he matched the strokes over my clit with each thrust of his fingers, increasing the speed and pressure until I hovered at the edge of ecstasy, ready to explode and then—

Pain rudely yanked me out of my dream, and I found myself gasping, and not in a good way. I clutched my stomach and pressed my lips together, aware enough to remember that Aline was sleeping on the bunk above me. I needed to get my head together, and I couldn’t do that if she was worried about me.

I curled into a ball, pressing my forehead to my knees. A shiver went through me, and it didn’t have anything to do with my dream. No, I was cold. My teeth were chattering. But the room was warm. I knew that because we’d been sleeping in this same room for a month, and it hadn’t been cold at any point.

The pain in my side twisted, sending my stomach roiling. Right side. A dull ache that became sharp. Nausea. Chills. I probably had a fever. That sounded familiar, and I wracked my brains to try to figure out why. The fact that I’d been asleep only a minute ago, and I was in pain meant it took me a little longer than normal to actually put all the pieces together, but a few minutes later, I’d figured it out.

My appendix. Mom had appendicitis a couple years ago, and this was how it’d manifested with her.

Shit.

I needed to get to a hospital. This wasn't some cold or even a flu where I could take some over-the-counter medicine and sleep it off in a day or two. Even with all our medical knowledge today, people still died from appendicitis if they ignored it. I probably had a couple hours before it got too bad. I could wait. Pretend I had a stomachache and send Aline to class, then get a taxi to take me to the hospital. If it turned out to be nothing, I'd come back and just finish out the week like I'd planned. If it really was appendicitis...well, I guess I'd cross that bridge when I came to it.

Stupid damn bridge.

And stupid damn bunny trails that my brain couldn't help but send me down because it didn't want to dwell too long on any single thought.

I swallowed a moan of pain and wondered what time it was. My stomach gave another lurch, and I hoped I could keep from throwing up. Pain I could handle. Vomit, on the other hand...

"Freedom? You okay?"

"Aline?" I hardly recognized my own voice.

I heard her coming down the ladder, and the next time she spoke, she was closer. "What's wrong?"

"My side." I opened my eyes, hating to witness the worry on her face. Still, I had to answer her question. "I think it's my appendix."

"I'm going to get Miss Little."

I nodded, closing my eyes again. If I'd felt any better, I'd be seriously pissed that this was happening here and now. We were in our last week with Neutral Ground. I supposed it was better than it happening on the flight home, but I wished it could've waited just a little bit.

I missed home in a way I hadn't the entire time we'd been gone. If I'd been at home, Aline could've driven me to the hospital, and if necessary, our parents could've gotten there in a few hours. And I'd have had my own bed to look forward to, no matter the diagnosis.

My mind drifted to thoughts of home, and I let them go. I was dimly aware that Aline was back and talking, but I was suddenly having a hard time focusing. Everything hurt, even my teeth.

As Miss Little came into the room, I had a sudden fierce longing for my mother. With how much attention Aline had needed growing up, I'd often kept illnesses to myself, not wanting to add to my parents' worry. The times when I'd been too sick to hide it, those were the times when my parents would take turns sitting by my bed, reading to me.

I was always the strong one, the independent one. I protected other people, made sure they were safe and healthy and happy. I put them first. I took care of everyone else.

And right now, all I wanted was someone to take care of me.

TWENTY

FREEDOM

I'D JUST HAD THE STRANGEST WEEK OF MY LIFE, AND I WAS READY FOR IT TO be over and things to get back to normal. Normal at home.

With the exception of this past week, I felt like our work with Neutral Ground had been a positive experience, though I still wished Aline had chosen the timing better. We'd made good contacts, had something new for our resumés and had made an impact on a group of children who could one day change their world.

But I was ready to go home.

I'd had an appendectomy not long after I'd arrived at the hospital, and unfortunately, there had been complications that had caused an infection. It could've happened at home and in any hospital, so I felt no ill will toward anyone at the hospital and had even talked to someone from their legal department yesterday. That still didn't mean I'd wanted to stay for the entire week, which was what had ended up happening thanks to the infection. Forty-five minutes ago, however, I'd signed the last of the paperwork and called for a taxi to take me to the airport. It was time to leave.

I'd asked Aline if she'd needed me to go back to Neutral Ground to help pack our belongings, but she'd insisted she'd had everything under control. My twice daily calls to Miss Little had confirmed it. I hadn't wanted to make Aline feel like I was checking up on her, so I hadn't mentioned those yet. I figured telling her how impressed I was would be a nice conversation to have on the flight home.

I also wanted to make sure that assthat Serle hadn't given Aline any grief while I hadn't been around. If he had, I'd make him regret it, even if I had to fly back here to kick his ass.

Or I'd just eviscerate him on social media and ensure that everyone knew what sort of creep he was.

Aline had brought a bag of some of my things to the hospital, so I carried that into the airport and made my way to the bench where I'd promised to wait for her. To my annoyance, I needed to sit down. While I'd been declared fit for travel and wasn't experiencing a lot of pain, my endurance still wasn't back to normal. I hoped finally being home would allow me to sleep better than I had in the hospital. I even planned to spend the entire weekend resting so that I'd be sharp to start searching for employment opportunities.

I could see the entrance from where I was sitting, but as person after person entered and none of them were my sister, I began to wonder if I should have gone to Neutral Ground after all. Aline had said that she'd handle everything, but she'd never had to be responsible when so much could go wrong. She could have underestimated how much time she needed to pack or the time it would take for the cab to get her to the airport. At the very least, I should have called her as soon as I'd been discharged and made sure that she'd thought of all the possible contingencies.

I took my phone out of my purse, hoping that I'd simply missed a text or call, but that wasn't the case. The only text I'd gotten from Aline today had been in response to mine, letting her know that I'd been discharged and had been on my way to the hospital.

Dammit, Aline. I sighed. At least I knew I could call her now and not worry about her talking while driving. The first call went unanswered but had rung several times before sending me to voicemail.

"Aline, I hope you're in the process of walking in here, and that's why you're not answering, but if it's not, you need to hurry. Promise the driver a bigger tip if he can get you here in the next few minutes. I'd rather not cut things close."

Almost as soon as I ended the call, I looked toward the doors, half-expecting to see her walking in, flushed and apologetic, already halfway through an

explanation. Except the next half dozen people who came through weren't her.

I waited fifteen minutes before calling again, and this time, it went straight to voicemail. "Where are you? I'm starting to get worried. Our flight's boarding in the next few minutes, and I really don't want to have to explain to Mom and Dad that we missed our flight. Call me or text me as soon as you get this."

I pushed to my feet, my anxiety over-riding the fatigue. What could possibly be keeping her from answering? I would've thought if she was stuck in traffic, she would've had nothing else to do but call or text. Or at least answer her phone.

Why wouldn't she just answer her damn phone?

I started to pick up my bag and then realized that I really didn't have the strength to walk around with it. And I needed to conserve every ounce of energy I had for speed-walking when she finally arrived because that would be the only way we'd get to our flight in time if she didn't get here soon.

"C'mon, Aline," I muttered. "Where are you?"

I looked at my phone again, even though it would have gone off if she'd called or texted. I knew the cliché about the watched pot never boiling, but I still kept going back and forth between staring at my phone and looking at the doors. The world went on around me, people coming and going, talking and joking in different languages, but all I could focus on were the two places that had the ability to tell me where my sister was.

Minutes passed, and then an announcement came over the loudspeaker, first in Persian and then in English. Last call for boarding for our flight.

Shit.

I made my way to the closest counter and waved someone over. The man's expression was stiff but polite. Even though I spoke Persian to him, I knew he could tell I was American, but I was hoping the fact that I was dressed conservatively, including a headscarf, would make him a little more favorably inclined toward me. As soon as I mentioned Neutral Ground, I had his complete attention. Their reputation here was a good one.

Quickly, I explained the situation and asked if there had been any calls from an American woman about the flight that had just announced the last boarding call. I wasn't surprised when the man shook his head. He asked if something was wrong, and I asked if there was any way the plane could hold for just a little longer. He said that wasn't possible, which was exactly what I'd expected him to say. I thanked him and walked back to the bench, my mind racing.

I sent off a text and called Aline again. Straight to voicemail, and the text remained unread. I waited until the flight officially left, and then I picked up my bag and went out to get a cab.

"Neutral Ground," I said as I got into the backseat.

After giving the driver the address, I began to mentally prepare myself for the conversation Aline and I needed to have. Once she explained to me what had happened, we'd make a plan about how to get home now that we'd missed our flight. We'd need to talk to Miss Little about whether or not we'd be able to return to our room while we made the necessary arrangements or if we'd need to go to a hotel. We'd also need to know procedures for extending our stay beyond our original departure date.

And someone was going to need to tell our parents about the change of plans. Someone who wasn't me.

Thanks to quite a bit of traffic, it took us a little longer to get back to Neutral Ground than it had for me to get to the airport, and by the time I exited the cab, I'd moved beyond irritation to anger. Aline had ensured me that she could handle all the arrangements for us, and she hadn't, but some of that anger was toward myself because I should have known better.

I dropped my bag just inside the door and headed straight for the room Aline and I had shared. It was empty. Not a single article of clothing or anything else was there. Aline had clearly packed our things and moved the luggage out of the room. I hadn't seen it in the front room, so I headed for Miss Little's office. Before I reached the office, however, I ran into my least favorite team member.

Serle Lansky.

He'd been pursuing Aline until I'd told him to back off, so he liked me about as much as I liked him.

"I thought you were leaving today." He glared at me.

"Where's Aline?"

"Isn't she supposed to be with you?" Crossing his arms, he tried – and failed – to look tough.

"Just answer the damn question." I took a step toward him.

"I haven't seen her since last night," he said. "She told me to stay away, and I did. As far as I know, she left for the airport when she was supposed to."

Another team member started by, and I grabbed her arm, asking her if she'd seen Aline. I went from person to person until I'd spoken to everyone still in the country, including Miss Little, and every single one of them said the same thing. They'd assumed that Aline had been on her way home with me until I'd shown up here. She'd packed up everything and left in a cab, just like we'd planned. The only thing that varied from person to person was that a couple people thought she'd had to get a second cab because the original one had left for some reason.

I appreciated everything they had to say, but it didn't help me find her.

This was no longer something I could handle on my own, if only because I didn't have the ability to search the area myself. As flighty as Aline could be, her disappearing between Neutral Ground and the airport and taking our luggage with her made no sense.

IT'D BEEN two days since Aline had gone missing, and I was still in Iran trying to find my sister. I'd barely slept even though I knew my recent surgery meant I needed more rest than usual, not less. How could I sleep when every time I closed my eyes, I saw all the things that could've happened to my baby sister? That could *still* be happening to her.

I should've been there with her. Wherever she'd been and wherever she was now.

The guilt was...indescribable.

My phone buzzed, and my heart gave a wild leap, only to drop straight back down again when I saw that the text had come from an unknown number. If that was another political ad or spam, I was going to throw the damn thing at the wall. It wasn't enough to get phone calls from automated systems. Now, they had texts too.

Except it wasn't anything like that.

Proof of life and demands follow link.

I clicked on the link, and it took me to a video. The starting screen was black, but I knew what was coming. Still, bracing myself could only do so much.

I stifled a gasp as Aline appeared. She was dirty, and I thought I could see some scrapes on her cheek and hands. She was still dressed in her own clothes and wore a headscarf, with nothing looking like it'd been ripped or damaged. I could only hope that meant she hadn't been...assaulted. That she'd been taken by traffickers had been my biggest fear, but the text seemed to point toward ransom, which I hoped meant that they'd kept her as unharmed as possible.

I pushed those thoughts back before they could take over. I needed to listen.

“My name is Aline Mercier, and I am an American citizen. I was working in Iran and have been...taken by a group of concerned citizens of Iran.”

She didn't sound scared. No, she sounded angry.

I honestly wasn't sure if that was good or bad.

“They have not hurt me, and as long as their demands are met, I won't be. My parents, Gerard Mercier and Paulette Lutz, must gather together five million Euros and five million American dollars in two separate black bags to be dropped off at the Azadi Tower by noon this Thursday. Any sign of the authorities and I will be hurt. If the money is not delivered, I will be...killed.”

I'd expected that last part, but it didn't make it any easier to hear. Or make me feel any less like throwing up.

But I couldn't throw up.

I finally had a lead, and I didn't know if I was the only one who received it, which meant I needed to let people know. Which people, though? The police?

The ransom video had contained the traditional 'any sign of' clause. The money wasn't a problem, so maybe my parents needed to know that we had confirmation that Aline hadn't simply gotten lost. I wasn't sure how much of my family's money was liquid at the moment, but Dad probably knew people who could help. But Mom and Dad weren't here, which meant we'd need to work out exactly how to do the ransom drop. We had until noon on Thursday.

I hadn't rescheduled a flight yet, but now that I knew when she'd be back, maybe that was what I should do. Positive thinking, right? If I scheduled a flight home for us both, that would prove that I believed I'd get her back. Now that I knew Aline had been taken, I could also go about getting her a new passport so we'd be able to—

“Stop.” I smacked my hand on the table in front of me, letting the sting clear my head. One thing at a time and in order.

I needed to let my parents know that Aline was alive and that she'd been kidnapped for money. The three of us could decide what to do about letting the police know. I wasn't going to leave it all up to a single plan, though. I needed to think of what to do if the ransom drop didn't work. I'd need help.

Immediately, a face popped into my mind.

Brody.

For a moment, I let myself imagine him coming here and helping find my sister, but then I remembered that he made alcohol for a living, and I didn't see that as being particularly helpful in these circumstances.

Then it hit me. I *did* know someone who might be able to help in this situation. Someone with experience in dealing with the type of people who'd taken my sister.

My relationship with Cain Hudson hadn't ended badly, though we hadn't really kept in touch. If his number was still good, I could ask him for help, and if I asked, I knew he'd come. He was a good man who'd deserved better than me. The fact that I knew I could count on him was proof of that.

But first...

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

Time to call my parents.

TWENTY-ONE

BRODY

AS A KID, I'D NEVER UNDERSTOOD MY PARENTS' NEED TO WATCH THE NEWS IN the morning, at noon, in the evening, and at night. Once a day seemed like more than enough. If anything life-changing happened, there were thousands of ways to find out in a timely fashion.

Da and Mom also read newspapers. Actual, physical newspapers. And that was plural. The last I knew, they had at least three different ones delivered. They probably read online ones as well.

That was far too much reality for me, especially since so much of it was depressing. I understood why the news shouldn't only have stories that were happy and upbeat. That wasn't how the world worked. It was just that, sometimes, it seemed as if the media didn't work quite as hard to share good things as they did bad.

Still, over the years, I'd come to understand why I should at least maintain a basic knowledge of what was going on in the world around me, if for no other reason than because my family was spread out across the world. It was sad, but news outlets sometimes released information before the authorities. I'd always been appalled at the times when people found out about a loved one's death or injury from the TV rather than the proper people.

That had always been one of my fears when it had come to Eoin's safety. I'd honestly been surprised when we'd gotten the call about the ambush rather than finding out about it from my television.

He was home safe now, but I'd kept up the habit of watching the evening news. Just because he was no longer a soldier in a war zone didn't mean something wouldn't happen to him or to the others I loved. Losing my mother at a young age had taught me that lesson quite well. Having my niece, Evanne, kidnapped by her mother just a few weeks ago had just driven it home. She was safe now, and everything was in the process of being worked out with her mother, but it had been several scary days.

Today, I needed to know the weather forecast, so I turned on the TV to catch the morning news and went to the kitchen to get some breakfast. I had a half-dozen things planned for today and ran through the list in my head while keeping an ear out for the weather. Since I hadn't been listening for anything else, I only registered a couple words.

"...Iran...missing worker..."

I spun around, heart pounding. I couldn't have heard what I thought. Leaving my food on the counter, I went into the living room to find that the news had cut to commercial. I hoped that meant I'd heard a promo for a story to come. My stomach churned as I waited, and it seemed like an eternity passed before it came back.

"We have news coming out of Iran this morning," the brunette newscaster said. "An American aid worker is assumed to be missing after she didn't get on her return flight to the U.S."

That could be anyone, I told myself. It was a big country.

"We've reached out to the state department, but they're declining to provide the name of the woman or the organization in which she worked. We'll bring you more on this story as it develops."

And that was it.

Nothing about when it had happened or what had happened. No name or age or anything more descriptive than the fact that it was a woman who'd gone missing.

That didn't mean the woman was Freedom. Or that anyone was *actually* missing in the first place. A person could have a hundred reasons to miss a flight. If that had even been what had happened. She might have moved to a

different seat on the plane. Whoever had provided the information in the first place could have made a mistake or been purposefully lying. I was honestly surprised the news had said anything with as little information as they actually had. Then again, it was the sort of headline that grabbed attention on an otherwise boring news day.

I went back into the kitchen to get my breakfast, but I wasn't hungry anymore. I wandered back into the living room to catch the weather but barely registered anything I heard. All I could think about was the missing woman and whether or not she was Freedom.

What was happening to her? Where was she? Was she okay? And then guilt that I was actually thinking *don't let it be her* because, no matter who she was, if there really was a woman missing, she had her own family and friends who would be thinking the same thing. Guilt that came with thinking that I didn't even have a right to be this worried about someone I wasn't involved with. Someone who'd told me to stay out of her business.

By the time the news ended, I knew I wouldn't be able to do anything until I knew that she was okay.

I'd never erased her number from my phone, even though I'd repeatedly told myself to do it. Now I was glad I hadn't.

She didn't answer, but she didn't send me straight to voicemail either. Then again, she might have had her phone on silent and letting it ring hadn't been a conscious choice on her part. Or maybe she wasn't anywhere near her phone because something bad had happened to her.

I didn't leave a message. What could I have said? 'Hey, I saw something on the news about an American woman in Iran going missing, and I'm hoping it's not you even though you didn't listen to me when I told you it was too dangerous and told me to butt out, and I don't know why I even care?'

"Dammit, Freedom." I dropped onto my couch and put my head in my hands.

What the hell was I supposed to do now?

I didn't have long to think about it because my phone rang just then. I grabbed it, hope flaring inside me for a few seconds until I saw the name on the screen.

“Eoin?”

“Brody. I have to make this quick.”

I frowned. “All right.”

“I need you to pick up our parents from the airport.”

“Uh, okay. When?” I had a lot more questions than that one, but I figured that was the most important.

“I’m not sure.”

I could hear Eoin doing something but wasn’t able to tell what. “Um, okay...”

“I’m still in Seattle, but I’m taking the family plane to L.A. in a bit. When they’re ready to head home, they’ll take Alec’s plane. They might want to just call a car service, but I wanted to make arrangements for them just in case.”

This conversation just kept getting stranger. Da and Mom were both perfectly capable of arranging transportation from the airport to the house, whether that was calling me or arranging for a pickup service.

“I’m going to be out of the country for a while with Cain Hudson.”

I knew that name. When Keli had taken Evanne, Eoin had called a friend who handled situations like that.

Shit.

Cain handled things like kidnappings.

“Where are you going?”

After a moment’s hesitation, Eoin answered my question, “The Middle East. I can’t tell you any more than that.”

“What you’re doing, it’s dangerous?”

“It is.”

With those two words, I understood why he'd called me, and why, despite needing the call to be quick, he'd answered my questions. Our parents had worried about him when he was in the army, and then he'd almost died. Whatever he was about to do could be as dangerous as serving in the military, and he wanted to make sure that a family member was aware of it so we could look out for Mom and Da in case something went wrong.

"I'll call Da later today and see what he and Mom want to do." I had to ask one more question. "Does this have anything to do with the U.S. aid worker who went missing in Iran?"

Another slight pause. "Cain's running the team, and there's a strict confidentiality policy."

That was the equivalent of pleading the fifth, which meant I knew that was why and where he was going, but he couldn't give me any actual information.

Dammit.

"Is there anything else I can do to help?" I asked.

"No, just handle things with Mom and Da."

"I will." I blew out a long breath. "You be careful, all right?"

"I will."

The call ended, but I didn't put my phone down. I stared at the screen, willing another call to come through. Or a text. Anything from Freedom to let me know that she was okay. I wouldn't be resting or doing anything that required a lot of specific attention until I knew she was safe.

TWENTY-TWO

FREEDOM

MY PARENTS HAD HIRED AN AGENCY THAT HANDLED RANSOM DROPS IN THE Middle East, but I'd made a contingency plan that involved an ex-boyfriend and a group of other former military men doing something that no one else would. I was as confident as I could be that they'd succeed, so I couldn't really regret hiring them...

Even though Cain had spent the last half hour or so trying to convince me to go back to L.A.

"Not going to happen," I said from between gritted teeth. "You're going to bring her straight to me, and then she and I are flying home together."

"That's not going to happen," Cain said tightly. "We have no idea what sort of situation we're going to be going into or what shit will be coming after us. We have to be able to make split-second decisions about extraction."

"Then I'll wait at the airport."

"You want to wait at LAX, go for it, but you're not waiting here."

"Stop being an ass, Cain," I snapped. "I'm not leaving my sister."

"And what happens if the people who have her decide that they can ask for twice as much if they grab you too?"

I barked a laugh. "They won't find me as easy a mark as my little sister. Anyone touches me, I'll rip their balls off."

“I know you think you’re a badass, but we don’t know anything about these people. There are people who can take out fully trained Rangers. We have no idea who we’re dealing with.”

My temper snapped. “I don’t care, Cain! I’m not going to leave my sister!”

“Go home, Freedom!”

If I hadn’t known Cain well enough to hear concern and fear rather than anger, I might’ve told him to go fuck himself and then tried to go after Aline myself.

Well, maybe not that last part. I wasn’t an idiot, no matter what Cain thought.

“Look.” His volume dropped back down to normal. “If they come after you, it could endanger Aline in a lot of ways.”

“Name two.” My nails dug into my palm, but I ignored the pain.

“If they have two of you, they can hurt one as...incentive.”

Shit. I hadn’t thought of that.

“And if they grab you after the ransom drop or after my team rescues Aline, that just puts us right back where we are right now. One Mercier woman being held as a prisoner while the other tries to figure out how to save her.”

Dammit.

I closed my eyes against the burn of tears. I hated that I cried when I was furious, but I hated it even more when I knew that anger was only on the surface of what I was feeling. Beneath it was sheer terror.

“Let me do the job you hired me to do, Freedom,” Cain said. “I’m going to find her, and I will bring her back to you. I swear.”

I nodded my head and then remembered that he couldn’t see me. “Okay. I’ll go.”

They were the hardest words I’d ever spoken, but no matter how much I hated it, I knew he was right. I needed to go back to L.A. I just hoped that my parents understood.

I ended the call and turned to my laptop to find the next flight back. I'd get those details first and then call my parents. I would go to L.A., but I wasn't going to the apartment without Aline. I needed to be with Mom and Dad. Reassure them that they shouldn't talk to the press while also not telling them about Cain's team.

There'd been a little bit of a story back home, but it'd only mentioned that a foreign aid worker from the U.S. had gone missing. I believed someone from Neutral Ground had guessed what had happened and talked to someone. Fortunately, Aline's captors hadn't contacted me about it, which most likely meant they either didn't know or didn't care. I didn't care which one, as long as she was safe.

It took me nearly twenty minutes to get what I needed, but I was able to get a flight for the next morning. With the rest of the day ahead of me, I made a list of what I had to do before I left. Check in with the police. Speak to Miss Little again. And call my parents.

I sighed. That last one needed to come first. No use putting it off. It wouldn't get any easier. I picked up my phone and placed the call.

THE PHONE RANG, jerking me out of a light and restless sleep. That seemed to be the only type of rest I'd gotten since realizing Aline was missing. The only reason my parents had gotten any sleep at all had been thanks to the tranquilizers the family doctor had prescribed. They'd offered me some when I'd gotten back to L.A., but I'd declined. My parents' health couldn't take the added stress of not sleeping. Mine could.

And I deserved every minute of it. Mom and Dad hadn't come right out and said that, but they hadn't needed to. I knew this was my fault. Granted, appendicitis hadn't been something I could have planned for or avoided, but Aline never should have been over there in the first place.

All that guilt and anxiety rushed into me before I'd even picked up my phone. The sight of Cain's name made me sit upright, everything else chased away by thoughts of what he could be calling about.

“Hello.”

“Sorry, did I wake you?”

I gave myself a mental shake, clearing away the last of the cobwebs. “Don’t worry about it. What’s happened?”

“We have a location where we believe Aline is being held.”

“Where?”

“You know I can’t tell you that.” His tone was gentle, but I knew he wouldn’t budge.

Honestly, I hadn’t really thought he’d tell me. I’d just needed to ask. It wasn’t as if I could actually do anything. I wasn’t even on the same continent anymore.

“What *can* you tell me, then?” I heard the frustration in my voice, but it wasn’t directed at Cain.

“We’re waiting until dark to give us better cover, so it’ll be a couple hours, but we’re going after her tonight.”

“The ransom drop is tomorrow. If you’re wrong, don’t you risk alerting them to the fact that someone’s looking for them?” I wasn’t really questioning Cain’s decision, but all I could see were all the ways things could go horribly wrong.

“There’s always a risk with any move we make,” Cain replied. “Move too soon, and we tip our hand. Wait too long and...”

“And we lose her completely,” I finished the thought. Death or trafficking, neither of which was a good outcome.

“This is why you hire someone like me to make these decisions,” he said. “I can weigh the risks and make the best call available.”

“I hired you because I knew you’d do that, but you’d still remember that she’s my sister, and getting her back is the only thing I care about.”

After a few seconds of silence, he cleared his throat. “I’m going to do everything in my power to find her, Freedom. I promise.”

“I know you will.” I sighed. “Please have her call me as soon as it’s safe.”

“I will.” There was another pause, and then he asked, “How are you doing?”

I considered lying and saying I was fine, but he wasn’t an idiot. He’d know it was a lie. He probably wouldn’t push since it wasn’t as if we were together anymore, but it’d still be a lie. Part of me wanted to say that it was none of his business, but that rang too close to the last conversation I’d had with Brody, and I didn’t want to bring those memories to the surface. Besides, Cain and I had managed to keep things friendly even after we broke up, and I could use all the friends I could get right now.

I went with honesty. “I’m about as well as a person in my situation can be. Holding it together for my parents and remembering the reasons why I hadn’t told them about your team.”

“If things go the way I think they will, you’ll be able to tell them that she’s on her way home soon enough.”

I clung to that statement as I said goodbye and then got up to shower. I didn’t bother trying to go back to sleep. That wasn’t going to happen until I heard back from him or Aline, and even then, I knew I wouldn’t be able to completely relax until she was home.

Soon.

Soon turned out to be that night. The number to Cain’s satellite phone flashed on my screen, and I answered the call before it could ring a second time.

“Cain?”

“Freedom.”

I closed my eyes as relief hit me. I sank to the chair behind me. “Aline. You’re safe?”

“I’m all right,” she said, her voice far calmer and even than I’d expected. “We’re taking off right now, so I’ll be home in about sixteen hours.”

“And you’re all right? They didn’t...hurt you?”

“Just some bumps and bruises.”

“Do you want to talk to Mom and Dad?” I’d tell them now that she was on her way home, but after what she’d been through, I wasn’t going to push her to talk to them.

“Not right now,” she said. Her voice shook a bit. “Thank you for sending people to find me.”

Tears spilled over, and I let them run down my cheeks. I’d need to hold it together for our parents and for Aline, but no one could see me crying right now, so I let it happen.

“I’ll always take care of you,” I reminded her.

I didn’t add that I’d done a shit job of it recently. I knew Aline well enough to know that she’d feel obligated to tell me that I hadn’t done anything wrong. She didn’t need to deal with my baggage. She was safe and on her way home, and that was all that mattered.

TWENTY-THREE

BRODY

I DIDN'T KNOW HOW LONG I'D BEEN ASLEEP WHEN MY PHONE WOKE ME. I groped for it blindly, not registering the name on the screen before answering it.

“Hello?” A burst of laughter had me pulling the phone away from my ear and sitting up. “Hello?”

“Your brother’s an asshole of the worst kind.”

I frowned and turned on the light. The voice sounded familiar, but I couldn’t quite place it. “Who is this?”

“Not surprised you don’t recognize me. You seemed to know me well enough when you were fucking me.”

Immediately, everything clouding my mind fled, and I was suddenly awake...and aware.

“Freedom?”

“Ding, ding, ding! You got it!”

“Are you...are you *drunk?!?*”

Another round of laughter. “I may have been drinking a *wee* bit.”

She was trying to use a Scottish accent. I wasn’t sure if that was funny or annoying, and I didn’t intend to decide until we went back to the first incomprehensible thing she’d said.

“What did you say about my brother?”

“Oh, right. *Him*. Bastard.”

My eyebrows shot up. What the hell was going on with her?

“Your brother fucked my sister.”

I had to be hearing things because there was no way in the world that made any sense. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Guess I should be glad he’s not bragging about it. But it shouldn’t have happened. Fucking bastard.”

“I still don’t know what you’re going on about.”

“Right. You need to know the whole story. How your asshole brother, Eoin, was supposed to save Aline from those asshats who took her, but he fucked her instead.”

My first thought was that she’d said his name correctly. The second was that I’d been right about what Eoin had been doing in the Middle East. But it hadn’t been Freedom who’d gone missing. It’d been Aline.

The relief I felt at the realization was quickly replaced by guilt as I remembered the petite, delicate-looking girl I’d met. What sort of asshole was I that I was *glad* someone like her had gone missing and not Freedom, who I knew would be able to take care of herself?

“Is your sister okay?” That seemed like a safer question to ask than how, exactly, she knew that Eoin had slept with Aline, though that was something I was going to need more time to process.

“Don’t know. She went home with Eoin. Probably fucking him right now.”

While I’d heard her swear every so often, this was excessive for her. It seemed whatever filter she had disappeared when she had a few drinks in her.

“He’s not as pretty as you.”

Maybe more than a few drinks.

“But she isn’t hurt?” I really did care about whether or not she’d been harmed, especially after I’d been even the least bit relieved that Aline had been the one taken. Besides, I wasn’t about to touch her comment about me being prettier than my brother.

“Not really. Except for what Eoin did.”

I stiffened. “My brother would never force—”

“Of course not!” she interrupted. “I said he was an asshole, not a rapist. Not that the two are mutually exclusive.”

“What the hell are you going on about then?” It took all my self-control not to yell.

“I thought you were smarter than that. Stupid.” She barked a laugh. “Eoin will hurt her because that’s what men do. He’ll get tired of her and hurt her.”

I gritted my teeth. It was one thing to say shit about men to me when we’d ended things so badly, but Eoin wasn’t me. Eoin was a better man, even if he wasn’t entirely certain of it himself.

“Maybe Eoin is the one who will get hurt,” I snapped back. “Men aren’t the only ones who say stupid things, you know. Maybe your precious sister will hurt him. Did you ever think of that?”

“Fuck you.”

The two words were followed by the abrupt silence that came with an ended call.

She’d hung up on me.

It took me a while, but I managed to fall asleep again, and knowing that Freedom was safe, I actually slept better than I had since I’d seen that news story. I woke up feeling rested, though not exactly happy. Freedom hadn’t been harmed, and her sister had been rescued. I was glad for that.

I tried to keep Freedom out of my head as I went to work, and Adela waiting at the door when I arrived definitely helped with that.

“Isaiah Eastman is in your office.”

I blinked. “Did he say why he was here?”

Adela shook her head. “Just that he wanted to talk to you if you had time in your schedule. I told him the only time you had was first thing this morning, so he said he’d wait in your office.”

This was definitely not how I thought my day would go, but as I headed to my office, I realized Isaiah’s visit might be exactly what I needed to forget about last night’s phone call.

Isaiah Eastman had grown up just a few houses down from me, and we’d been in the same grade despite him being a year younger than me. He’d always been smart, top of our class the whole way, so it hadn’t been a surprise when he’d gotten into Stanford and completed an MBA in three years. After that, he’d moved to Orlando with his college girlfriend and then to Nashville a couple years later, but even though he’d lived on the other side of the country, we’d still kept in touch.

He’d told me a few months ago that he’d planned to move back to California, but I hadn’t heard from him since. That wasn’t odd. We’d always been the sort of friends who could go months without hearing from each other but then pick up right where we’d left off.

When I entered my office, he was behind my desk, his hands behind his head and his feet on my desk, a cocky grin on his face.

“Morning.”

“I see you’ve made yourself at home,” I said as I hung up my jacket.

“Of course.” He put his feet down and stood up. “The place looks great.”

“Thanks.” He came around the desk, and we embraced. “It’s good to see you. I didn’t realize you were back already.”

“I’ve been back and forth since October, but settling things back east and getting set up here has been running me ragged.”

“I can see that. You look like shit.” I grinned at him.

“At least I have an excuse.” His obsidian-black eyes glinted with good humor.

I had one too, but I wasn't about to waste time talking about everything that had gone on with Freedom. Isaiah and I had plenty to talk about that didn't have to do with my sex life.

"Are you in San Ramon, then?"

"San Leandro, actually," he said. "I just closed on a house Monday. I'll be expecting at least two bottles of your best as a housewarming present."

"Is that so?" I gestured for him to sit. "I would think the giver could choose the gift."

"The memory of the last gift you chose for me is still fresh in my mind," he said dryly.

"Right. The llama." I laughed as I walked around to my seat behind the desk. "What did you end up doing with it again?"

"The petting zoo was grateful for your donation." He chuckled. "And I had them name it after you."

"I'd have it no other way." I glanced at the time. "I do have a packed schedule today, so I'm assuming you had something specific you wanted to talk to me about."

"I do," Isaiah said, his voice taking on his business tone. "And it's time-sensitive, which is why I'm here now and didn't just wait to talk to you."

"I'm listening."

"The short version is that I've started a new business here, and I'd like to have you involved."

I didn't try to disguise my surprise, but I didn't interrupt to ask questions either. Isaiah was the kind of man who had a plan, and it was always better to let him explain the plan, and then I could ask any questions I still had.

"I started a travel agency in Nashville, and it ended up being one of the top in the state, but I had a couple of ideas that wouldn't really work from there. I needed to be here." He steepled his hands, pressing his fingertips together. "On top of the typical packages, I want to create exclusive, one-of-a-kind packages that no one can offer anywhere else."

Exclusive gave me an idea of what he was thinking, though not the details. Those came now.

“I want Shannon’s to supply all the beer and whiskey I plan to load up on the elite cruises I’m putting together.” He smiled. “And I’m sure you can imagine just how much booze people drink on those ships.”

I could imagine it. I *was*, in fact, imagining it.

“I’d also like to offer you the chance to buy in on the line itself,” Isaiah continued. “I’ve done well for myself, but not enough for me to single-handedly get this thing off the ground with the sort of panache it deserves. I need investors.”

I nodded slowly. “You said this was time-sensitive?”

One side of his mouth tipped up in a half-smile. “I purchased a single ship to outfit exactly the way I want things to be, with the exception of your fine liquor at the moment, but since I want to keep the number of passengers low, I want to have at least two more ships before I start.”

“Okay.” There was more, I was sure of it.

“And I want to start with a forty-eight-hour cruise from midnight on New Year’s Eve to midnight on New Year’s Day.” He made a dismissive gesture. “Or however that works. You know what I mean.”

“You want to have everything up and ready to go before New Year’s Eve *this* year?”

“I can do it.” Isaiah’s confidence was unwavering. “If I get the right people on board.”

“Right people like me.”

He nodded. “Yes. You’re the first.”

“And I’m assuming you need an answer right away.”

“Sort of.” Isaiah leaned forward slightly. “I have meetings with a few other investors today. I want you and them to go on a four-day cruise on my ship, starting tomorrow. We’ll go up the coast and then turn around to come back

on the twenty-sixth. Whether you come or not, I'll buy whatever liquor you can sell me for the trip."

Shannon's was closed all weekend and on a limited schedule next week because of the holiday. Because of the way making whiskey worked, we didn't create something one day for it to be sold the next. All my labels evolved over the years. It was the beer that had the quicker turnaround, but I always planned the schedule to allow my employees to take off around the holidays or to work the double-pay I offered. That meant things would be fine for Adela to keep an eye on while I was gone.

Taking a four-day cruise and coming back in time to spend the holiday with my family sounded like a much, much better way to forget about Freedom than working myself to death and then sleeping through Thanksgiving.

"I'm in."

TWENTY-FOUR

FREEDOM

I DIDN'T LIKE SEEING ALINE UPSET, BUT I COULDN'T SAY THAT I WAS unhappy with what had happened between her and Eoin – or surprised, honestly. Not that I knew any details. She'd just come in this morning and told me she and Eoin were done. All she wanted now was to focus on Thanksgiving with family. I could get behind that with far more enthusiasm now that she had her head on straight. By the time we made it to Black Friday, Aline would be in prime condition to discuss our future.

After breakfast, Aline had excused herself with a headache and retreated to her room. I had a feeling it was more about Brody's asshole brother than lack of sleep, but I wasn't going to pry, not when my questions before had sent her straight into his arms. It was her first crush and heartbreak; she'd get over it with time.

Maybe I'd suggest to her that we return to the apartment after Thanksgiving instead of her staying here like Mom and Dad wanted. Since Cain's agency was here in L.A., I assumed that meant Eoin lived here too. With he and Aline broken up – or whatever the right phrase was for whatever they had been – I couldn't see her wanting to stay here any longer than necessary. Once I asked her, I could talk our parents into it, tell them how getting back to her normal routine would be the best thing for her.

My thoughts were interrupted by my ringing phone, and I had a moment of wild hope that I'd see Brody's name on the screen. Why I thought that would be a good thing was beyond me. After last night's drunken phone call, I had more of a reason than ever to never want to see him again.

My face burned at the memory of the things I'd said, as well as how he'd responded. At the time, I'd felt completely justified in reaming him for what his brother had done, and now it appeared that my fears had been realized. Aline hadn't told me what had happened between her and Eoin, but it had been clear that they hadn't parted ways amicably. No matter what Brody thought, I knew it'd been Aline who'd gotten hurt.

It wasn't Brody's name I saw, however. It was Dr. Ipres.

"Hello?"

"Freedom, I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"Not at all, Dr. Ipres."

"Please, call me Cicily."

I could hear the smile in her voice, and some of my tension eased. "Of course, Cicily. How are you?"

"I'm doing well, thank you. It's been a bit odd these past few months, getting used to not seeing you around campus or in my classroom."

"It's definitely been strange for me too," I said. "I hadn't realized how set I'd always been in a school-related schedule."

"How did your trip go?"

I couldn't hear anything in her voice but sincere curiosity. We'd managed to keep what had happened to Aline fairly quiet, trusting only a few people with the truth. While I knew Dr. Ipres – Cicily – would never use someone else's misfortune to draw attention to herself, the fewer people who knew about the kidnapping, the better. The last thing Aline needed right now was a media feeding frenzy or even well-intended condolences. She needed to move on.

"It was quite productive," I said honestly. "Aline did a wonderful job with the children, and I was able to practice both my Arabic and my Persian."

"I'm assuming that, since I haven't received any reference calls on your behalf, you haven't yet been hired anywhere?"

I knew she didn't mean anything negative by it, but it still rankled. "No, I thought it best to start sending in resumés after Thanksgiving. An interview before Christmas and then a starting date just after the first of the year would be impeccable timing."

That was most of the truth, anyway. The fact that I hadn't arrived back in the States on the originally intended day, and then the time waiting for Aline to be rescued, had all made it much more sensible to wait.

"Do you have plans over this weekend?"

"No." I had a feeling we were moving from polite small talk into the reason for the call.

"I had a former student reach out to me earlier today to ask if I knew of any translators who spoke both Greek and Russian well enough to translate not only from those languages to English and back, but also from Greek to Russian if necessary."

"That's a pretty tall order." Her calling me made more sense now.

"One that you can fill," she said.

"I can," I agreed. "What's the event?"

"It's not a single event, actually. There's a group of businesspeople who are going on a cruise."

"A cruise?" I let myself sound as confused as I felt.

"It's not a vacation or party," she said, correctly interpreting my tone. "Isaiah Eastman is putting together an exclusive travel agency that will offer specialty cruises. He's inviting potential investors to take a four-day cruise, leaving tomorrow morning and coming back on Tuesday. Among his investors are at least one who speaks Greek and another who speaks Russian."

I'd thought about going home this weekend to get a little space from my parents and get my head together for the plan I'd told Cicily I had. That wouldn't take all weekend, though, and I hadn't exactly been looking forward to the downtime that would come with it. Accepting this job would give me

something to do, and then I could use the downtime on the ship to do any research. If this Isaiah guy truly wanted to cater to the elite, he'd need to have good Wi-Fi. I could use the internet there as well as I could here or at home.

And I'd be paid for it.

I didn't need money, but it would be nice to have something I could point to on my resumé that was an actual, paying job. And it'd feel good to finally get a taste of what I could expect from one possible option for my future. While doing some sort of freelance translating was not high on my list of possible employers, it was still, at least, in my field.

"How can I contact Mr. Eastman?" I asked. "I think I'd like to take him up on that job."

Four days of thinking about nothing except my work and my future. Just me and whoever else happened to be on that ship. Strangers who'd know nothing about me or my family beyond the fact that I was the translator.

That sounded...nice.

TWENTY-FIVE

BRODY

SAN LEANDRO WASN'T FAR FROM SAN RAMON, BUT THE TEMPERATURE difference this morning was noticeable. I didn't know if it was due to the wind coming off the ocean or just some weird weather fluke, but whatever the reason, I was glad I'd worn my jacket instead of just packing it.

Things were fairly quiet as I made my way to the boarding gangway. The ship was smaller than a normal cruise ship by quite a bit, which meant that the ramp actually went to the main deck rather than a door on one of the lower decks.

As I stepped onto the ship, I saw the three jacketed figures already on the deck. The middle one – Isaiah – waved. The woman to his left was tall, close to six feet even without heels, and slender, with striking features that made me think she was a model or in a similar sort of field. The wind was making a mess of her dark curls, but she had an elegance that made it look attractively wind-swept rather than messy. The man on Isaiah's other side was about the same height as the woman and had curly hair that was a darker shade of brown than hers.

“Good morning.” Isaiah stretched out his hand, and I shook it. “This is Doyle Ewell and Marta Vasilev.”

“Good to meet you.” I shook Doyle's hand first and then Marta's. “I'm Brody McCrae.”

“Your name sounds familiar.” Doyle studied me closely. “Have we met before?”

I shook my head. “I don’t think so. What do you do?”

“Athletic clubs.” His dark blue eyes shone with pride. “Three in Chicago where I grew up and three here on the West Coast. Ewell Do Well.”

I chuckled at the play on words. “I think I saw a billboard in L.A. for one.”

“That one just opened,” Doyle said. “What about you?”

“Shannon’s Distillery. I make whiskey. Beer too, but whiskey’s the main focus.”

He frowned. “I haven’t heard of it, but I know I recognize your name.”

“It might not be his name,” Isaiah said. “Brody’s got a massive family. There are McCraes doing all sorts of things.”

Before either Isaiah or I could expound on that, a third man joined us. Average height and stocky, with silver in his black hair, he looked older than the rest of us, but it was impossible to guess his exact age.

“Glad you could make it,” Isaiah said as he shook the new man’s hand. “Everyone, this is Dimos Raptis.”

We each introduced ourselves, and for the first time, Marta’s thick accent came through. Some sort of Eastern European, probably Russian, though I wasn’t familiar enough with the language to say for certain.

“Dimos is the one who sold me this ship,” Isaiah said. “And he has two other ships I want to add.”

“Yes, ships.”

Dimos had a thick accent, but it wasn’t the same as Marta’s. He said something in whatever language was his native one, and I wasn’t the only one who clearly had no idea what he’d said. Even Isaiah looked confused.

I’d taken French in high school, but that wasn’t going to help me here. I thought it was more than a little odd that he wouldn’t have at least someone who knew the language. Trying to navigate the sort of terminology we’d need to do business together would be difficult if we were struggling to communicate clearly. There were apps that could help, but it would still be

difficult. Judging by the expressions on everyone else's faces, they were thinking the same thing.

Well, everyone except Isaiah. He was grinning. "I know what you're thinking. I have the language thing covered." He looked over my shoulder, and his smile widened. "Here comes the translator I hired."

I turned automatically, and for a moment, my brain didn't register what I was seeing. *Who* I was seeing. When it clicked into place, all the air went out of me.

Dammit.

TWENTY-SIX

FREEDOM

A GUST OF WIND BLEW MY HAIR ACROSS MY FACE, TEMPORARILY BLOCKING my view as I made my way to the deck. I'd thought about pulling it back, but I'd woken up with a headache, and pulling it into a ponytail would've just aggravated the issue. By the time I'd gotten here, the pain killers I'd taken at home had started to work, but I'd forgotten about my hair.

"Dammit," I muttered as I pushed the wayward strands back. I'd seen a group of people on the deck, and I had no doubt that they were all looking at me now, which meant their first impression of me was going to be with a rats' nest sitting on my head.

I was still a couple yards away when I raised my head, smiling as I looked at a tall woman. That smile disappeared, however, when my gaze moved to the next person.

Brody.

The stunned expression on his face told me that he hadn't known about me being here any more than I'd known about him. As I pushed down my personal feelings, I watched a mask fall over his face and knew, without needing him to say a word, that we were going to pretend that we didn't know each other. We could get through this by being professionals.

"Freedom Mercier!" A handsome man with warm brown skin and closely cropped sable-colored hair came toward me, hand outstretched. "It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm glad you were able to join us."

“Mr. Eastman?”

“Isaiah, please.”

He had the kind of pleasant demeanor that I was certain put people at ease, and it would’ve worked with me if I hadn’t been so overly aware of Brody standing only a couple feet away. I felt like I’d stepped into a lightning storm. The hairs on my arms prickled, and every cell of my body buzzed with electricity.

Isaiah began to introduce me to the others, and that helped me pull my attention back to the reason I was there in the first place. Picking up on Marta’s accent first, I greeted her in Russian.

As with any language, there were nuances in regions, influenced by everything from immigrants to the surrounding areas, but like in English, it was still possible to have a conversation with someone. After a brief exchange with her, I repeated the same thing with Dimos, only in Greek.

And then came Brody. After shaking his hand, I had the urge to rub my now-tingling palm on my pant leg, but I managed to suppress it. A polite smile, and then I was shaking hands with Doyle Ewell, the final member of the group.

“Let’s get you all to your rooms, and I’ll let the captain know that we’re ready to go.” Isaiah gestured farther up the deck. “I only have a bare minimum crew for us, so if you can bring your luggage with you, I’d appreciate it. Otherwise, I’ll have to come back down at get it myself.”

That got a ripple of laughter from all of us as we lifted our bags and followed Isaiah to a set of exterior stairs. As we moved up to the second tier, I found myself in the awkward position of following Brody at the perfect height to be staring straight at his ass. I didn’t need the reminder of how nice it was, but it was impossible to *not* see it.

By the time we reached the first of the cabin doors, my face was flushed and only partly from the elements and exertion. I just hoped everyone was more focused on our surroundings than me. I had a minute to see chairs set along the deck before Isaiah began talking.

“We have six staterooms here, three on this side and three on the other, with connecting doors available should a group choose to use our services and want to be able to come and go between the suites. Don’t worry, there are double locks on both sides to prevent anyone from getting into their neighbor’s room without permission.” Isaiah held out a key card to Doyle. “This is your room.”

Dimos and Marta were also on this side, which left Isaiah, Brody, and me on the other side. Of course, Brody’s room was in the middle, which meant that I had a connecting door not only with Marta, but with Brody as well.

Perfect.

Isaiah had given us time to unpack and settle into our rooms before we were supposed to meet back at the stairs we’d come up, and I was grateful for it. Each time a member of our group had gone into their room, the tension between Brody and I had seemed more obvious. I was honestly surprised that Isaiah hadn’t noticed. Then again, he might have and simply chosen not to ask. Whatever the reason, I needed at least a few minutes to compose myself to prevent any future questions.

The room was a welcome distraction, I thought as I closed the door behind me. And *room* was definitely not a large enough word to encompass the space in which I found myself.

This looked more like the sort of stateroom Rose had had in the movie *Titanic*.

A small kitchenette clearly made for re-heating and keeping snacks was to one side. To the other was a closet and the door that went to Brody’s room. A sitting room with a couch, table, desk, and chairs were in front of me. Nice artwork hung on the walls, along with a decent-sized television. I walked farther into the room and spotted the bedroom and bathroom off to one side and the far door that led to Marta’s room.

I ignored the connecting doors and carried my bags into the bedroom. A massive, king-sized bed took up most of the room, but there were still two bedside tables and a dresser. I unpacked my clothes before taking my toiletries bag into the bathroom.

I let out a low whistle. Half of the bathroom was taken up by a shower. Glass encased, with a bench seat and two removable showerheads, it was easily as nice as my shower back home. The counter was marble, and the tile looked to be the same. Even from where I stood, I could tell that the linens were high quality.

If Isaiah had done all this for just our small group, he'd set a high standard for what else he had in store for paying guests. I wasn't here as an investor or supplier of goods, but I was a little tempted to speak to Isaiah about my parents perhaps investing. If I felt the same when we came back, I'd do just that.

It didn't take long for me to finish unpacking, but I didn't go straight back out, dreading the possibility of getting stuck with just Brody out there. Instead, I wandered, opening doors and drawers, mentally running through my Greek and Russian vocabulary for each thing I saw and touched. I'd brushed up some last night on both, but it had been a while since I'd had any real conversations in either language.

I'd made it through the kitchen area when I heard a knock on the connecting door to Brody's room. I walked over and disengaged the lock but waited a beat before opening it. My heart was pounding, and I needed a minute to prepare myself.

As if any amount of time could actually prepare me for seeing him face-to-face again, no one else in the room. Just him and me, inches apart.

I opened the door.

TWENTY-SEVEN

BRODY

I BARELY HEARD A WORD ISAIAH SAID AS HE LED US UP TO THE SECOND DECK where our rooms were located. I'd ended up at the front of our little group, which meant I wasn't able to watch Freedom as we walked up the stairs, but I could feel her watching me.

And as if this couldn't get any more complicated or awkward, her room was right next to mine.

With a connecting door between our rooms.

I went straight to the bathroom, barely even registering my surroundings, and I turned on the sink. Leaning over it, I let out a stream of curse words, low enough that no one else could hear, especially over the water. I didn't know how thin the walls were, and with my room being between Isaiah's and Freedom's, I didn't want to risk either of them hearing me swearing. Isaiah would want to know why and Freedom would probably guess why, neither of which were anything I wanted to deal with.

I unpacked, trying to pretend I wasn't thinking about what she was doing in her own room. I couldn't hear a sound, but I didn't know if that was because she was just being extra quiet or because the rooms were well-insulated. I'd find that out soon enough because, at some point in the next four days, she'd need to shower.

That thought just made things worse because now I was thinking about her naked. Standing in that huge shower, water streaming down her body. A drop clinging to one tight nipple before dripping off. Soap bubbles slick on her

skin.

Shit.

Now I was hard.

I went back to the bathroom, and this time, turned on the water to splash the cold liquid on my face. I needed a whole fucking cold shower, but that would've been a little too obvious. It was chilly enough out that I hoped once I was outside again, my erection would care more about staying warm than expressing its interest in Freedom.

But first, I needed to know why she was here.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I went to the connecting door between our rooms, opened mine, and knocked on hers. After a minute, I heard the click of the locks and the slide of the chain. Anticipation clenched my stomach, and it wasn't all a bad thing.

Dammit.

The door opened, and she was there. "Hi."

"What are you doing here?" Okay, that might've been a bit on the harsh side, but I didn't really see the point of a lot of meaningless small talk when we both knew the elephant in the room's name.

Her expression hardened. "I'm here for a job, not that it's any of your business."

"A job?" I crossed my arms. "Seriously? You expect me to believe that you just happened to be hired by a friend of mine?"

Her eyes narrowed. "For your information, I wasn't aware that you knew Isaiah Eastman. He's a Stanford alumni who called Cicily – Dr. Ipres – to ask if she knew of anyone who could translate English, Greek, and Russian. That's a very particular skill set and one that I happen to fill."

"Isaiah's my friend." Frustration ran through me, mostly because what she said was very true. Still...I couldn't let this go. "If anyone has a *legitimate* connection to him, it's me."

She raised an eyebrow. “Because it’d be so easy to figure that out?”

“Isaiah asked me here because he wants to serve Shannon’s on his ships,” I said. “No one else could provide him with what I make.”

She pulled her phone out of her pocket and held it out to me. “Call Cicily. Ask her if she knows Isaiah and if he contacted her. Ask her how many people she knows who could provide the service he needs.”

I almost took her up on it, but Freedom didn’t bluff. No matter how much I wished I could be pissed off at her for coming here to fuck with my head, I had to admit that she’d had no idea that I’d be here. And Isaiah had no idea that she and I knew each other.

Which meant this fiasco was no one’s fault. Just a fucking coincidence.

Or fate.

“I’ll take your word for it,” I said tightly. “I didn’t know you’d be here either. Isaiah just called me yesterday and asked if I’d come. All I knew about the other people who’d be here was that they were potential investors. I didn’t know that there’d be a need for a translator or that it’d be you.”

She put her phone back in her pocket. “And I didn’t know you two were buddies, or I never would’ve accepted this job. But now we’re not exactly in a position where either one of us can leave.”

“You’re right.” I took a deep breath. “But it doesn’t have to be an issue. We’re both adults, perfectly capable of being professional.”

“We are,” she said. “It’s not like we’re being asked to spend time with just the two of us, and no one knows that we’ve...hooked up in the past. If we just focus on the work and don’t feel the need to overshare, we can spend these four days seeing if Isaiah’s venture is as good as it seems.”

Her words seemed to imply that she was looking into the cruise line as something more than just this single job, but that wasn’t my business any more than how much she was getting paid for these four days or about anything else in her life. She’d made that completely clear on more than one occasion.

“So, we keep pretending that we’re strangers.” I made it a statement rather than a question.

“I think that’s for the best, don’t you?” Her expression was guarded.

I wanted to say no, that I didn’t think it was for the best. That we should actually talk about what’d happened between us. That being this close to her for four straight days and nights was going to drive me nuts because I couldn’t stop thinking about what it had felt like to sink my cock into her.

Instead of saying any of that, I kept it simple. “It sounds like we’re on the same page.”

“Good.”

The door shut, and I was alone again.

It was better this way, and I’d eventually be able to say that honestly if I just kept thinking it.

I hoped.

TWENTY-EIGHT

FREEDOM

AFTER TALKING TO BRODY AND AGREEING THAT IT WOULD BE BEST IF WE pretended not to know each other, I needed a few more minutes to gather myself before I felt like I could handle being around him. What we were doing was smart. The only real solution to the strange situation we'd found ourselves in.

And it was what I wanted.

To move past what'd happened between us and get on with my life.

With that thought firmly entrenched in my mind, I left my room and headed for the stairs. Isaiah and Marta were both there already, which meant I didn't have to struggle to find small talk because one of the first things I liked to do when speaking to someone in a language not my own was have a brief conversation in their native tongue to help me acclimate. Since I'd be working with three languages rather than two, learning the speech patterns would be more important.

Translation was rarely a straightforward word-for-word sort of thing. Nuances in a language varied in region, class, and numerous other factors. I'd once heard it explained as the differences between an American from the southeast, an American from New England, a Scot, an Australian, and a Brit. All technically spoke English, but there were a lot of phrases and words that had vastly different meanings.

Scot.

Of course, I had to think *Scot*, even though, most of the time, Brody didn't have an accent.

As if the thought had conjured him, Brody came around the corner. His eyes met mine for a brief moment before sliding away. If I hadn't known his face so well, I wouldn't have seen the tightening at the corners of his eyes, his mouth. I wanted to think that it was bothering him, this decision we'd made about pretending to be strangers and not even friends, but it had been easy for him to agree with me. He'd said we were on the same page.

I didn't need to poke the bear.

Fortunately, Doyle chose that moment to join the group, and he brought with him a wide smile and a plethora of jokes to keep us all laughing until Dimos arrived a few minutes later. Since I'd already talked to Marta, I stepped back to walk with Dimos down the stairs, chatting with him the way I had with her.

By the time we reached the main deck, I had a good feel for both Marta and Dimos. I'd also established how each of them preferred I handle their translation. I was thoroughly in a working mindset, relieved to have something to focus on instead of Brody.

"I want to take you all through the same tour the passengers will get so you can get an idea of the whole scope of what will be offered," Isaiah said as we stopped next to where we'd come onto the ship. "When guests come aboard here, we'll have staff members who will take their luggage and then direct them to their rooms. Once we depart, we'll have a tour that will begin here."

As we started walking, I stayed between Dimos and Marta, ready to interject whenever they looked at me for something they hadn't understood. Since most of what Isaiah said had visuals, I didn't really have much to do for this part of the tour.

We went through the dining hall and past the kitchen, taking the time to admire the elegant tables and chairs. The windows and French doors weren't letting much light in today, but on a sunny day, it'd be full of natural light. I imagined there'd be a beautiful view at sunset and sunrise, and passengers might even get a glimpse of stars at night.

One set of doors didn't lead outside but rather to a more dimly lit, sophisticated space that was a mix between a club and a bar. There was room to dance, as well as intimate booths lining the wall. If I'd doubted why Brody had been asked to come, this room would've been all the explanation needed. Putting my personal issues with him aside, I couldn't think of a better person to supply liquor of a quality worthy of this place.

Next came the exercise room, though who wanted to exercise while they were on a cruise, I didn't know. Dimos seemed to agree with me, but Marta looked like she was impressed by the equipment Isaiah promised. Considering her previous occupation, which had been the same as my mother's, Marta was probably the exact type of person who'd exercise during vacation.

Before anyone could ask, Isaiah explained that the reason the room was empty at the moment was because he was hoping that would be where Doyle's investment came into play. I thought that was smart, giving an investor a specific area that fit with his product. It'd be great advertising.

We moved on to a room that made more sense, in my opinion. Well, more sense for a vacation venture. I wasn't entirely sure how much sense it made to have a room full of electronics on something that would spend most of its time surrounded by water.

Then again, if the massive flatscreen television and rows of computers were in danger of being immersed in seawater, their being ruined would most likely not be the biggest problem.

Turning into a hallway, Isaiah took us past the elevators first and showed us the restrooms. They looked like something that would've fit right in at a five-star hotel. Marble counters, brass furnishings, and more room than one would've expected for a ship's toilet.

The elevators were glass. I'd been in that sort before, but I hadn't counted on how the motion of the water, combined with the movement of the elevator, played havoc on my equilibrium. I swayed, afraid for a moment that I'd stumble, but then a hand caught my elbow, steadying me.

I didn't need a reflection or to turn around to know who was touching me. My body knew it well, every cell heating up, wanting more. Those hands had

been over every inch of me, knew me intimately.

No, not intimate. That implied something more than physical closeness.

As soon as the doors opened, his hand dropped away, but the heat remained, my skin tingling. I tried to ignore it as the group stepped onto the third deck. Since we all had rooms on the second tier, we didn't need to see the staterooms, but Isaiah explained that he wanted us to see the 'regular' cabins, so our tour would differ here from what other patrons would receive.

When he opened one of the doors and encouraged everyone to explore, I stayed outside with Isaiah.

"I know I'm here as a translator," I said, "but I was wondering if I could make a suggestion."

"Suggest away." He smiled, his expression so warm and open that I couldn't help but smile back.

"You might want to put a warning sign in your elevators that looking at the waves while the elevator is moving might cause vertigo. I got a little woozy for a minute."

"Are you okay?"

I nodded. "I thought it'd be better if I said something rather than you realizing it only after a guest...had a more *visceral* reaction."

He laughed, a nice sound, an attractive sound, even.

But it didn't do shit for me.

Dammit.

"Thank you. I have to admit, I never would have thought of that," he said. "I've never really struggled with vertigo."

I smiled at him. "Glad I could help."

"Looks good," Brody said as he came out of the room. He glanced at me, something unreadable skipping across his gaze. "Don't you want to check it out?"

Trying not to frown at his tone, I said, “Sure.” I didn’t say that what I actually wanted was to get away from him. I just went.

The cabins weren’t as fancy as the staterooms, obviously, but they were still luxurious enough. Since Marta and Dimos didn’t need any assistance at the moment, I did take the time to look around the room so I’d be able to give my parents a good report if I decided to suggest to them that they invest in Isaiah’s cruise line.

It had nothing to do with me needing a minute after Brody’s strange behavior a few minutes ago.

I followed Marta out and stayed at her side as we made our way back to the elevator. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Brody shooting me more of those indescribable looks, but I ignored him. I wouldn’t need his or anyone else’s assistance. I was simply going to look somewhere else so I didn’t get dizzy. I wouldn’t need Brody’s help this time.

Or ever.

And I didn’t care that every time his arm brushed against mine, a jolt of electricity went through me. Or that the only time I *wasn’t* thinking about him was when I was literally speaking another language. Like when we were standing next to the hot tub on the top deck, and I couldn’t stop picturing what it would be like to be in there with him, hot water swirling around us, jets of water pulsating against our skin as I rode him.

Nope. Not at all.

By the time Isaiah announced that we were going to have a late lunch, I was already exhausted.

At this rate, I was either going to sleep for a year or explode, and I didn’t know which would be worse.

TWENTY-NINE

BRODY

IT WAS THAT STUPID ELEVATOR THAT RUINED MY PLAN TO IGNORE FREEDOM AS much as humanly possible and to never, ever get close enough to touch her. What were those two sayings about the best-laid plans and the road to hell? One leads to the other, or that was the gist, anyway.

Whatever it was, the moment I saw Freedom sway, I hadn't even thought. I'd just reacted, grabbing her elbow to steady her. The jolt went all the way up my arm, leaving my pulse pounding and my pants suddenly too tight. It'd taken everything I had to let her go and walk away.

When Isaiah had opened one of the cabin doors and told us to go inside, I'd been absurdly grateful that Freedom had chosen to stay on the deck. Enclosed in the elevator, I hadn't been able to escape the maddening apple-cinnamon scent of her shampoo. I needed it out of my head, and the smell of brand-new carpet and furnishings had been just the thing to do it.

"I've never been a big fan of cruises," Doyle said as he peered out of the window. "I have claustrophobia issues. But even these rooms would be big enough for me."

"Aye," I agreed absently. My face immediately heated when I realized how I'd answered. Leave it to Freedom to so thoroughly throw me off that I reverted to childhood speech. If anyone noticed, they didn't comment on it.

I'd seen enough to know that Isaiah had done just as good a job on these cabins as he had on the staterooms, so I headed back out to the deck. I regretted my decision the moment I saw Isaiah and Freedom smiling at each

other. The shock of jealousy that went through me was stronger than I liked, and I couldn't quite talk myself out of it. The best I could do was hide it.

"Looks good." I glanced at her but didn't trust myself enough to make eye contact. "Don't you want to check it out?"

"What's with you?" Isaiah asked once Freedom had gone to join the others. "You've been...moody."

I gave him a sharp look. "I have *not* been 'moody.'"

He raised an eyebrow. "Would 'broody' be more accurate?"

"I'm fine. What's with you?" I crossed my arms, well aware of the fact that it made me look even more defensive than I felt. "You're not usually the nosy type."

He held up his hands, palms out in the universal gesture of surrender. "You're my friend, and you seemed like you had something going on. You say you're fine, so I'll just assume you're turning into an asshat."

I sighed. I deserved that. "Sorry. There's just been a lot of shit going on over the last few months." I paused, then clarified. "The last year, actually."

"I heard about what happened to Eoin." Isaiah's expression was a different sort of seriousness. "That's some fucked up shit. How is he?"

I rubbed my jaw, the stubble rough against my palm. "Better, actually. Not back to normal, but he's not spiraling the way we thought he would."

"That's good."

"What happened to him wasn't the only crazy thing my family's been through this year," I said. I'd forgotten how easy Isaiah was to talk to, but I wasn't going to bring up Freedom. Instead, I brought up the most recent family drama. "You remember Alec's ex, Keli?"

By the time the rest of the group joined us, I'd filled Isaiah in about Keli dropping Evanne at Alec's place and moving to Italy with a new boyfriend, as well as Keli then running off with Evanne once things with the now-ex-boyfriend hadn't worked.

“Everything’s okay now, though, right?” Isaiah asked. He and Alec hadn’t been close, but any decent person would’ve sympathized with my brother.

I nodded. “Keli might start pushing limits, but for right now, she’s following the new custody agreement to the letter.”

The conversation ended there as Isaiah returned to his hosting duty.

We moved up to the top deck where the pool, hot tub, and deck chairs were located. The pool was empty at the moment, but the hot tub was full and ready to go at any point. It took everything I had not to look at Freedom when Isaiah told us that we had guest swimwear of all sizes in our cabins if we wanted to use the hot tub.

Since she’d brushed up against my arm in order to get close enough to Marta to translate something, I’d already been overly aware of her presence again, which made it that much harder. Now, I couldn’t stop myself from imagining her in a bikini, flaunting every one of her amazing curves as she came up out of the water like something from a movie.

And that wasn’t the only thing I was picturing either.

Just the two of us, stargazing. Her on my lap, back against my chest. My hand sliding into her bottoms, fingers stroking her sensitive skin. Bringing her to orgasm. Warning her to be quiet or risk waking the others. The tight, wet heat of her taking me inside. The soft moans and whimpers as she rode me. The way her skin would taste—the tang of salt from sweat and a faint hint of chlorine.

“– if you’ll follow me.”

Isaiah’s words broke into my fantasy only because he’d nudged me with his elbow. I had no idea why we were following him, but I was grateful that everyone else was behind me as I tried to think of anything that would calm down my cock. I didn’t know how obvious it would be since I wasn’t about to risk a look to check, but I was hard enough for the light friction from my boxer briefs to be...problematic. Coming in my pants might be worse than just having a hard-on.

This was going to be an excruciating four days.

I didn't want to let anyone know that I'd missed what Isaiah said, especially Freedom. She might've suspected that she'd been the reason for my lapse in concentration, which meant I went with the group in silence, not figuring out that we were having lunch until we entered the dining room.

"Breakfasts and lunches are buffets while dinners are full service. The bar next door will have appetizers and snacks available too," Isaiah said as we walked back to the dining room. "I have a kitchen and wait staff of approximately twenty-five people, but I didn't feel that we needed quite as many for this journey since we're not running at even a quarter capacity. With that in mind, I'll ask that you use your imaginations a bit regarding what this place will look like full, with each table having their own waiter, and the tables loaded down with more food."

Considering how amazing everything smelled and how much food I could see as soon as I walked into the room, it was difficult to think that it could be more impressive than it was, but if anyone could do it, Isaiah could. And I was starting to think that I might want to be more involved than just providing the alcohol. If the rest of the next few days went as well as I thought they would, I'd talk to Isaiah about investing as well.

The food was amazing, and the table large enough that I was able to find a seat that allowed me to look at Freedom as little as possible. That should've been enough to keep her out of my head, but it wasn't. I was more aware of her than anything else. She was between Dimos and Marta, chatting easily in both Russian and Greek, not even the smallest hint of strain in her voice. I couldn't understand a word she said, but I couldn't tune her out either.

No matter how hard I tried.

"Things are going well, I think," Isaiah said to me.

It wasn't a question, but I responded like it was. "Yes, they are. This is quite impressive, my friend."

"Thanks." He smiled and looked around the table. "I'll have the Shannon's you brought with you set out in the bar tonight, along with the surveys to determine which of your labels my potential investors think will be the best fit."

“Isaiah, I had a couple questions,” Doyle spoke up from the other side of my friend.

“Of course.”

As Isaiah turned to Doyle, I turned my attention to my food. I let the conversation ebb and flow around me, half-paying attention to the subject matter, trying to do everything I could to not think about how much I wanted Freedom. After what felt like decades, Isaiah raised his voice to address the whole table.

“I know that I don’t have all the amenities I’ll have for the maiden voyage, but I’d really like for everyone to explore what we do have available. Relaxing in your rooms. The view. The bar. And for dinner tonight, I’d like everyone to try the dining-in option. I’d like for us to meet tomorrow morning after breakfast to discuss what you think. If you’re going to invest, I want you to have input.”

Knowing I wouldn’t have to be around Freedom for the rest of the day should have made me feel relieved. Instead, I wondered who she’d spend her time with. Would she stay with both Marta and Dimos, the three of them wandering around together the whole time? Then again, if we were going to explore on our own, there really wasn’t any reason for them to have a translator. It wasn’t as if they spoke no English whatsoever. Freedom’s job had to do more with them being able to clearly discuss business with the group on equal footing.

But if Freedom wasn’t needed for the reason she’d come on the trip, what would she do as the rest of us were exploring? I knew she was well-off enough that she could be an investor, even though that wasn’t the reason she’d been brought on, which meant she might want to do as Isaiah had suggested. Or she might want to talk to Isaiah about being interested in investing.

Or maybe she’d want to talk to him about something else.

I could still see the smile I’d caught on her face when I came out of the cabin. Isaiah laughing. The two of them standing there, looking like some sort of model couple. They’d be gorgeous together. I knew, based on my conversations with her, that Freedom wasn’t looking to be a part of a couple,

but that didn't mean she wouldn't be interested in something else from Isaiah. The stab of jealousy that hit me actually made my stomach turn.

Dammit.

I stood abruptly, my thighs hitting the edge of the table. My face burned as silverware clattered, the embarrassment worse than the pain in my legs. I muttered an apology, not looking at anyone as I left. I didn't pay any attention to where I was going, so when I found myself in the corridor that led to the restrooms, I ducked inside. I didn't know if anyone had followed me from the table, but the last thing I wanted was to look even more like an idiot by confirming that I'd been walking blindly. At least with me going into the bathroom, the worst someone would think was that I was seasick or had eaten something that didn't agree with me.

I gave myself a few minutes and then went back out to the hallway, no specific destination in mind. I stood for a minute, looking around to get my bearings. Not necessarily bearings about where I was or where I wanted to go, but rather of who was around me. I didn't consider myself a solitary person, but I had to admit that I wasn't really in the mood for company at the moment.

Why, then, I wandered into the exercise room, I didn't know. Finding Doyle in there wasn't a surprise. He was the one with the chain of gyms or athletic clubs or whatever he called them. From the little time I'd spent with him, I knew he was the type of man I'd normally enjoy being around, but I wasn't in the mood for jokes or laughter.

I didn't leave right away, though. I might not have wanted to have a conversation, but I wasn't going to be flat-out rude either. It wasn't Doyle's fault that I hadn't liked seeing Isaiah and Freedom smiling at each other. Or that I couldn't stop thinking about her.

"My dad's a construction worker back in Chicago," Doyle said, glancing at me as he walked the perimeter of the room. "Always carried a tape measure in his pocket. Everywhere. Even to church on Sunday."

I didn't see where he was going with this, but I nodded anyway. It seemed like the polite thing to do.

Doyle continued as he made another round. “Even though I started work right alongside my dad, I never got into the habit. I never thought I’d need to. Construction was just the first step, and I didn’t plan on staying in it long. Dad kept on me about it, though. Being able to measure a proper size whenever and wherever.”

I shifted my weight from one foot to the other and tried to decide when I could excuse myself without being a total prick.

“I wasn’t about to admit that he was right, of course, but there were times I needed one, so I taught myself to measure distances by walking and by using my hands.”

That explained what he was doing. Sort of.

“Now, it’s what I do.” He came to a stop a few feet away from me.

“Whenever I have to measure out a space to determine how I want to lay out equipment, I walk it.”

I only figured out he was finished when he grinned at me, apparently waiting for my response. “Oh, uh, that’s interesting.” I didn’t have any questions I wanted to ask. All I wanted was to leave.

Then a figure walked by outside, blonde hair gleaming as a break in the clouds let through a beam of sunlight.

“She’s quite something, isn’t she?”

I tore my gaze away from Freedom and looked over at Doyle. The admiration on his face brought back that flare of jealousy I’d felt with Isaiah. His smile widened when he looked at me.

“Guess you already knew that.”

“What?” I had to force myself to keep my voice even.

“The way you just looked at me.” He chuckled. “A man doesn’t get that sort of look if he’s not interested in the woman getting attention.”

I was annoyed that Doyle had noticed anything at all, but there was relief too. The last thing I needed was anyone finding out that Freedom and I had history. It seemed, however, that trying to completely avoid her wasn’t going

to work. Stealing covert glances had attracted more attention than if I'd been as casually friendly as I had with the others.

I shrugged. "She seems nice."

Doyle chuckled longer this time and clapped a meaty hand on my shoulder. "I've seen her checking you out too. You should go talk to her. Cruises can be romantic."

I wasn't about to take his suggestion, even if I liked the thought that she'd been watching me too, but it did give me a way to leave without coming off as a bastard. As I left the exercise room, however, I did turn in the same direction Freedom had gone. We needed to have another talk. At least one person had noticed the tension between her and me. Ignoring each other wasn't working.

And neither was ignoring what'd happened between us.

I found her on the top deck, leaning on the rail and looking out at the horizon. For nearly a full minute, I watched her, letting myself admire the woman I couldn't get out of my head.

Then, as if she'd just realized she was being watched, she turned. Her eyes lit up for a split second, and my heart gave a funny skip in response. Then the mask fell back into place, and I fixed on a neutral expression. I didn't leave, however. I'd made a decision, and I planned to follow through.

No matter how it went, it was the right thing to do.

"I owe you an apology," I said as I stopped just a foot from her. "Two, actually."

She went very still, her body language as impossible to read as her face. "All right."

"I shouldn't have made that comment about Aline hurting Eoin."

Freedom shook her head. "No, I started that. I may have been a little drunk, but that's no excuse. I shouldn't have even called you, much less blamed you for what happened between our siblings." The corners of her mouth tightened. "I know all too well what it's like to be held accountable for a

sibling's actions.”

From what I'd observed about Freedom and her sister, I had no doubt she understood. I didn't bring that up, though. I still had another apology to make, and this one was all mine. “We might've both been in the wrong there, but I'm the only one who needs to apologize for how I behaved months ago when you told me about going to Iran.”

She didn't try to hide her surprise.

“You were right that it was none of my business. I had absolutely no right to tell you what to do.”

“And I should have understood that the reason you were so intense about it was because of what'd happened to Eoin.” Freedom shocked me with the admission. “And if I hadn't realized it then, I definitely should have after I met him and figured out who he was.”

It took me a moment to process what she said, and when I did, it was like a punch in the gut.

Eoin's scar.

Months had passed since he'd been injured, but I still had a difficult time thinking of him looking any different than the red-headed teenager who'd constantly been in trouble until he'd enlisted.

Still...

“No matter how worried I was, or why, I shouldn't have expressed it that way. You deserved to be treated with respect, and I didn't do that.” I wanted to add that, no matter what my reasoning was, she shouldn't have felt responsible for Aline in the first place. I'd learned from my mistakes, however, and kept my mouth shut. Freedom and I weren't even having sex anymore. If her relationship with her sister hadn't been my business back then, it certainly wasn't now.

“Thank you,” Freedom said softly. “I appreciate that.”

That gave me the encouragement to bring up one more thing. “Do you think, instead of trying to ignore each other and pretend that we're strangers, we

could try just talking? Being...friends? Or, at least, friendly?"

She smiled, the expression softening her features. "I think we can do that."

THIRTY

FREEDOM

WHEN I'D SEEN BRODY ON THE SHIP, THE LAST THING I'D EXPECTED HAD been an apology, let alone two. And then had come the offer to be friends.

I was still reeling from our entire conversation as Brody and I made our way around the top deck. Not reeling in a bad way. Once the apologies were out of the way – his and mine – I'd allowed myself to acknowledge what I'd been too angry to feel before.

I'd missed him.

As much as I'd wanted to believe that what we'd had between us had only been sex, the truth of the matter was that he'd given me more strength and support than I'd realized. I thought he'd made me weak because I'd felt vulnerable around him, but the time I'd spent apart from him had made me realize that wasn't the case. There was a different level of strength that came with what we'd had, and I just hoped that our friendship would offer that as well.

I figured that was the sort of thing that would or wouldn't come with time, but for right now, it was nice to have cleared the air so that we could just walk and talk without all the shit we'd piled up between us. It was easier for us to talk about Isaiah's business venture too. As I'd guessed, Brody had been tapped to supply the liquor, but I wouldn't be surprised if he invested as well.

“You said you and Isaiah were friends, right?” I asked. “Do you play racquetball together or something?”

“Racquetball? Not exactly my speed.” Brody laughed. “You’re right about us being friends, though. Isaiah and I were friends as kids and kept in touch after we graduated. Surfing and rock climbing is more our speed.”

“Isaiah doesn’t really seem like a thrill-seeker.”

Brody raised an eyebrow. “And I do?”

It was my turn to raise my eyebrows. “Do you really want me to answer that question?”

He grinned and shrugged, looking more like the easy-going surfer I’d first thought him to be than the savvy businessman I now knew he was. A question I’d wondered about more than once popped back into my head, and I figured this was as good a time as any to ask it.

“Those scars you have, are they from some of your thrill seeking?”

He shot me a rueful smile and rubbed the back of his neck in a gesture I recognized as him being self-conscious. “I was surfing in Australia when I was a teenager. Got dragged along a reef.”

Something tugged at a memory in the back of my mind. “A teenager?”

“About fifteen years ago,” he clarified.

It came forward then, a news story I’d seen as a child. A story about a teenage surfer from California who saved the life of a kid during a competition in Australia. I stopped and watched him go a few more steps before he realized I wasn’t next to him anymore.

“You saved a kid’s life.”

He turned, his face coloring. He was...embarrassed?

“I’m right, aren’t I?” I crossed the distance between us until I was close enough to smell that sandalwood scent that always seemed to hang around him. “It was on the news. Some kid got into trouble, and you saved him. In the process, you ended up getting really hurt.”

“More or less.” He shifted weight from one foot to the other, and I suddenly realized that he was uncomfortable.

“You don’t want people knowing,” I said. Definite point to him for that. Most men would’ve used that story to pick up women, even if it had happened years ago.

“I was there, and I had the ability to do what needed to be done,” he said. “I never wanted people to make a big deal out of it.”

“Does Isaiah know?” I asked, curiosity getting the better of me.

He gave me a wry smile. “Da managed to keep my name out of the papers, but Isaiah knew I’d been in Australia, and then a couple weeks after I got home, he saw the scars.”

I reached out and squeezed his forearm. “You’re a good man, Brody McCrae.”

Something settled between us in that moment, something heavy and thick. Something I wasn’t quite ready to name or even really acknowledge. I saw the same hesitation on Brody’s face, and I dropped my hand before everything took an uncomfortable turn.

“Let’s check out the bar,” Brody suggested. “See what Isaiah thinks is worthy of my whiskey.”

He winked at me, and off we went. And I pretended not to want to touch him again.

I did, however, wonder if he was having the same difficulty.

THE FOOD WAS DELICIOUS, and even though I didn’t feel like I’d done much in the way of exercise today, I’d been hungrier than usual. I’d ordered the beef stroganoff and had been highly impressed. Considering how much cooking my family did, that was quite a compliment. The salad had also been good, and I was saving the chocolate-covered strawberry mini-cheesecake for a late-night snack.

Except after I finished watching *Sleepless in Seattle*, I wasn’t in the mood for cheesecake, no matter how decadent it promised to be. I’d chosen that

particular film because it was a favorite, but also because I knew my attention would no doubt be wandering.

But it hadn't wandered far.

Just to the other side of that connecting door.

I wanted to know if he was still there or if he'd left again. If he'd left, had he done so alone? Or was he staying in tonight to watch a movie? Catch up on some sleep? Or had he decided on some 'adult entertainment' and was doing something else entirely?

The thought of him stretched out on his bed, cock in hand, jerking off to something he was watching...damn if it didn't get me hot and bothered. Especially when another thought occurred to me. What if he was masturbating not to something on TV, but to fantasies of me?

Fuck it.

I went to the connecting door and knocked.

A few seconds later, he opened it. I had a moment to register that he was only wearing a pair of tight black boxer briefs, and then I was kissing him, unsure which of us moved first.

Clothes fell to the floor, buttons lost and fabric torn, but neither of us even paused. Some ruined clothes were a small price to pay to have skin on skin. I couldn't touch him enough. I wanted every inch under my hands. Tracing the scars with my fingers, I had a new appreciation now that I knew how he'd gotten them. At some point, I'd take my time and follow the same path with my tongue, but not now.

We tumbled back onto the bed, a tangle of limbs and overheated skin. Without taking my mouth from his, I hooked my leg over his hip, using it to pull his body even closer to mine. The coarse hair on his chest and legs chafed my skin pleasantly, making my nipples hard and other parts of me wet. I reached between us and wrapped my fingers around his already hard cock. I stroked it from base to tip, brushing my thumb across the top.

Brody groaned, sinking his teeth into my bottom lip. I gasped, my grip tightening until he cursed.

“Keep that up, and we’ll be done too soon,” he warned.

When I squeezed him again, he brought his hand down on my ass with a surprisingly loud crack. I sucked in a breath, the short jolt of pain replaced with heat that made my insides clench. He must have seen something on my face, because he did it again.

I released his cock and ran my nails up his chest, pausing at his nipple to tease it. He caught my wrist but didn’t move my hand.

“You’re playing with fire,” he warned. His thumb brushed over my pulse point, the touch sending pleasure rippling across my nerves.

“Am I?” I teased, enjoying the way his eyes darkened when I rubbed against him. “What, exactly, would be the consequences of that? Are you going to burn me?”

His eyes narrowed, and a thrill went down my spine. “On your stomach.”

I didn’t even think about it. I stretched out on my stomach and waited.

I didn’t have to wait long.

He pushed my legs apart, and a moment later, his mouth was on me. I closed my eyes, enjoying the sensations. This wasn’t what I’d had in mind, but I wasn’t going to argue.

Then a sharp crack, and my eyes flew open. He was still going down on me, but he’d also just slapped my ass. He laughed, and the vibration went through me. Another smack, this time on the other side, and his tongue still kept working its magic. The angle was different, creating new ways for his tongue to move around and over my clit. Adding in the little bursts of pain sent new, intense sensations racing along my nerves, fanning out from my core and traveling to the tips of every extremity. My hands curled into fists, the thick bedspread keeping my nails from digging into my palms.

Ever since that one book had gone mainstream, spanking had become the sort of thing people could talk about. I’d never been the kind of person who judged anyone else’s kinks, but I’d also not really thought about any of those things in my own sex life.

I would've regretted it if I'd thought it would've been like this with someone else. My connection with Brody was...different.

Two more quick smacks – one to each cheek – pulled me out of that train of thought and brought me back to the present. The next two grounded me not only to the here and now, but to him. To us.

Sudden suction pushed me over an edge that I hadn't known I was near, and I cried out. My body tensed, every cell lighting up, wiping out everything else. And then he was inside me, and I was coming again.

THIRTY-ONE

BRODY

I COULD NEVER GET ENOUGH OF MAKING HER COME.

If I'd learned nothing over these past couple days, I'd learned that. Over and over, in dozens of different ways and in several different places.

Like in the hot tub at midnight when we'd fulfilled the fantasies we'd shared about that particular location.

Or yesterday afternoon, when I'd fingered her to an orgasm while we'd stood at the railing in front of our rooms.

I'd gotten as good as I'd given too. Like when she'd followed me into the restroom and given me a blow job while the rest of the group was finishing dinner Sunday night.

While we'd both spent plenty of time actually doing what Isaiah had brought us here to do, we'd also had enough personal time where we'd been able to put aside our professional obligations and just enjoy each other. And no one had been the wiser.

One thing unexpected had occurred, though.

At some point, I realized that I didn't want this to end when we docked on Tuesday. I wanted us to try to continue this relationship or whatever we wanted to call it when we returned to the real world. She'd never said that she was interested in more, but I could see on her face, when we were together, that what we had wasn't just sex.

I didn't want the same sort of casual dating I'd had in the past, but I knew we'd need to start somewhere. We could be so good together. I just had to figure out a way to present it to her that wouldn't send her running.

THIRTY-TWO

BRODY

I'D GONE BACK TO MY ROOM SHORTLY BEFORE DAWN AND HAD MANAGED TO get a few hours of sleep before joining the rest of the group for a late brunch. I'd risked choosing a seat next to Freedom, but no one seemed to notice except her. The fact that she'd smiled made me think that perhaps she'd been thinking along the same lines as I had. With that encouragement, my decision had been made.

After brunch, everyone went back to their rooms to pack since Isaiah had a final meeting scheduled in an hour. As I did, I used the time to consider how best to approach the topic of a future together. I wasn't sure if Freedom would bring it up, which meant, if I really wanted it, I'd need to take the initiative.

I decided that straight-forward would be best. No misunderstandings. It was a hell of a lot scarier than beating around the bush and making guesses, but she was worth the risk.

I knocked on the connecting door, even though I knew it wasn't locked. Yesterday morning, Freedom had surprised me in the shower, and last night, I'd returned the favor. Right now, though, I didn't want to walk in without at least alerting her first. When she didn't respond after a minute or so, I knocked again. Another minute passed.

"Freedom?" I opened the door a crack. "Hey, I was wondering if we could talk."

I grimaced at the cliché phrase, but I hadn't been able to figure out a better way to start the conversation. A quick look around, though, said that it didn't matter because Freedom wasn't here. Her open suitcase was on the bed with folded clothes already inside. Her toiletry bag was packed and zipped, sitting next to the other luggage on the bed, as was her purse. Her shoes, however, weren't next to the table where she always put them.

I went back into my room to grab my key and then headed out to find her. It wasn't as if she could completely disappear on me. The ship was a decent size, but it was still a ship. The worst that could happen would be us just missing each other and walking in circles for a while.

Halfway down the stairs, I met Dimos, who was coming up from one of the lower decks. Hoping to cut some time off my search, I asked if he'd seen Freedom.

He smiled and nodded. "She went to the laundry."

"Thanks."

I hoped I'd just sounded like I wanted to casually talk to someone I'd been friendly with over the last couple days. I liked Dimos well enough, but I didn't want to mess anything up by someone making a big deal out of it. I knew Freedom well enough to know that she wouldn't want to make any decision if she felt like people were watching us.

I made my way down the stairs and then turned toward the door that led down to the lower decks. During regular cruises, housekeeping would offer laundry services through the same room that took care of all the other linens. Isaiah had asked if some of us could do some laundry to see how easy it would be to allow passengers to use the laundry room if that ever needed to be an option. I hadn't realized Freedom had taken him up on it, but it wasn't as if we'd been together every hour of the day.

The laundry room was the first door on the right. From what Isaiah had said, the other side of the room had an entrance too, and that one was next to a service elevator that allowed the staff to go up and down with carts. The staff quarters were also on this deck, but since they weren't at full capacity, the entire deck had an almost echoing feeling to it. It was well-lit, without layers of shadows I would've expected in an area like this, which kept it from being

creepy.

I pushed the door open but froze halfway when Doyle came around the corner into my line of sight. Under normal circumstances, it wouldn't have stopped me, but he was zipping up his pants. Just as I hadn't wanted Dimos to be suspicious of Freedom and me, I didn't want to get mixed up in whatever Doyle was doing.

Before I could shut the door and leave him and his partner to it, he plucked something off his pant leg and held it up.

A bra. Red lace with a little black bow.

I knew that bra. In fact, I'd sucked on Freedom's nipples through that bra two days ago.

"Hey," Doyle called back the way he'd come from. "I think you lost something."

He went back around the corner, and I closed the door. My stomach churned as my mind tried to process what I'd seen. Doyle zipping up his pants. Holding Freedom's bra. Saying that she'd lost something.

Freedom had come to the laundry room to fuck Doyle.

Okay, maybe she'd come to the laundry room to wash her clothes, but she'd still fucked Doyle.

Doyle Ewell.

What. The. Fuck.

I was still reeling, but I knew one thing for certain. I didn't want to be here when Doyle and Freedom came out of the laundry room. She and I hadn't made any promises to each other, and she owed me no explanations, but if she knew I'd caught them, she might try to say something, and that would just make the situation worse.

I turned and walked back the way I'd come, each step feeling like my feet weighed ten pounds. All the enjoyment and peace I'd felt the last few days was gone. I'd really thought that when I left this ship, it would be with plans to see Freedom again and the possibility of her meeting my family at some

point.

And now I realized that I was wrong. I'd been wrong this whole time. The connection I'd thought existed between us had all been in my head. And only my head.

I was suddenly very glad that I hadn't talked to Freedom yet. Maybe some part of me had known that she wouldn't have wanted the same things, convincing me that it'd be a better idea to wait until right before we docked. The human mind was a complex machine, capable of doing crazy things to protect us. With all the stress I'd been through this year with Eoin and then what'd happened with Alec and Evanne, maybe my mind knew I couldn't take another hit.

And as hard as it was to realize that Freedom hadn't even wanted to only be sleeping with me the last few days, it would've been worse if I'd suggested us dating, and she'd rejected me. If she'd pitied me.

No, I decided. It was better this way. Better to know before I made a fool of myself. Now, I could prepare myself to have a polite conversation before the two of us went our separate ways.

It was time to say goodbye and really mean it.

THIRTY-THREE

FREEDOM

UNTIL I'D STARTED PACKING, I'D COMPLETELY FORGOTTEN ABOUT THE clothes I'd put in the laundry. Isaiah had asked the group to check out the laundry room, and I'd thought it'd been a reasonable enough request, so I'd taken down a few things. And promptly forgotten about them.

The only reason this annoyed me was because I'd been hoping for another round with Brody before the final meeting. I didn't know if we'd have much chance to spend time together after we went home.

I might lose a few minutes, but I still intended to follow through as soon as I finished packing. We still had some time before Isaiah's last meeting.

Anticipatory thoughts took up enough of my attention that I walked into the laundry room without realizing that it was already occupied.

By Doyle Ewell.

Who was holding my bra.

"That is not my undergarment," Marta said as she stepped out of a shadowed corner. She looked as put together as always, but Doyle was rumpled enough for me to figure out what had been going on a few minutes ago.

Still, no matter how awkward it was, I wasn't going to give up one of my most comfortable bras.

Especially since I had some great memories associated with that one now.

“That’s actually my bra, Doyle.” I couldn’t hold back the chuckle as Doyle jumped.

Color flooded his cheeks. “Freedom?”

I walked over to him and plucked my bra from his hand. “Seriously, Doyle? You really thought this was hers?”

Marta rolled her eyes as she came over to the two of us. “We are both beautiful women, but our bodies are not the same.”

“It wasn’t like I was measuring anything,” Doyle pointed out with a grin. “Shouldn’t I earn some points for not knowing the different sizes of your boobs?”

Marta and I both laughed, but there was nothing mean about it from either of us. In the course of the trip, Doyle had shown himself to be a decent man, if a little prone to over-flirting and making the occasional joke that toed the line of appropriateness. I didn’t know if this was the only time the two of them had hooked up, but whatever it was, they appeared to have had fun. Whatever else was going on between them was their business and not mine.

My business was admitting the fact that I wanted more than these few days with Brody. And then doing something about it.

I needed to talk to Brody before we got off the ship. Once we stepped onto dry land again, all the stuff that went along with our real lives would be in our faces again, demanding our attention. We needed to figure things out before that happened. I wasn’t entirely sure what those things would be, but I did know that however we worked it out, I wanted to keep Brody in my life.

Even if that meant dating and actually calling it that. A relationship. Boyfriend – girlfriend. Lovers. Something more exclusive than just having sex whenever we happened to be available.

My heart skipped a beat at the thought of what that ‘more’ might be. Suddenly, I was eager to get back to my room, eager to finish what I needed to do so I could have nothing else keeping me from Brody and the talk we needed to have.

“I’m going to grab the rest of my things,” I said, pointing at the small basket I’d left on a table.

“Sorry about that.” Doyle gestured toward my bra.

“No worries,” I said with a smile.

Minutes later, I was back in my room and zipping up my suitcase. After a quick check to make sure I’d gotten everything, I went to the connecting door for Brody’s room and knocked. After a second unanswered knock, I opened the door and went inside.

It was empty.

As in no luggage. No toiletries. No Brody. The only evidence that he’d been there at all were the used towels stacked on the bathroom counter and the trashcans that hadn’t been emptied.

Deciding he must have already taken his things down even though we had a couple hours before we’d get back to port, I left to find him. With Isaiah wanting to talk to everyone in a bit, I didn’t know if I’d have another chance to get Brody alone to discuss what our future looked like.

To my surprise, I found him in the exercise room using a punching bag that had been set up in one corner. I’d known he was athletic, but I hadn’t realized that boxing was something he did. Or maybe he wasn’t boxing, just hitting things. It seemed like a waste of energy that could be best spent elsewhere.

Like in a bed.

“There you are.” I smiled brightly at him, unable to mask what I was feeling. “You must’ve packed at super speed.”

He stopped punching the bag and turned toward me, but his eyes didn’t meet mine. “I wanted to try out a few pieces of equipment here before the last meeting. Give Isaiah some feedback.”

Something was off.

“I thought we’d spend the time before the meeting together.” My smile faded but didn’t completely go away.

He shrugged. “I figured we’d gotten enough of each other.”

Gotten enough of each other.

What did that mean?

“We have spent a lot of time together these past few days.” I took a step toward him, but he didn’t come to meet me.

“I had a lot of fun.” He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. Those blue-green irises were strangely cool. “It was definitely a productive few days too. I’m looking forward to getting back into work.”

He hadn’t said anything rude, but he also wasn’t saying anything that led me to believe that he’d had the same intense experience I’d had.

“Fun. Yeah, it has been.” I spoke slowly, my stomach sinking.

“I’m sure you’re anxious to get back to Aline.” He turned back to the punching bag. “If you end up working at Stanford, I might see you around. Depends on how much of that work I delegate now that I have another contract.”

“Oh. Um, yeah. Maybe.” I had absolutely no idea how to respond.

He returned to hitting the bag, making a clear ending to the conversation.

Feeling slightly dazed, as if I’d been on the receiving end of one of those blows, I headed back to my room. I’d been so certain that we were thinking along the same lines. Clearly, I’d been mistaken.

This hadn’t been the kind of angry explosion that had pushed us apart not so long ago, but this was worse. Calm. Polite.

Indifferent.

I told myself that was good. I had too much on my plate now to be spending time socializing. I needed to talk to Aline about where she planned to look for work so we could decide where we were going to live. Then I’d have my own employment to look into. And if we moved, there’d be the matter of dealing with our lease. Packing. Decisions to make about what we would take and what we’d leave.

And that wasn't even taking the holidays into consideration.

So, I had more than enough to keep myself busy.

It was better this way.

It had to be.

THIRTY-FOUR

BRODY

THANKSGIVING HAD BEEN GREAT BECAUSE IT WAS THE FIRST ONE THAT EVERY single member of the family had attended in years. At least since Eoin had enlisted, maybe a couple years before that. Having him there after what'd happened in the spring made it all the better.

In fact, he'd actually told me that he had a new path to follow. A new career. At least for a while. He was going to L.A. to work with his friend, Cain, who'd helped us out when things had gone sideways with Alec and Evanne.

Family had been the best part, but the food had also been exceptional, which was saying something considering how good everything always was. There'd even been a birthday cake for me to go along with the pie, which had made Evanne's day.

I didn't mind turning thirty-two. I really didn't. I had a successful business and a family that loved me. I had new friends and new areas for expansion. I still had plenty of time if I decided I wanted to have a wife and kids. Hell, if Alec could land a woman like Lumen Browne, there was hope for all of us.

And it didn't matter if the person who'd first made me think I wanted more didn't want the same.

Still, I'd been grateful that I had something to do today, even if it was a completely insane decision on my part.

My younger sister, Maggie, had surprised everyone with the information that she wasn't returning to New York until Sunday afternoon. None of us had

asked why, though I'd seen the look Mom had been giving her. If Maggie made it out of California without a patented Theresa Carideo McCrae interrogation, I'd be shocked.

Which was probably why Maggie had asked me to take her shopping on Black Friday. Dodging crazy people who liked to shop at the ass-crack of dawn to save forty-three dollars on a toy that would break before New Year's was one thing. Dodging the questions she'd have coming her way was something else entirely.

If something was wrong and she wanted to bring it up, I'd listen, but I wasn't going to pry. Especially since I had my own issues I preferred not to talk about right now.

"Mom said you were on a cruise last weekend?" Maggie shuffled forward in line, shooting a glare at the woman next to her who tried to elbow her out of the way.

Maggie might've been soft-spoken, but she was no pushover. If Miss Pink Hair Rollers thought she could push my little sister around, she was in for a rude awakening, and not from me.

"It wasn't a cruise, exactly." At least there were things about the trip I could talk about without bringing up Freedom. "Do you remember Isaiah Eastman?"

She thought for a moment. "I think so. African American, same grade in school, lived two blocks over?"

"That's the one." I shifted to keep a surly bald man from cutting in front of Maggie and me. "Anyway, he moved back to California at the end of last year, and he's putting together this small, specialized cruise line."

By the time I finished telling her about some of the non-Freedom-related highlights, the doors opened and all conversation ceased as we commenced the day-after-Thanksgiving ritual gauntlet. She'd given me a copy of her list, and we'd already arranged for a meeting place, so our attention turned to fighting the masses for gifts.

As much as the pressing crowds and scrabbling for disappearing items annoyed me, it also kept my mind so occupied that I didn't think about

Freedom pretty much at all. Especially since I did feel the need to keep looking around to make sure Maggie was okay. Something about her being here felt weird, and I couldn't put my finger on it. Since she didn't seem to want to share, I handled the things I could take care of. Namely, protecting her from shoppers who were willing to brain a person with a purse to get the last talking rainbow unicorn.

When we met up next to the massive Christmas tree, Maggie was grinning, and her shopping cart was almost completely full. The things I'd managed to snag topped it off, and I found myself matching the expression. For the next few exhilarating minutes, I was...happy.

The store had brought in extra workers and had every checkout manned, including several people whose job appeared to be making sure people weren't being dishonest in the self-checkout. Once we finished paying, we moved back outside and waded through the sea of people to reach a – shockingly – empty bench.

“Whew.” Maggie collapsed on the bench, and I set the bags of purchases next to her. “That was invigorating.”

“I think the word you're actually looking for is ‘ridiculous.’” I grinned at her. “Please tell me you don't do this in New York. You'd need full football gear.”

Something on her face shifted, though I couldn't figure out what. “I did the first year I was there, and before you ask, I took Carson with me. He was the one who vetoed future Black Friday shopping.”

I made a mental note to get Carson something extra as a thank you. Maggie wasn't tiny, but she was far from large and definitely not aggressive enough to handle this on a New York City scale.

Not like Freedom.

My entire body tensed. I'd been doing so well not thinking about her that I hadn't even seen that coming. Yes, she was taller and stronger than Maggie – and definitely more aggressive – but there was no reason my thought should have brought up Freedom.

“Hey, are you okay?” Maggie tugged on my hand. She was frowning, and I had a feeling I was doing the same. “Brody, what’s wrong? You seem like something’s bothering you. Yesterday, too, and I know it’s not your age.”

I started to lie and say I was fine, but then Maggie gave me the serious look that all the women in my family seemed to have, whether they were related by blood or not.

“All right,” I said with a sigh. “I met a woman, and I really liked her.” Saying it in the past tense wasn’t being entirely honest, and it made me slightly sick, but I kept going. “Last week, I found out that she didn’t feel the same.”

“Brody, I’m so sorry.” Maggie leaned over and hugged me. “Why didn’t you tell any of us?”

I hugged her back. “Thanks, but there wasn’t really much to tell. We hit it off. Hooked up a few times. I thought we both wanted to move on to something more, but I was wrong.”

I kept my voice even, but Maggie saw through at least some of it.

“She’s a fool.” Maggie’s arms tightened around me for a moment before she sat back. “I mean it, Brody. And not just because you’re my brother. You’re a good man, and any woman would be lucky to have you.”

She said it with the sort of confidence that made me think I could do anything. She’d been like that as a kid, able to tell us that she believed in us and have it make a difference. She’d never been adventurous like Paris and me, not in the traditional way at least, but she would do things that came across as brave or daring...whenever she knew that any of us would catch her. Sometimes literally.

“Thanks, kid.” I leaned over and kissed her forehead. “Now, where to next?”

For a moment, I thought she wouldn’t let me change the subject, but she did. “How about lunch?”

“It’s nine o’clock in the morning,” I reminded her.

“Breakfast then.” She pointed toward a small diner tucked between two of the larger stores. “What do you say?”

“Let’s see if they have pancakes.” I stood up and gave her what I hoped was an easygoing grin. When I put out my hand, she took it and let me help her to her feet.

“Hot chocolate with marshmallows,” she said. “It’s not cold here like it is back east, but I need hot chocolate.”

“All right,” I agreed. We’d only gone a few steps when I saw a glimpse of blonde hair out of the corner of my eye. Without meaning to, I turned my head.

And immediately wished I hadn’t.

Freedom was here.

I didn’t know why, but she was here. Standing outside a bookstore and looking annoyed.

“Dammit.”

Maggie’s grip tightened on my arm. “What?”

I glanced down at her, ready to lie, but it was too late. She’d followed the direction I’d been looking, and since Freedom was the only person in that particular group of people who was female and around my age, it didn’t take much to put the pieces together.

“That’s her, isn’t it? The woman you were just talking about.”

“Yes,” I admitted. “But it doesn’t matter. Let’s go get some breakfast. I don’t want to talk to her or even think about her, okay?”

“Okay,” Maggie agreed, a flash of anger in her eyes for only a moment before vanishing. “Pancakes and hot cocoa.”

“That sounds perfect.” The words didn’t betray the conflict inside me, and that was the one thing I could say for certain. I didn’t want to talk to Freedom while Maggie was there. Family came first, and if anyone could understand that, it would be Freedom.

Not that she would’ve cared.

THIRTY-FIVE

FREEDOM

I WAS AN IDIOT.

Some people may have been exhilarated by extreme shopping, particularly on Black Friday, but I wasn't one of them, even on the best of days. Today wasn't even close to being one of the best, which made me hate this even worse.

It'd been harder than I'd anticipated, getting my head into Thanksgiving after getting back from the cruise. I'd gotten up early Wednesday morning to drive to L.A. so that I could keep up our family tradition of baking preparation for the holiday itself, but no matter how much I'd tried, I hadn't been able to divert my attention to the future. It'd been too stuck in the recent past.

Even after arriving at my parents' house, I'd been unable to lose myself in the familiar routine. Every smile had felt forced, every pleasant word a lie. I had wanted to be grateful. Hell, I had every reason to be even more thankful this year than years past. After all, Aline's safety had been nothing short of a miracle. So many things could have gone wrong, could have been different. And, as much as I loathed to admit it, a portion of that was due to Brody's brother.

Maybe that was part of the reason I'd been on edge for the last two days. Seeing Aline smiling and happy made me think about how she'd been delivered back to our family, which of course, made me think of Eoin, which in turn made me think about Brody. Even with my family on a holiday that we'd always enjoyed, I hadn't been able to escape him.

If my parents or Aline had noticed that I seemed a little less enthusiastic than usual, they hadn't said a word. I should have been grateful for that too since I hadn't wanted to talk to any of them about what had happened with Brody, but instead, I'd been annoyed. And that had made me pissed at myself. Which had led me to announce that I was returning to our apartment instead of staying the rest of the weekend.

And, as if I wasn't enough of a masochist, I'd decided to stop at a bookstore to pick up a onetime only gift for Aline. I preferred to do my shopping online, so anytime I had to venture out to a brick-and-mortar store was an annoyance. Black Friday was a special sort of hell.

I wasn't entirely sure what I was punishing myself for, but I'd definitely made myself pay.

Of course, the only store I needed to get into had, for some unknown reason, split their sales into two separate times. They'd opened at midnight and stayed open until six-thirty and then closed until nine-thirty. Seeing how small the store was, I guessed that they'd needed time to restock and set up more promotions because they didn't have room for all the merchandise they wanted to sell, but that didn't make it any less annoying to be standing here with a dozen other people instead of getting what I needed and leaving this crowded place.

At least it wasn't cold. I could be thankful for that.

My stomach growled, and I frowned. I'd used the excuse of needing to get here and left my parents' house before anyone else was up, and I'd made good time, but I hadn't stopped to get anything to eat, and now I was regretting it. I wasn't about to get out of line a few minutes before they opened. Better to get what I'd come for and then get food. I had about ninety minutes more to drive before I even reached my apartment, and I was definitely too hungry to wait until I got there. Fortunately for me, I knew there was a small diner in the complex.

Before the thoughts of food could create any additional embarrassing noises, the door to the bookstore opened, and the line moved forward. Once inside, I was pleasantly surprised at how clearly marked everything was. It didn't take long for me to find what I was looking for. Two men in front of me reached

the display first, but it was well-stocked, and I was able to get the Erika Summers collector edition bundle with no trouble at all. It would go well with the first edition *Island of the Blue Dolphins* I'd found a couple months ago. Not because the books were anything alike in content, but because they were books my sister loved.

As I made my way back through the crowd toward the register, some of my negativity faded, driven away by the fact that I'd been able to get what I'd come for and in anticipation of how happy Aline would be. That's where I needed to focus. Holidays with my family.

Out of the corner of my eye, something on a display case made me stop and turn toward it. I'd seen snow globes, and while I didn't personally collect them, my mom did, and one of these would be a great gift. They weren't just any snow globes either. They were literary ones. Mom wasn't as much of a reader as Aline was, but she did enjoy the classics, and the ones on the second shelf were based on *A Christmas Carol*.

I was in the middle of deciding between the one with Tiny Tim walking with his dad or the one where Tiny Tim was on Scrooge's shoulder when someone came up beside me. I glanced down, ready to move aside if whoever they were needed to get into the case. Instead, I found a slender blonde glaring up at me as if I'd done something to personally offend her.

"Can I help you?" I kept my voice polite, not knowing the reason she seemed annoyed at me. I wasn't going to be rude to someone for a misunderstanding. If she had a problem with me standing here, trying to make a choice, however, I'd be happy to remind her that patience was a virtue.

"I'm Brody's sister."

Surprise went through me. That had been the last thing I'd expected today. San Ramon was about as far away from here as Stanford, but it wasn't really the distance that made this improbable. I'd lost my skepticism of those sorts of coincidences when I'd learned about the connections between Brody, Eoin, Cody, and Fury. No, it was the fact that she knew I knew Brody. The only sister of his I'd ever seen had been Paris, and the woman in front of me wasn't her.

“Which one?” It might have sounded like an unimportant question, but it was a legitimate inquiry since I knew Brody had several sisters, but none of his siblings had any reason to know who I was, let alone approach me.

“Maggie.” She put her hands on her hips, turquoise eyes flashing. “And I don’t want to know your name. I just wanted to tell you that you lost out on the best thing that ever happened to you. If you can’t see what a great man my brother is, then you’re an idiot, and you don’t deserve him.”

My jaw was still hanging open as she turned and walked away.

Stalked away, really.

I might’ve stood there all morning if an elderly woman with purple hair hadn’t politely asked me to move so she could get to the snow globes. My mouth snapped shut, and I stepped aside, letting her reach the one she’d picked out. The movement snapped me out of my shock, but I was still in a daze as I took the snow globe already in my hand up to the register with the books I’d selected.

As I waited in line, my head started to clear, and my emotions surged to the surface. A plethora of them.

Baffling happiness that Brody had told one of his sisters enough about me that she could recognize me though she hadn’t known my name.

Annoyance that she’d been bold enough to tell me off in the middle of a bookstore during the busiest shopping day of the year.

Anger that I was the one being called names when it’d been Brody who’d sent us on our separate ways.

I’d been disappointed when I’d realized that he’d gotten his fill of me, but he’d at least had the decency to be honest. Or at least I’d thought he had. Now, I wondered what he’d told his family if at least one of his siblings thought I’d been the one to end things.

Not just *what*, I admitted. I wanted to know *why* he’d done it.

Why had he been so cool and nonchalant about telling me that he wasn’t interested anymore but had then told Maggie – at the very least – something

that'd made her believe I'd somehow rejected and hurt *him*?

Had he told her about me at some point, and she'd read too much into it so that when he told her we weren't seeing each other anymore, she assumed I'd been the one to end it?

Except what sort of 'thing' had he said about us that would've made her think it was worth even asking about? It wasn't as if we'd been in an actual relationship. Neither one of us had wanted that...until I'd started thinking that I might. But he wouldn't have known that because I'd never told him.

And I was even more grateful of that now than I had been before.

I kept telling myself that it didn't matter. He could tell people whatever he wanted. It wasn't as if I'd be around his family. Aline was done with Eoin. Any business with Stanford would be handled by the university. If my parents decided to invest in Isaiah Eastman's company, they'd handle all the interactions. I wouldn't be going on any of Isaiah's cruises, and if I happened to return to Stanford for an alumni event, I'd know to be aware, even if the odds of him actually being present at either of those occasions was low.

It was a logical argument, and it should have made me feel better. It should have talked me out of being upset. Logic. Common sense. Thinking. Those were the traits I relied on, the things that made me the person I was. I'd gone the whole 'feelings' route before, and it had bitten me in the ass. I didn't do that anymore.

Hours after I'd returned home, however, I was still fuming. I couldn't stop thinking about how he'd blown me off and then had the balls to lie about it to his sister, complete with a description good enough for her to have recog-

Shit.

It'd taken me nearly six hours to figure out that something else had been nagging at me.

There was no possible way that Maggie could've recognized me. Brody and I had never taken any pictures together. Even if he'd given a detailed physical description – blonde, blue eyes, tall, whatever word described my figure – there's no way she could have seen me in the middle of a crowd, an hour away from where I lived, and figured out who I was.

Unless she'd been there with Brody.

The betrayal cut deep and sharp, making me press my hands against my stomach, hoping I wouldn't throw up.

He'd been there too.

If he'd just ignored me, it wouldn't have hurt like this, but he hadn't ignored me. He'd clearly seen me, pointed me out to his sister, and then let her ambush me with accusations that he damn well knew were false.

By the time my phone rang that evening, I'd descended from a bad mood to a horrible one. Still, I didn't let it show when I answered my parents' call. Their news, however, that Aline was going on a date with Eoin tomorrow evening changed everything.

It looked like I was driving to L.A.

Again.

THIRTY-SIX

FREEDOM

WHEN I'D WOKEN UP TO A BURST PIPE UNDER MY BATHROOM SINK, I SHOULD have just gone back to bed and let the apartment flood because, so far, that was the high point of my day. By the time the building manager and maintenance had arrived, every towel I owned and three blankets had been soaked. The repair itself had taken an hour, and then I'd had to clean up the mess, including doing laundry so that Aline and I would have clean towels to come home to and to prevent the sopping material from becoming musty. All that meant I hadn't been able to even get into my car until noon.

If that had been the only disaster that'd happened today, I still could have made it to L.A. before Aline had left on her date, but that had only been the beginning.

I'd barely made it two blocks when I realized I'd left my phone at the apartment, so I'd turned around to get it. Then I'd discovered that I'd been low on gas. The station where I'd stopped had a line, and then the pump I'd picked had chosen that moment to have their card reader go down. Another long line stretched out to the cashier, and the clerk seemed more interested in flirting with the man in front of me than doing his job.

Back on the road for less than a quarter of an hour, I'd hit a detour that had taken me forty minutes out of my way. I'd only just gotten back on track when a combination of hunger, needing to use a restroom, and a lengthy text from my mother requiring an immediate response had me pulling into the first travel plaza I came to. I took care of all three things, including warning my parents that, short of a miracle, I wouldn't be arriving in time to stop

Aline from going on her date. I would, however, be there to console her when the night ended badly.

If I'd learned one thing from my time with a McCrae, it was that it would eventually end. Badly. I could only hope that it would be sooner rather than later.

Upon leaving the travel plaza, I'd been determined to drive straight through until I reached my parents' house. My getting-worse-by-the-minute day, however, had different plans.

A sixty-mile construction zone where the speed limit was down to thirty-five miles an hour, combined with holiday traffic, and an abundance of highway patrol cars, slowed things to a crawl.

Less than fifteen miles outside of the construction, my tire had gone flat. While I'd had the tools and the skill to fix it, I hadn't had the ability to do so without a working spare, and mine looked more like a tortilla than a donut. The last time I'd seen it, it had been filled with air, but I hadn't really been surprised. Not with the way my day had been going.

It'd been nearly six-thirty by the time roadside assistance arrived to change the tire into a new one I'd asked them to bring. On a positive note, I was once again riding on four regular tires without needing to worry about riding on a spare the rest of the way.

Flashing lights on a sign had prompted me to turn to the noted radio station where I'd learned that an accident up ahead had closed the road down to a single lane for at least another half hour. I'd used that time to get something to eat and update my parents, who'd informed me that Aline had left on her date. The road had been fully re-opened by the time I'd reached that stretch of highway, though debris had still been scattered along the shoulder.

The second accident had been larger, involving a semi-truck, a moving van, and two pickups. It had effectively shut down every lane for more than an hour before the police had been able to start re-directing traffic. The detour had taken me around the next exit I'd needed, and of course, there'd been no entrance going back the way I'd come. Without the option to backtrack, I'd been forced to go even farther out of my way until I'd finally found a way to get back to where I'd needed to be.

Three more construction zones and a poorly marked detour that had led to me getting thoroughly lost meant I'd finally pulled into my parents' driveway well after midnight. I'd told them I'd be coming in late but that I'd still be there. At one point, I'd briefly considered turning back, but by the time it'd gotten late enough for me to have considered it, I'd been closer to L.A. than home, anyway. Besides, I'd have needed to come back at some point in the next few days to pick up Aline, unless she'd intended to ask our parents to borrow one of their cars or fly back.

I sat in my car for a moment, eyes closed, trying to breathe out at least some of the tension and negativity that had built up throughout the day. It was probably best that I'd missed Aline coming home. I wasn't in the best frame of mind to deal with another idiotic McCrae. After a hot shower and some sleep, I'd be better equipped to handle whatever had happened on Aline's date.

With thoughts of my bed firmly in mind, I picked up my bag and went inside. Everything was quiet as I headed down the hallway to my room, but then Aline's bedroom door opened, and a naked man stepped into the hallway.

Eoin.

Whatever last bit of control and calm that still lingered inside me snapped. "What the *fuck* are you doing here?"

He crossed his arms, a belligerent expression on his face. "Wrong door. I was looking for the bathroom."

I dropped my bag and walked toward him, fury making it difficult to keep my voice down. This wasn't going to be pleasant, but the least I could do was keep Aline from hearing me throw the bastard out of the house.

I WOULD'VE LIKED to sleep in, considering how shitty yesterday had been and how little I'd slept last night. Going off on Eoin and sending him running hadn't been quite as satisfying as I'd anticipated. I'd needed to do it, though. That much had been clear from moment one.

The man had been walking around my parents' house naked.

Naked.

I'd done my best not to see anything but his face, and since I'd been looking so hard at it, I'd seen his reaction to some of the things I'd said, in particular, the fact that he'd been Aline's first. I wasn't really surprised that she hadn't told him. When it came to her emotions, Aline didn't always think things through. That was how we'd gotten into this mess in the first place.

Which was why I'd set my alarm for five o'clock this morning, to ensure that I was awake before everyone else. I needed to speak to Aline before she told our parents that Eoin had spent the night. They'd been concerned enough with the date. I had to protect them as much as I needed to protect her. Better for her to be angry at me than at Mom and Dad.

So, I made myself a cup of coffee and waited. Sure enough, before too long, Aline came into the kitchen, freshly showered and smiling. That smile didn't last long. The moment I brought up Eoin's name and their date, her expression changed, taking on that familiar stubborn set I knew all too well.

She tried to defend him, of course, telling me that he'd apologized for his previous behavior, that it was all just a misunderstanding, but I knew she didn't understand. She wasn't going to let it go unless I put it to her in a way that she couldn't write off.

"Did he apologize for leaving you in the middle of the night?" I could've said that more gently, but I wasn't currently at my best. Still, I was pleased to see the shock on her face. She needed to use her head instead of her heart, and sometimes, getting there took a little jolt of reality. "I didn't think so."

"You saw him?"

I sighed and told her how I'd gotten him out before our parents had known he was there. Then I'd told her the reason why he'd run and waited for her to yell again.

Except she didn't.

"How could you?" she whispered.

The disappointment in her voice. The hurt. As if I'd done something wrong. As if I hadn't spent all day yesterday trying to get back here to take care of her. As if I hadn't put my life on hold to fly halfway around the world because she'd gotten a well-meaning but foolish notion into her head. As if my entire life hadn't been focused on her from the moment our parents had told me that I was going to be a big sister.

Something in me snapped.

"Someone had to protect you. You have zero experience with men, and you picked the absolute worst sort of man for your first time. And you couldn't even just leave it there, chalk it up to an irresponsible decision brought about by a highly emotional and tense situation. You had to make an impulsive choice because you were annoyed at me, and then you went out with him again. You brought him to our parents' house. That's not—"

"Stop!" she shouted. "You are not my parent!"

Before I could respond, our parents came into the room, surprise on both of their faces.

"What's going on here?" Dad asked.

"She's mad because I kicked out the man I caught coming out of her room last night. Naked." The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them, but then I realized I didn't want to stop them. I was tired of smoothing things over for our parents.

"You slept with a man you'd only been out with once?" Dad was looking at Aline, but I answered for her.

"Oh, no, she slept with him *before* they went on their date. Twice."

"Oh, Aline." Mom shook her head.

"Don't you ever think before you act?" Dad sighed. "You're so much smarter than that."

All the air went out of her, and for a moment, I thought she'd finally realized how reckless she'd been. How much she needed to grow up now that we were out of school.

“I think this is enough,” she said quietly. “I’m done.”

Apparently not.

As she left the room, Mom and Dad turned to me.

“You knew that she’d slept with this man before?” Mom asked. “And you didn’t tell us?”

“And he’s part of the agency you hired to rescue her?” Dad shook his head. “Really, Freedom, I expected more from you.”

I sat down in the chair, the weight of my parents’ disappointment heavy on my shoulders. The worst part was, they were right. I’d fucked up. And yelling at Aline had done nothing but hurt her.

A perfect end to a perfect week.

THIRTY-SEVEN

BRODY

ADELA AND LEON WERE FLIRTING.

Not just joking flirting either. I'd seen Leon turn on the charm, both for women he wanted and women he just wanted to make smile. I'd also seen what happened when men flirted with Adela and she wasn't interested, which was most of the time. All the time, really.

What I hadn't seen before was the way Adela's eyes lit up when Leon had walked into the room and smiled at her. There'd been a familiarity between them I hadn't seen before. Not with them. When I'd last met with Leon, he'd told Adela the story behind my scars, and as far as I knew, that was the extent of any conversation they'd ever had. Now, however, I wasn't so sure.

"I'm surprised you're taking this much time off," I said to Leon as we waited for the ad executive to join us in their conference room. "What with the Jingle Bells Exhibition coming up and all."

Leon shrugged. "I decided not to do the exhibition this year. Thought it might be nice to have a quiet Christmas."

"So, you'll be back in Australia with your family?" Adela asked, giving Leon a sideways look. "Or do you plan to stay in the States?"

"We can work any filming around your plans," I said. "So don't feel obligated to stay."

Leon raised an eyebrow at me before shifting his gaze to Adela. "Trust me, Brody, I'm not sticking around for you."

Adela's cheeks turned pink. "So, you already have plans scheduled?" she asked primly, clearly trying not to sound too interested.

"I have plans to have plans." He gave her the easy smile I knew, but the light in his eyes was different. Along with the teasing was something more mature, a true interest that I thought went deeper than simple physical attraction.

A pang went through me as the thought immediately brought an image to mind. Physical beauty but also sharp intelligence and ferocious intensity. I'd thought it was something more than what it had been. I hoped, for both of my friends' sakes, that whatever was going on between them was mutual.

Finding out that an attraction was one-sided wasn't pleasant, especially if that revelation came by way of discovering she'd slept with someone else.

I pushed both the picture in my head and the accompanying thoughts aside. The reminders that came with watching Adela and Leon dance around each other weren't fun, but I would've been a real bastard if I begrudged my friends being happy. Fortunately, I didn't need to try to figure out a way to ease myself out of the conversation, so I didn't mess things up between them.

Mike Sala, the person handling our account, came into the room with an apology and a wide smile. He shook everyone's hands before taking the seat opposite me and opening his laptop.

"I have a couple ideas I want to pitch," he began. "I'm thinking a series of ads that can be shot all at once, edited together in different ways, to either be individual spots or to a linked storyline."

Adela took notes. Leon and I asked questions. Mike handled everything with a calm confidence that I liked. The entire meeting was completely professional and productive. Everything that I'd wanted out of it.

And yet, as soon as we stepped outside, all my positivity drained away. Adela and Leon struck up a conversation in the elevator, and I wasn't a part of it. They weren't trying to shut me out, I knew that, but the spark between them was so bright that it made sense they didn't see anything else. Not wanting to bring them down, I suggested the two of them go to lunch, and I'd meet them back at the office. Before they could say that they wanted me to come along, I made an excuse about some emails I needed to answer and headed for my

car, a smile pasted on my face the entire way.

THIRTY-EIGHT

FREEDOM

IT WAS NOW FRIDAY, DECEMBER SIXTH, AND ALINE HAD BEEN MISSING FOR nearly a full week. Not like when she'd been taken in Iran and I knew she was in terrible danger, but still missing.

I knew Los Angeles was a highly populated city that covered a large area, but it shouldn't have been difficult for me to find my sister after she left our parents' house that morning. We hadn't known exactly how long she'd been gone before we'd realized it, but it shouldn't have mattered. Even if she'd left a few minutes after the blow-up that day, she shouldn't have been able to just vanish.

She'd taken our car, but GPS had led us to the bus station. Not an out-of-town bus, but one of the many that ran through L.A. Still, we'd had no way of knowing which bus she'd taken.

We'd tried calling her, of course, and texting, but she'd ignored everything. In fact, the calls had been sent straight to voicemail, and the messages didn't show as being read, not even now, days later. Aline had turned off the phone finder app too, and that really concerned me. If she was somewhere she didn't want us to know, then I had a feeling I knew who she was with.

Mom and Dad were both furious with me and out of their minds with worry about Aline. I'd been doing everything I could to find her, of course. Since both of our phones were on our parents' accounts, I'd checked her call and message logs every day, but there was nothing but incoming calls to voicemail and incoming messages, all from our parents and me.

She and I shared one credit card, and I wasn't surprised that she hadn't used it, but I'd checked, anyway. Figuring out her passwords for her individual card had been easy since she'd used the same one we used for our joint one. There'd been no charges on that one either.

I'd called the bank Monday afternoon and explained my concerns, then had gone with my father to check Aline's trust since he was the only other person authorized to access it. By the time we'd arrived, Aline had already taken out a decent-sized sum of cash from her trust. That had told us two things. First, tracking her financially would be impossible as long as she was frugal. Second, she hadn't left the city, at least she hadn't as of Monday morning.

Mom had called the police while Dad and I had been at the bank. The man she spoke with told her that because Aline was an adult and she'd clearly left the house under her own volition and hadn't appeared to be under duress at the bank, there'd been no reason to suspect that Aline wasn't simply avoiding us. That had, unsurprisingly, not gone over well with my mother. It had also led to me going to the station the next morning to talk to someone in person. While my discussion with another Officer Not-So-Helpful hadn't been as volatile as my mother's, it had yielded the same results.

Nothing.

My parents had been furious when I'd told them, and it had only gotten worse when I agreed that the police really didn't have a reason to search for Aline. While she could be absent-minded and naïve, she didn't have any mental or emotional issues that prevented her from being able to care for herself. She had committed no crimes, and we knew she hadn't been taken against her will or harmed in any way, at least up to the point where she'd left the bank. It wasn't the job of the police department to find someone who simply didn't want to be found. If anything, asking them to abandon cases where people were legitimately in danger would be wrong.

With no reason to be angry at the police, I'd found all the blame being laid at my feet. The weight of guilt had my stomach in knots. I'd barely eaten or slept all week. I'd done everything I could think of, talked to all our friends. There'd only been one possibility I hadn't yet explored because I couldn't see any way it wouldn't make things worse.

Except I'd reached the point where I had to do it.

And to be honest, I *wanted* to do it now. All the shit that had been building inside me since we'd realized that Aline had left needed somewhere to go.

And I had the perfect target in mind.

Well, two, technically.

Fortunately, I found them together.

One look at Cain's face told me that he had no idea why I was pissed, but I knew Eoin did.

"Good, you're together, so I can yell at you both at the same time."

They listened, and they argued, first with me and then with each other. I opened my mouth to interrupt and turn the attention back to where it belonged, getting *her* back to where *she* belonged.

Then Eoin said, "And it's over. You know that."

I stared at him, all the wind going out of me as I processed the meaning of his words. "You mean she didn't come to you? Didn't ask if she could stay with you during her little temper tantrum?"

The horror on his face told me he wasn't lying. "What are you talking about?"

Shit.

I'D DRIVEN BACK to L.A. on Saturday, hopeful that Aline might have finally returned to the apartment. She'd been angry with me, I knew, but it'd been a week, and she had to come home at some point in time. Which 'home' was a toss-up, but we could cover both places if I simply went back to Stanford.

As an added bonus, I wouldn't have to endure the disappointment from Mom and Dad. Seeing their anxiety was stressful enough, knowing that I'd caused

it and I hadn't been able to ease it. Yet. It had to be *yet* because any other outcome wasn't an option.

Aline hadn't been here when I'd arrived. Still, I'd stayed. As much as I hated not being in L.A. to search for Aline, I had to admit that it was more likely she'd return to a familiar place on her own than it was for me to find her in a sea of people, especially since I'd run out of places to look. The most frustrating thing about it was that I felt like I'd missed something. Some person she'd go to, a place she'd feel safe.

I'd spent yesterday talking to students, hoping that, even if I failed to find her here, I'd figure out what I'd missed. The only thing I'd accomplished, however, had been the realization that Aline hadn't really had any friends outside of the circles I'd brought her into. She hadn't been disliked, but no one other than our joint friends had spent much time with her outside of the occasional polite conversation or a shared table in the dining hall.

Today, I intended to speak with faculty, though I wasn't holding much hope for that leading anywhere. Some students became close enough to their advisors or professors to go to them with non-academic problems but most didn't, especially not after they graduated. Aline had respected her advisor and had a few professors she'd enjoyed sitting under, but I didn't think she'd have reached out to any of them. Still, I planned to ask.

Later.

I'd been lying in bed for the past hour, trying to muster enough energy to get up. When Aline had been taken, I'd experienced helplessness to an extent, but I'd at least had a general idea of who I'd been fighting and had contact people who could help. Now, I had even less information to go on and fewer resources at my disposal. Cain had offered to use his agency to find her, but I'd turned him down. The last thing my family needed was to get Cain and Eoin involved again. Eoin had caused all of this in the first place.

My phone rang, and my pulse picked up. Mom's name was on the screen, and I sincerely hoped that she was calling me to say that Aline had come back. That things were going to go back to normal now.

"Hi."

“We just spoke with Aline,” Mom said, relief evident in her voice.

Spoke with. That wasn’t the same as *saw*. Nothing about her being home.

“Is she okay?” I sat up in bed, telling myself that if Mom wasn’t panicking, Aline was fine. Still, I needed to hear it myself.

“She is,” Mom said. “She’s been staying with Martina Chavez.”

Martina. I closed my eyes. Shit. That was the name that’d been trying to come forward for days.

“I hadn’t realized that the two of them had kept in touch,” Mom said.

I had. Aline had gone to see Martina twice in the past year, but clearly, my sister hadn’t told our parents, or they would’ve mentioned Martina to me. I should have known, though. Martina lived in Los Angeles and wouldn’t have felt obligated to reach out to any of us if Aline had asked her not to. I wasn’t about to share any of that information, though. My parents blamed me for Aline leaving. If they found out that I knew she had stayed friends with Martina and hadn’t reached out, they’d be furious. I honestly didn’t think I could handle them being more upset with me than they already were.

“Did she say if she was coming back there or here?” I asked. “If she doesn’t want to borrow one of your cars, I’ll come down and pick her up. Or she can just stay with you until Christmas.”

After almost a full thirty seconds of silence, Mom answered, “She’s staying at Martina’s a little while longer.”

“She’s what?” I had to have misheard.

“We had a talk, and she helped us see her side of things.”

I frowned. “Her side of things about what?”

“I’m sure she’ll talk to you too.” Mom neatly sidestepped the question. “But for right now, she wants to continue living with Martina as she figures out what she wants to do.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Aline had talked with our parents, told them where she was, gave them some speech about why she’d left, and they

were letting her stay in an apartment I was certain wasn't in the best part of the city.

I'd spent the last week being blamed for the entire thing, never said a word in my defense, and had been driving myself crazy trying to find her. And I doubted I'd get an apology or credit from my parents.

"She's going to try to come for Christmas," Mom continued. "And she said she'll reach out to you."

"When?" I asked through gritted teeth.

"Oh, she didn't give any specific timeframe, but before Christmas, I'm sure." Mom didn't sound concerned at all.

"Do you have Martina's address?" I asked. "I'm sure I can find it, but if you already know it—"

"No," Mom cut me off. "She doesn't want to see you yet."

"Excuse me?"

"Aline specifically asked us not to tell you where she was because she didn't think you'd respect her decision to want some time apart."

She'd told them not to tell me where she was because she didn't want to see me. This wasn't a sharp pain, like a knife to the gut. No, this felt more like I'd swallowed a bowling ball, and now it was sitting in my stomach, a weight I couldn't get rid of.

"Please, Freedom. Just let her be. She'll talk to you when she's ready."

I nodded, still trying to process it all, and then realized that Mom couldn't see me. "All right. I'll leave her alone."

Mom and I talked for a few more minutes, but I didn't really remember much of what she said. All I really knew was that the person I'd cared about more than anyone else wanted nothing to do with me just because I'd tried to protect her.

When I ended the call, I tossed my phone back onto the bedside table and rolled over, taking my blankets with me. Now that I didn't need to go

searching for answers today, I could stay curled up here as long as I wanted. I had no one counting on me, no one I had to take care of, nothing that needed to be done.

The person whose well-being had driven nearly every moment of my life since I was a child no longer wanted to be around me. I didn't know what to do with that.

THIRTY-NINE

BRODY

COMPARED TO THANKSGIVING, CHRISTMAS EVE WAS A QUIET AFFAIR. Quieter, anyway. Only ten of my siblings in attendance, and Alec wasn't one of them, which meant Lumen and Evanne weren't here either, and Evanne usually brought a whole other noise level to family events. Then again, maybe it just seemed quieter because I wasn't doing much talking tonight.

"What's going on with you?" Paris asked as she plopped down on the couch next to me. "You haven't once dared Sean to eat a pinecone or begged Mom to let you open just one present early."

"I'm not a child, Paris," I snapped. Her eyes widened, but there was no hurt in them. I still immediately felt guilty because I wasn't a complete bastard. "Sorry. That was completely uncalled for. I do have a reputation for doing immature shit."

Paris frowned and put her hand on my arm. "All right, now I'm worried. The apology, yeah, that makes sense because that was a dick thing to say, but self-deprecation isn't your thing."

I wanted to be insulted, to claim that she was implying that I was conceited, that I thought I could do no wrong, but I knew that wasn't what my sister was saying. It was just more proof that I wasn't, as Theresa would've said, 'fit company' at the moment. I loved my family, and it wasn't that I didn't want to be here, but I just couldn't get myself to my usual excitement for the holiday. I hadn't been able to find my usual enjoyment in much lately.

I sighed and shook my head. "Just in a shitty mood is all."

“Who’s in a shitty mood?” Rose sat down next to Paris and held out a plate with a few Christmas cookies on it. “Want some?”

“Thanks.” Paris took a macaroon. “Brody’s the one in the shitty mood.”

“Why?” Rose asked before biting into a chocolate-covered mint Oreo. “Did Austin tell you that Santa Claus isn’t real?”

“You’re never going to let me forget that, are you?” Austin was passing by with a glass of eggnog, which was probably why Rose had said it.

“I was four,” Rose replied, pointing at him with her cookie. “And you made me cry.”

“I remember,” Austin said. “Mom made me donate all of my Christmas presents to a women’s shelter that year.”

He smiled, but I saw the shadow pass through his eyes. What he didn’t say was that he’d kept donating Christmas gifts to that same shelter ever since. The first year, he’d gotten Rome, Blaze, Alec, and me to help deliver them so that our parents wouldn’t find out. After that, we’d each chosen a similar charity, saved money the way he had, and delivered our gifts in secret as well.

While we didn’t always have the time to shop for gifts and take them in personally now that we were adults, I knew that all of us provided specific donations to those same places for Christmas gifts every year. We never really talked about why we did it, but I’d always gotten the impression that Austin still felt that guilt from when he’d told Rose about Santa Claus.

Austin must’ve seen that I was as reluctant to talk about what was going on with me as he was to talk about the Santa Claus incident because he joined us and changed the subject to Rose’s plans for her ranch.

I listened as she talked, as the discussion ebbed and flowed around me, siblings coming and going. No one mentioned how I wasn’t myself, but Paris still shot me a concerned look a time or two until we started dinner, and I proved that I wasn’t so far gone that I didn’t have an appetite. Granted, I didn’t enjoy the food with the same level of enthusiasm I normally did, but I still enjoyed it, and it put me in a relatively more positive mood.

Things were looking up by the time the first video call came in. Paris was the closest, so she answered it.

“Eoin! Right on time too. We were betting whether...oh, hi.” Her voice changed, and that did as much to draw our attention as his name. “Mom’s going to kick your ass for not telling her you have someone with you.”

While Mom talked, the rest of us moved in behind her. Part of me wasn’t even surprised when I saw the familiar face next to Eoin’s on the screen. I’d thought things with Aline had ended, but apparently, that wasn’t the case. He wouldn’t have put her on this call if it was just a dalliance. Hell, he probably would’ve been here if he wasn’t with her.

He introduced all of us, and if Aline recognized me, she didn’t show it. There was no reason she should. She’d only seen me once, briefly, and she’d had no idea about my connection with her sister. The only person she did recognize, apparently, was Fury.

And then Eoin upped the shock value. “Everyone, this is Aline Mercier. My fiancée. And we’re having a baby.”

Shit.

It looked like Freedom and I were going to be connected, anyway. For life.

Fuck.

FORTY

FREEDOM

MY CONVERSATION WITH ALINE ON THE NINETEENTH HAD BEEN BRIEF BUT cordial. Since she would be at the house for Christmas, I hadn't pressed any of the things that she and I needed to talk about. Mom and Dad would most likely broach the subject of how long she'd be staying with Martina, which would be the perfect segue into questions about her plans for the future.

All of that went to hell, though, when she showed up with a surprise. A tall, ruggedly handsome surprise.

I managed to give him a polite smile and handshake, but that was all I could do. I couldn't understand how Mom and Dad were okay welcoming him into our home after what he'd done, but I wasn't about to be the one who ruined Christmas, especially not after almost losing my sister not too long ago.

"So, Eoin, tell us about your family," Mom said with a smile as we all moved into the dining room.

Well, at least I didn't need to worry about us running out of topics of conversation. I did, however, need to be careful that I didn't give away too much about how much I already knew about the blended clan. As far as I knew, aside from Brody, the only other ones in his family who knew anything about me were Paris and Maggie.

"Well, there are a lot of us," Eoin said as he sat down next to Aline. "I was born in Scotland, but after my mother died, Da met a widowed woman from San Jose and married her, so we moved to San Ramon, the whole lot of us."

“I’m so sorry about your mom,” Mom said. “That must have been very difficult.”

“Thank you.”

Eoin looked uncomfortable at the sympathy, but that I could understand. I’d never liked receiving condolences. I never knew exactly how to handle them. I reached for my drink and tried to hide my annoyance. I didn’t want to find anything in common with him.

“How old were you?” Dad asked.

“Gerard,” Mom said, reproof in her voice.

“It’s all right,” Eoin said. “I was three. I don’t really remember her. Mostly what I know is from what my older brothers remember.”

“How many do you have?” Mom asked.

Now that was a question that would take a while.

Aline laughed and put her hand on Eoin’s arm. “Pace yourself, or you won’t get anything to eat.”

From the little I knew about Eoin, I’d gotten the impression that he didn’t really like to talk much, but he didn’t limit himself to one-word answers with my parents. Between bites and Aline’s little attempts to help, he talked about each of his siblings, and I couldn’t deny the clear love he had for all of them.

If he’d met Aline under different circumstances – or at least gotten involved with her under different circumstances – I might not have minded him joining us today. Granted, he wasn’t the type of man I’d ever pictured my sister with, but family was important to him, and that made up for a lot.

Still, I could never forgive him for taking advantage of her. If I’d thought this thing between them would last, I might’ve been more emphatic about that particular point, but I doubted it would take Aline long to realize how mismatched they were. I’d be polite to him until then, but I didn’t plan on going out of my way to resolve my issues.

It took a lot of self-control not to speak up after Mom and Dad thanked him for rescuing Aline. Yes, he’d been part of the group who’d saved her, but

taking advantage of my sister that same night had canceled out any of the positive he'd done.

And then he had the gall to offer up some shit about how grateful he was to have been there because she meant so much to him.

I was still trying to figure out the best way to respond when Aline said something about leaving. Mom asked the question on the tip of my tongue, so I went with the rest of what I'd planned to say when the opportunity presented itself.

"We can pack your things in the car tonight, and then I'll pick you up at her place tomorrow morning for us to head back to Stanford. I was going to spend tomorrow here too, but it's been a while since you've been home, so we'll leave early."

I felt Mom and Dad looking at me, but I kept my eyes focused on Aline. I knew she wouldn't want to hurt Eoin's feelings, but I'd willingly field that landmine for her if she just said the word.

Except she didn't.

She said she wasn't going back to our apartment, that she planned to look for jobs here in L.A. I didn't understand why she needed to get any of her things if she'd be here, and I said as much.

"I'm not staying *here*. I'm staying in L.A., not with Mom and Dad."

I clenched my jaw and counted to five. I couldn't believe she was doing this again, making plans without even taking into consideration what I might want. Well, I wasn't going to give in without a fight this time.

"I don't want to live in L.A."

"I'm not asking you to." Her voice was quiet but firm.

I was shocked to see that she really meant it. I appreciated the fact that she hadn't actually expected me to move at the drop of a hat without any discussion, but what she was planning was ridiculous. I gave her the same big sister look I'd given her when she'd done other foolish things. She never thought anything through. "So, you're just going to have some tiny room in

Martina's apartment for who knows how long?"

"No."

I frowned. "You're going to get a place of your own?" I couldn't stop myself from laughing. The idea was ludicrous. "You've never lived a day on your own."

Her eyes flashed with something dangerous I'd never seen before, and her voice went several octaves deeper. "I can take care of myself, but for your information, I won't be alone. I'm living with Eoin."

What. The. Fuck.

Any good intentions I'd had about waiting this out vanished with that last statement, and I turned on him. The bastard had told me that he hadn't seen her. Fucking *liar*!

"What the *hell* did you do?! How dare you take advantage of her when she was upset! Out on her own for the first time and vulner—"

"We're engaged." Aline's voice was still firm as she continued to drop bombshells. "And I'm pregnant."

I felt the color drain from my face. That couldn't be possible.

"So back off."

I stared at Aline as if I'd never seen her before, and in a way, I never had. Not this Aline.

As she and Mom talked, I could see the excitement on our mother's face. Knowing how much our parents wanted children, it made sense that Mom would be happy at the prospect of a grandchild. But like this?

Suddenly, I realized something. "Where's your ring?"

She took a ring out of her pocket, and for a moment, I wondered if she'd bought some cheap trinket to use in case we reacted badly to the baby news.

"We weren't going to make any announcements today. Everything's still new."

My laugh was sharp enough to cut. “New? You two have been together for, what, five weeks? Six?”

Dad used the fact I’d pointed out to question Eoin’s commitment to taking care of Aline and a baby, but I could have told him that wouldn’t be an issue. Even without our family money, Aline wouldn’t be without resources. From what I knew of the McCraes, they valued family above all else. He’d pay no matter what.

That didn’t mean I was going to approve of this rash, irresponsible decision. “You can’t really be…” I shook my head. It was pointless to try to argue with her. I turned to our parents. “How can you let her do this?”

Before they could answer, Aline lifted her chin. “I’m twenty-two years old. I have a college degree in an essential field. I have a wonderful fiancé with a good job and a beautiful place for us to live. We’re going to make a home for our family here in L.A. We’re going to pack some things and then be back down to say our goodbyes.”

I sank down onto the couch, all the strength running out of my legs. I couldn’t believe this was happening. This year was supposed to have been about me and my sister moving from young adult students to young adults starting out their chosen careers. We should have been spending today talking about all the things we’d accomplished in the past year and what we had ahead in the coming year. I shouldn’t have been sitting here while my sister and her *fiancé* were upstairs packing her things because she was moving in with him.

And she was pregnant.

Pregnant.

And even though the timing had been influenced by the pregnancy, I knew Eoin wasn’t just ‘doing the right thing.’ Some people might’ve seen an engagement as just that, but I’d seen the light in Eoin’s eyes when Aline had put on that ring.

He loved her.

Absolutely nothing about the time the two of them had been together should have led to this. They’d slept together due because of a highly charged

situation and then again because Aline had wanted to prove a point to me. Every single interaction they'd encountered came out of some unconventional circumstance. And yet his response to finding out she was pregnant was to propose to her.

I didn't say anything as they came back downstairs and said their goodbyes. I wanted to be angry with her, but I knew she'd had an IUD, so even if she hadn't used a condom with Eoin, that should have protected her from pregnancy. And if they'd forgotten to use a condom, I couldn't really point fingers since I'd gotten caught up in the moment myself on occasion, one of which was with Eoin's own brother.

I wanted to be angry at the circumstances that would keep me tied to Brody forever, but even that realization wasn't the reason for the fury bubbling up inside me.

No, the reason I was angry came from my past, and the fact that it blind-sided me pissed me off even more. As Mom and Dad's conversation flowed around me, my mind took me back to my freshman year of college.

I'd met Jack Graves in the law library on my second day on campus. He was pre-law and exactly the sort of serious, ambitious man who would perfectly fit with the picture I had of my future. He'd been my first, and while he hadn't forced me, I had definitely felt the pressure to keep him happy.

The times I'd said *no*, he'd backed off, but it'd always been with a sigh, and even when I had given in, I hadn't enjoyed it. He'd never hurt me, but he'd also been more concerned with getting what he wanted.

Back then, I'd told myself that I'd gotten what I'd wanted too. A boyfriend who would one day be my fiancé, and then my husband. I'd wanted him to come home with me during winter break so he could meet my family, but he'd said it was too soon. I'd been disappointed but had understood.

I'd had also understood that he hadn't had much time to talk to me since his family always had things planned for when he was home.

Going back after the break, I'd assumed that our relationship would go back to how it had been, and he and I would be on track for him to come to L.A. to meet my family for spring break. He'd seemed a bit distracted the first couple

of days, and then I'd missed my period.

When I'd told him, he hadn't proposed.

He'd accused me of trying to trap him into a relationship by getting pregnant on purpose.

And as if that hadn't been enough to break my heart, he'd informed me that he'd rekindled a relationship with a woman from his hometown and had been with her during the entire break. We'd broken up, and I'd gone to buy a pregnancy test by myself. It'd been negative, but I'd still spent the next couple weeks with my stomach in knots, relaxing only after my period had finally started.

I'd done it the right way. Found a serious college student. Dated for a month before having sex. Used condoms every time.

And I'd gotten cheated on and dumped.

Aline had done absolutely nothing right, and she'd gotten a proposal and a man who adored her.

Fuck my life.

FORTY-ONE

BRODY

WHEN ISAIAH SAID HE WANTED TO MEET FOR LUNCH THE SATURDAY AFTER Christmas, I'd agreed, but only if he came to San Ramon. I had no desire to be anywhere near Los Angeles right now. I'd always have a connection to Freedom now that Eoin and Aline were going to have a kid together. Even if their relationship didn't last, there'd always be that nibbling. I'd do my best to avoid making things awkward in the future when we were forced to spend time together, but right now, I needed to be in the one place I knew she wouldn't be. I didn't know if she was still in L.A. at her parents' place or her apartment in Palo Alto, but she wasn't in my hometown, that I knew for certain.

Which meant this was the best place for me to be.

Since it wasn't a workday, and Isaiah was the only one I was meeting, we'd decided to go to Bishop Grill since Isaiah was staying at the San Ramon Marriott. Most business lunches served to impress as well, which generally meant the sort of places that didn't have prices on their menus. Isaiah didn't need that, though. Just excellent cuisine, which Bishop Grill possessed.

Since I'd texted him just before I'd arrived, he was waiting for me, and we went to a table in the back. After we both ordered the Marriott Burger, we chatted about how our holidays had gone. Since Isaiah knew Eoin – though he hadn't ever really spent time with him – I told him about the engagement and the pregnancy, including the fact that Aline was Freedom's sister.

“Wow.” He leaned back in his chair. “I gotta know, how in the world did *that* happen?”

I filled him in on the little I knew, most of which was speculation, but stuck only with Aline and Eoin’s relationship and their connection to Freedom. I said nothing of the closer connection I’d had to Freedom.

Isaiah wouldn’t have cared. Nothing that had happened between Freedom and me had had any effect on Isaiah’s business, and since she and I were done, it wouldn’t affect anything in the future either.

“Small world,” Isaiah said, shaking his head. “Who would’ve thought a pair of brothers and a pair of sisters would come to know each other through two completely separate and different means.”

He had no idea how true that statement was or that my meeting Freedom had occurred *before* Eoin’s and Aline’s, though with the same results. McCrae men and Mercier women apparently had combustive chemistry.

No, not the same results, I reminded myself. Aline and Eoin may have had their ups and downs, but they’d clearly both wanted a commitment. What had happened between Freedom and me had never moved beyond hooking up, no matter what I’d thought about. The best I could hope for now was a lack of awkwardness and embarrassment at family events, like when my niece or nephew was born.

“How much is Aline like her sister?” Isaiah asked. “I can’t really see Eoin with a woman as headstrong as Freedom seems to be. I mean, I’m guessing he’s grown up a lot, being in the army and what happened to him and all, but still.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know her well, but what I do know of her is different from Freedom. She’s more optimistic, I guess. Sees the good in everyone. Not as careful. Does things without thinking them through.” Even as I spoke, I knew that I wasn’t going by personal knowledge. All of it came through the screen of Freedom’s view of her sister.

“After everything Eoin’s been through, it’ll be good for him to have someone with a lighter look on life,” Isaiah said.

I had to agree with that observation. I was happy for my brother, and if it hadn't been for Freedom and my history, I would've been thrilled. I'd get there one day, once my emotions weren't so raw.

"Since we're talking about couples and odd pairings, I have to ask if you knew what was happening on the ship."

My stomach clenched. The way he'd worded it told me that he wasn't talking about Freedom and me, but it hit too close to the mark. "What?"

"Doyle and Marta."

I frowned. What was he talking about? "Doyle Ewell and Marta Vasilev?"

Isaiah nodded. "I know. Crazy, right? I guess they were sleeping together the whole time."

"How do you know?" I tried to make the question as casual as possible. If Isaiah knew about them, he could figure out about Freedom and me.

"That's the funniest part," Isaiah said. "They made it through the whole trip and then got caught by one of the staff in the laundry room before our last meeting."

I went completely still, barely even breathing.

"Apparently, she walked into the laundry to find Doyle apologizing to Marta for mistaking some underwear for hers when it belonged to someone else. I guess Marta was telling Doyle to show how sorry he was because Janet said Doyle started to talk about how he was going to make it up to Marta, and that was more than Janet wanted to know."

Doyle had been in the laundry room with Marta, not Freedom. He'd had Freedom's bra, but not because she'd been there with him. The hamburger I'd just finished sat like a lump in my gut.

Freedom had made an assumption about who Paris was to me instead of asking. The 'proof' had been circumstantial at best but understandable. I wasn't so sure that my own mistake could be so easily forgiven. Freedom and I had had more time together, a deeper connection. I'd jumped to conclusions and hadn't bothered trying to see what had really happened.

There could have been a million reasons why Doyle'd picked up Freedom's bra, but I'd only seen the ones that meant Freedom didn't want me the way I wanted her.

"Brody, are you okay?"

"I don't know," I answered honestly. "I think I fucked up the best thing to ever happen to me, and I don't know if I can fix it."

"Do you want to fix it?" he asked, expression serious.

"More than anything."

"All right, then." Isaiah nodded. "Then let's figure out what you need to do."

FORTY-TWO

FREEDOM

I'D BEEN SITTING ON THE COUCH, SLOWLY MAKING MY WAY THROUGH THE best tiramisu gelato Palo Alto had to offer for the past hour. I'd picked it up yesterday with my groceries when I'd come back to the apartment.

My apartment.

I'd been coming back to that all day.

My apartment.

Yesterday, I'd managed to focus on my driving. With post-Christmas traffic pretty much the entire way, it'd given me plenty to do. Between that and not having slept well on Christmas night, by the time I'd gotten home, I'd been exhausted enough to sleep without dreaming for nearly eight whole hours.

When I woke up at dawn, I was well-rested and clear-headed, which royally sucked because that meant I had to actually deal with the full repercussions of everything that'd happened over the last couple days.

Like the fact that this was no longer an apartment I shared with my sister. I hadn't noticed it yesterday because I'd basically just crashed when I'd gotten back, but first thing this morning, I'd seen what I hadn't last night.

None of Aline's things were here.

Her room was bare of all but the furniture. At some point between Christmas Day and yesterday evening, she'd moved out. Without a word or even a text.

Not that I could blame her.

I'd been an ass.

And a few other choice curse words.

After she and Eoin had left on Christmas, our parents had made no bones about the fact that I was to blame for all of it. I'd been the one to bring in Cain's team to rescue Aline when they would've simply paid the ransom. I hadn't personally vetted each member of the team and had trusted an ex-boyfriend of mine. I'd been more concerned with my career than I had been about making sure no one took advantage of her.

Except I didn't think that was right.

I loved my parents, and I knew they were just freaking out about everything that'd gone on with Aline over the past few months, but it...it was too much. I'd been taking care of Aline, putting her first for my entire life. My parents had never come out and flat-out told me that I had to put my life on hold for her, but the fact that they put all this guilt on me showed that it had always been their mindset, spoken or not.

Yes, I was a big sister, and that came with some sense of responsibility, especially because of the issues she'd had as a baby, but she wasn't a baby anymore. She wasn't even a teenager. Her health was fine. She had nothing to keep her from being able to make rational, educated decisions about her life. I might not always agree with those decisions, and I sometimes thought she didn't use that big brain of hers as much as she should, but if that was what she wanted...

I sighed and stuck my spoon in the gelato. I was spiraling again, but I couldn't seem to stop it.

I'd always spent my time running, moving, thinking, doing. I went from one thing to the next. Between willpower and denial, I excelled at not dealing with my shit. Except now, I had nothing else to focus on.

No schoolwork. No regular work. Nothing to write or research. Nothing to plan for the next day, and no need to unwind after a difficult but rewarding day.

And no de-stressing distraction in the form of mind-blowing sex.

I could've found someone to fuck, I supposed, but I really wasn't in the mood. It was just too much work to find a guy and hope he could get the job done. Gelato was doing the job just fine.

Or so I told myself.

I needed to stop with the self-pity party. I might not have been responsible for Aline's choices, but I was responsible for my own. My parents shouldn't have put so much pressure on me, conscious or otherwise, but just as Aline wasn't a child anymore, neither was I. My life, and what I did with it, was up to me.

So, what did I want to do? That was the million-dollar question.

I was twenty-six years old with a master's degree, and while I still wanted to work in that same field, the surrounding circumstances didn't necessarily have to still be the way I'd pictured them. They didn't need to be based on anything other than what I wanted.

A thriving career where I could make a difference still meant something to me. I wasn't sure, however, exactly what form that would take or where it would be. All the things I'd thought of before had been influenced by what I thought Aline wanted with her life, and I was starting to think that I needed to make a completely blank slate when it came to prospective careers.

Maybe I needed a completely blank slate all the way around. Go to a different state or even a different country. Build a social life around work and a new neighborhood. And if romance came along naturally, I'd figure that out when it came. Right now, though, it was low on my list of priorities.

Someone knocked on my door, and I sighed again. I didn't really want to get up, but it was probably a good thing for me to move around a bit. I also needed to put the gelato away before I made myself sick eating too much of it in one go. With that on my mind, I went to the door and opened it, not realizing I hadn't checked the peephole first until I saw Brody standing in the hallway.

I didn't understand. He'd said he'd gotten me out of his system. Before I could ask why he was here, though, he spoke in one long rush of words.

“I’m sorry I was an idiot who jumped to conclusions, and instead of just asking you about what I saw, I acted like the best thing to do would be to pretend that I was thinking what I thought you were thinking.”

The run-on sentence left me staring at him dumbly for several seconds before I stepped back and motioned for him to come inside. Once he did, I closed the door, looked at the carton in my other hand, and said, “Kitchen.” I pointed at him. “You stay.”

I half-expected him to still follow me, but he didn’t, so I took an extra minute of solitude to pull myself together as well as I could. Which wasn’t much, to be honest. Part of me wanted to excuse myself longer so I could change out of my Charlie Brown Christmas pajama pants and camisole into something that, if not sexier, would make me at least feel like a mature adult who had her shit together.

I doubted I owned anything that could manage that right now.

I reminded myself that I hadn’t done anything wrong when it came to how my relationship with Brody had ended, and he clearly felt that he’d been the one in the wrong, so I didn’t have anything to prove to him. After a couple calming breaths, I squared my shoulders and walked back out into the living room where Brody still stood next to the door.

“Let’s sit down,” I suggested. The tension was awkward, and I didn’t know if sitting would make it worse, but I wasn’t sure how long it was going to take for him to explain. Once we were settled at opposite ends of the couch, I faced him squarely. “I’m listening.”

“I need to back up from the apology to explain why I’m apologizing in the first place.” Brody looked uncharacteristically somber. “The last day we were on the ship, I realized that I didn’t want us to go our separate ways when we docked.”

That admission alone would have shocked me into silence, but he clearly wasn’t done.

“I knew that we’d both said we weren’t looking for anything exclusive, not even casually dating, and just because we’d made up from our fight about your trip to Iran didn’t mean that had changed, but I knew that if I didn’t at

least ask, I'd regret it."

The hope I'd thought died more than a month ago flickered back to life. I cautioned myself to wait until he finished what he'd come to say. The last thing I needed to do was make this entire situation worse now that we were going to be in-laws.

"I went to your room, but you weren't there, and I left to look for you."

That sounded a lot like what I'd done, but this must have happened first.

"Dimos said you went to the laundry room, so that's where I went." Brody rubbed the back of his neck, his tell when he was embarrassed by something. "I opened the door just as Doyle came around the corner, holding a bra I recognized."

My jaw dropped slightly. That wasn't possible. I'd been there, and I hadn't seen him.

"He spoke to someone who was out of my line of sight and said that it was hers. Because I knew it belonged to you, I assumed he was talking to you. I left before anyone saw me. I didn't know otherwise until earlier today when Isaiah told me that Doyle and Marta had been hooking up the entire time."

"I was there." I finally found my voice. "I walked into the laundry room when Doyle had my bra."

"You must've been on the other side," Brody said.

I could see it now, the door on the opposite side of the room. If Brody had looked in through there but hadn't actually come inside, he might not have been able to see Marta.

"Do you think this is the universe telling us something?" I asked. "All these hits and misses. The misunderstandings and assumptions."

He shook his head, a determined look on his face. "No, this was me being an idiot and making an assumption. I refuse to believe there's some higher power or whatever that doesn't want us together." He leaned toward me but didn't touch me. "If you say it's not what you want, I'll respect that, but this year, even when I was pissed off at you, I couldn't stop thinking about you."

Wanting you. I want us to try to make things work. A real, adult, warts-and-all relationship.”

“I did it too,” I reminded him softly. “I made assumptions about who Paris was. And, honestly, I think the two of us have been absolutely terrified of what it would mean if we chose to pursue something more real than anything else we’d ever had, and we’ve been fighting it tooth and nail, finding any excuse to walk away.”

He nodded, and I could see that he hadn’t gotten it. He still looked like he was bracing himself for bad news.

So, I did the only thing I could think of that would get through to him. I grabbed the front of his shirt, pulled him to me, and kissed him.

FORTY-THREE

BRODY

EVEN THOUGH FREEDOM HADN'T YELLED AT ME OR TOLD ME TO GET THE HELL out, I didn't dare to hope that she'd do anything more than accept my apology and agree that we'd be cordial to each other because we'd be connected by family. Then she started talking about how we'd been sabotaging ourselves, and I wanted it to mean that she didn't want us to do that anymore, but as multiple other instances in our relationship had proven, we really needed to stop making assumptions.

I was just about to ask her for clarification when she did something that made me feel like I could move from assuming to making an educated guess.

She kissed me.

I had a second of surprise, and then I was kissing her back, hot and wet and hungry. It'd been barely a month since I'd last had her mouth on mine, but it felt like it'd been years. She tasted sweet, like a dessert I couldn't quite place but knew it was my favorite and always would be.

I grabbed her hips and pulled her onto my lap, needing her closer. Her hands slid up to my shoulders and then up my neck until her nails lightly scratched my scalp. I moaned, squeezing her ass. How had I ever come close to thinking I could live without this? Without her?

When the need for air finally broke the kiss, I tightened my grip on her, not wanting her to go anywhere, even if we had to stop with the kissing for a bit. I just needed her close.

“No more assumptions,” I said. “I promise. Only open and honest communication, no matter how hard it might be.”

Anything I intended to say after that vanished the moment Freedom slipped her hand between us and rubbed my cock through my pants.

“Something’s hard.” She grinned at me. “And in the spirit of being honest and open, that’s what I want right now. We can talk after we have make-up sex.”

I could get on board with that idea. As an answer, I stood up, taking her with me. “Then we’re going to do that right too, and at the moment, that means a bed.”

“You know where my bedroom is.”

Surprised that she wasn’t insisting I put her down, I decided to take advantage of the opportunity and carried her to her bedroom. She yelped as I tossed her onto the bed, and I used the opportunity to take care of the awkward undressing part. There just wasn’t really a sexy way to take off shoes and socks for a man. At least, not one that I knew of.

Freedom wasn’t wearing shoes. Or socks, I now realized. “You painted your toenails green?”

“*Christmas* green,” she corrected, wiggling her toes at me. “I was being festive.”

I saw the hint of a shadow, but she shook her head, and it disappeared. Considering the news my family had gotten on Christmas Eve and the fact that Aline didn’t appear to be here, I thought I knew what caused that slight darkness. When she didn’t bring it up, though, I made a mental note to ask about it at a future date, and focused on the here and now. Because now I knew that we had a future where we could talk about everything and anything.

The thought was almost as arousing as watching Freedom pull her camisole over her head and toss it onto the floor.

Almost.

I loved seeing her in sexy lingerie, but there was something to be said for casual nudity, the intimacy of stripping when there'd been no thought of seduction or sensuality. The knowledge that this was what it was like when she was alone on a normal evening.

“Do you normally answer the door without wearing a bra?” I blurted out the question and then cringed. “Shit. That sounded like a judgmental and chauvinistic asshole comment. Which was not what I meant at all. I was thinking that I must've been really fucked up in the head to not notice the second you opened the door.”

She laughed and leaned back on her elbows. “You're wearing too many clothes.”

A couple minutes later, we were both naked, and I was in one of my favorite places in the world: between Freedom's legs. Multiple orgasms seemed like a good way to show how sorry I was for my part in all our arguments, and I intended to start right now.

We'd had a rocky year together, but I'd still learned most of her nuances, the things that turned her on and the sounds she made, the little tells that let me know just how to touch her, how to coax every last drop of pleasure from her. Like the way she squirmed when I flicked the tip of my tongue back and forth across her clit. Or the moan when I dropped to get my tongue as deep into her pussy as I could. The cursing as I sucked on the sensitive flesh. Nails digging into my scalp, holding me in place, encouraging me to give her more.

I brought her once with just my mouth, then eased off for a few seconds before sliding two fingers inside her. She cried out my name, back arching at the sudden invasion. She wasn't so tight that two fingers hurt her, but my fingers were snug enough that I could feel the fluttering of her muscles as an aftershock rolled through her.

While I loved going down on her, I wanted to see her face when I made her come this time, so I raised my head and took a moment to admire all the soft curves of this beautiful woman.

My beautiful woman.

The intensity of the possessiveness that came with that word surprised me, but only for a moment. I'd spent so much of this year denying the depth of what I felt for her, but now, I let it all come, let it fill my eyes so that she could see it.

If she was looking.

And she was.

Our eyes locked, and I curled my fingers inside her, slowly dragging them back until her body jerked and I knew I'd found the right spot. I stroked her g-spot over and over, watched her irises darken, pupils dilate.

She began to move, hands fisting in her blanket, hips twisting and back arching. I pressed my free hand on her lower belly, holding her still while my thumb began to brush back and forth across her clit. She came quickly, every muscle in her clenching, her body stiffening. Her mouth opened, but no sound came out.

I studied her body, her face, and knew that she was almost to the point where intercourse would move from pleasure to pain. But I could get one more climax out of her before I finally gave in to my own need, and I knew exactly how I wanted to do it.

My fingers were slick as I pulled them from her, and she made a soft sound, her body dropping back to the bed.

"One more." I kissed the inside of her thigh.

"Cock."

"Fingers."

She glared at me. Or, rather, attempted to glare. "Meanie."

I chuckled and nipped the same spot I'd just kissed. "I'll make it good, I promise."

"Always good," she said, her voice still sluggish. She waved a hand at me. "Fingers. Then cock."

"Bossy."

She started to say something else, but I chose that moment to do two things: rub my tongue over her swollen clit and slide my finger into her ass. She cried out but didn't tell me to stop. I drove her relentlessly, pushing her to that line between pain and pleasure, until she screamed my name...and then passed out.

After cleaning up a bit, I stretched out next to her, trying to ignore my throbbing cock. Admiring her naked body didn't actually help, but I couldn't draw my gaze away. I'd almost lost this, lost her, because I'd let my family's past grief close me off. No more. I was through with being cautious in this one area of my life. I was going to jump off a metaphorical cliff, I realized. And I'd do it as soon as she was coherent enough to listen.

I didn't need to wait long. Her eyes fluttered open, and she managed a lazy smile.

"Hey," she said.

I brushed some hair out of her face. "Marry me."

She laughed, but it didn't bother me. I was serious, but after everything that'd happened between us, I couldn't blame her for thinking I was joking.

"I don't have a ring, but I'm serious," I said. "I love you, and I want to marry you."

I waited for my words to sink in. She rolled onto her side, her gaze intense as she studied me. I didn't say anything, letting her work it through so she could respond.

"You don't think it's too soon?"

I was honestly surprised at the question. Of all the ways she could have replied, I hadn't thought that would be the first place her mind would go. I had an answer, though. "We've known each other for almost a year, and I think we know each other pretty well. That's more than most people can say."

I didn't mention the fact that my brother and her sister were already engaged, and they'd only met last month, but I knew she was thinking it. How could she not be? Aside from the fact that she was extremely close to her sister, the

entire situation was the kind that stuck with a person. I had a feeling the whole story was even crazier.

But I didn't really care about that right now. I cared about my proposal and the woman in bed next to me.

"This past year showed me just how good it can be with you and how bad it is when we're not together. I don't want another year like this, not one more sleepless night because I think I've lost you." I ran my finger along her bottom lip. "I want you to be mine forever."

And there it was, all laid out and ready for her to destroy if that was what she wanted to do. If she did, I'd at least know that I'd put it all on the line.

"Yes."

She said it so simply that it took a moment for it to register. And then I had to repeat it. "Yes?"

She smiled, a bright and open smile that lit up her entire face. She nodded so there'd be no doubting it. "Yes." And then she pushed me onto my back and straddled my waist.

"We'll go ring shop—"

Her mouth came down on mine hard enough to bruise, and she raked her nails down my chest. The pinpricks of pain went straight to my cock, and any softening that'd happened during the brief break immediately vanished.

"The ring can wait." She pulled back just enough to speak, her words breathless. "I need you inside me right now."

"Yes." I ran my tongue over her bottom lip. "Yes."

She slid down in one smooth motion, little whimpers falling from her lips as a shudder ran through her. I groaned as the vibration passed into me, twisting pleasure into a tight fist in my gut. I started to reach for her hips, but she grabbed my hands and pulled them up to her breasts. Understanding that she wanted to be in control, I focused my attention where she wanted it, my fingers rolling and tugging on her nipples. She rocked back and forth, finding the right combination of friction and pressure for us both.

I had no urge to close my eyes or look away. The physical pleasure of our bodies coming together was secondary to seeing Freedom's face without a single guard in place. Everything that I'd been feeling for her, I saw reflected back at me. Some final piece had fallen into place, and we were in sync, bodies and minds.

The muscles in her thighs flexed against mine as she rode me, breathing coming quicker the closer she got to orgasm. I could barely hold myself back, but I wanted us to reach that point together.

When I saw the familiar tells of her impending climax, I finally let go of the tenuous grip I'd had on my self-control, and the moment she called out my name and tightened around me, I followed.

As she dropped to my chest, our bodies still joined, she spoke, low but clear, "I love you too."

FORTY-FOUR

FREEDOM

THE LAST FEW DAYS HAD BEEN SOME OF THE BEST OF MY LIFE, AND definitely the best of the last year. It was also probably the first time I had ever truly felt like I wasn't holding everything on my shoulders. The day after the proposal, Brody and I had talked about all the things we'd needed to work out, and then I'd gone back to L.A. on Monday to talk to my parents and Aline.

Mom and Dad had been first, and it'd gone better than I'd thought it would. Not easier, because it'd wrung me out emotionally, but better because we'd cleared the air and established the healthier relationship we'd have going forward. Then, as I'd been walking out, trying to decide if I'd wanted to reach out to Aline today, I'd gotten a text from her.

The moment I'd seen her, though, I'd known it hadn't been the right time for us to talk. She'd needed my help, and this had been her genuinely asking for it, not what I'd always thought of as her expectation. I'd chosen, without feeling pressured or guilty, to wait, and so I'd sent her back to Eoin and then had gone to a hotel and called Brody.

While I'd wanted to go back to my apartment or Brody's place so we could begin making the practical decisions for us to start a real-life together, I'd known that I couldn't walk forward until I'd dealt with the past. Aline was part of that past.

So, I'd stayed in L.A. and had used the time to work on this new relationship with my parents. I'd also packed up my room at their house, and they'd

promised that the next time I came to the city, it would be a proper guestroom where my fiancé and I could stay.

All of that during the day and then hours talking to Brody at night – including a steamy round of phone sex to celebrate New Year’s Eve and our one-year anniversary – left me with little time to worry about what was to come with Aline. It didn’t, however, mean that my stomach wasn’t in knots on Thursday afternoon as I drove to Langer’s to have lunch with my sister.

She was already there, waiting just inside the door. She still looked a little too pale, but the smile she gave me was genuine. As we waited for our food, I asked her to tell me what had happened between Eoin and her after the last time we’d spoken. As she did, her face came alive, cheeks flushing, eyes sparkling.

I never would have forgiven myself if my meddling had prevented her from having this. I owed her so much more than an apology, and as soon as she finished sharing, I would do all of it.

The opportunity presented itself shortly after we started eating, so I put down my fork and began, “I really am sorry for all the shit I put you through about Eoin. I know I said that before, but it needs to be repeated. And I plan to apologize to Eoin too.”

“It’s okay,” Aline said, reaching across the table to squeeze my hand. “He’ll understand, even if you don’t want to tell him about Jack.”

“I should’ve still handled it better,” I insisted. “But I don’t just owe you an apology for Christmas. Or even just about my reaction to Eoin. I haven’t been willing to accept the fact that you’re an adult and that you can make your own decisions. I was wrong.”

“It came from a good place,” Aline said in a soft voice that was also strong and level. “I understand that. Mom and Dad did the same thing. We’ve talked about it.”

“I talked to them too, and I want to explain some of that. Not as an excuse, but because you’re my sister and I should’ve talked to you about this a long time ago instead of shutting you out because I thought that was protecting you.”

“Okay,” she looked confused but was still listening.

“We both know all the stories about how hard it was for Mom to get pregnant and then you, the miracle baby, and all that. I’m only just now understanding what that must’ve done to you, to have everyone always seeing you as that helpless baby who needed taken care of. And I contributed to it.” When she opened her mouth to protest, I held up a hand. “I want us to move past this so we can be real sisters. With a healthy relationship. But that’s only going to happen if we talk about the things that came between us in the first place.”

“All right.” She nodded and then gestured for me to continue.

“I’ve never talked about what it was like for me. Mom and Dad always said how I wanted to take care of you from moment one, and that was true. What they didn’t say was how much they pushed that on me until it was my entire identity. Everything I did and said had to be about what was best for you. Not because *you* expected it, but because Mom and Dad did.”

“They told you that?” Aline’s lips pressed together in a thin line.

“It’s...complicated,” I said. “And we’ve talked through a lot of it over the last couple days.”

She shook her head. “This year...I mean, I knew it’d be a year for change, but I never thought it’d be...all this.” She made an all-encompassing motion with her hand.

“Tell me about it.” I took a long drink. “And there’s more.”

She chuckled. “That sounds like one of those commercials we always make fun of. ‘But wait, there’s more.’”

I laughed, and some of my tension eased. Not all of it, though. The next bit related to her directly and was going to be a bombshell. Brody and my parents had agreed not to tell anyone else about us until I talked to Aline today. Brody had decided to have his conversation with Eoin while I was with my sister and then move on to other members of his family. By the end of today, everyone in both of our families would know, at the very least, that Brody and I had been dating for a while and were engaged.

Talk about starting the year off with a bang.

“This year, it wasn’t just Mom and Dad, or even the added stress of school that had me being such a bitch.”

“Freedom...”

I held up my hand again. “Not all the time, but I had plenty of moments.”

“We’ll agree to disagree on that.” Aline crossed her arms, a stubborn set to her jaw.

Now I knew for certain that she and I would be okay. That made it easier to finish my story.

“Last New Year’s Eve, at the party I went to, I met someone.”

Her eyebrows shot up, but she didn’t say anything or ask any of the questions I saw flashing through her mind.

“We had sex, and I figured I’d never see him again. One-night stands have been pretty much my go-to. I didn’t want any connection. The most I ever got from anyone was a first name. Later that week, though, I saw him again, and we had sex. I figured that would be it. Twice was more than enough. I didn’t find out his full name until Dr. Ipres, unknowingly, had me reach out to a distillery to supply alcohol for the art exhibit.”

I paused for a few seconds to take a drink and saw her thinking back.

“The good-looking guy who talked to us at the exhibit.” Her eyes widened, and I knew she’d put the pieces together. “Freedom, is he—”

“Brody McCrae.”

She’d been leaning forward during my story, and now she leaned back, completely...well, gobsmacked was the only word I could think of to describe how she looked. After only a couple minutes, she spoke, “I’m guessing there’s more.”

“There is.” I took a deep breath and kept going. “I mistook Paris...do you know who she is?”

Aline nodded. “I was too nervous on Christmas Eve to realize it when Eoin introduced me to some of his family that I’d seen Paris – and Brody – before.

That night at the exhibit, she was there too.”

“I thought she was his girlfriend.”

“Ah. I’m guessing that didn’t go well.”

“It did not,” I said ruefully. “And I didn’t find out the truth until near the end of April.” I was leaving out some bits, but she didn’t need to know all the details at once. We had plenty of time to talk about those things in the future. “Then in June, we fought about us going to Iran, and we didn’t speak again until right before Thanksgiving.”

“Wait.” Aline frowned. “How does that fit with Eoin coming to Iran then if you and Brody weren’t speaking?”

“Yeah, that’s just...weird.” I shook my head. “When I called Cain about finding you, I didn’t know who was on his team. Even after I saw Eoin at the airport, I didn’t realize who he was.”

“At the bar,” she said suddenly. “That’s when you figured out who he was.”

I nodded. “I knew that Brody’d had a brother in the army who’d been badly hurt, but he’d never said Eoin’s name.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “That was strange, making those connections.”

“Is that where you were before Thanksgiving? With Brody?”

“Sort of.” I explained about the cruise, how Brody and I had made up, then had yet another misunderstanding, on Brody’s side this time. When Brody had realized what had happened, he’d come to me to apologize.

“So, you’re together now?”

I gave her a wry smile. “I’m not trying to steal your thunder, but we’re engaged.”

Aline’s mouth dropped open. “Engaged?”

I shrugged. “We talked about how we felt, about our need for better communication, and the fact that, technically, we’d been together almost a

year. It didn't seem so crazy."

After a minute, she laughed. "So, this is what it feels like, being on the receiving end of a shocking engagement announcement."

I smiled. "But telling you that I'm engaged to your fiancé's brother isn't the only reason I shared so much of what happened between Brody and me. A lot of the shit that I freaked out about this year was because of things that were happening between Brody and me, things I didn't know how to handle. I had all these emotions I was denying. Feelings I didn't want. That stress on top of everything else going on..." I pressed my fingertips to my temples. "I should've handled things better."

She reached over and took my hand. "You're telling me now, and it sounds like you have a lot of that stuff worked out."

"I'm working on it. Brody and I are working on it together."

"Does that mean my idea of communication classes as an engagement gift would be welcome or unnecessary?"

I laughed. "You've known for all of thirty seconds, and you already have a gift idea?"

"What can I say?" She grinned at me. "I'm a genius."

I rolled my eyes. "Yes, you are."

"But seriously, Freedom, we're okay. Better than okay, I think, now." She squeezed my hand. "Because we're going to move forward from here, right? No more going back to the way things were."

"That's what I want," I said, my throat tight. "Honest and open communication. No avoidance or pretending everything's fine. Two adult sisters who love each other and would both do anything to protect the other."

Her eyes glistened with tears. "I would love that."

My own eyes burned, and I could barely speak, but I said one more thing I needed her to know. "I love you."

FORTY-FIVE

BRODY

LIMITING A WEDDING TO IMMEDIATE FRIENDS AND FAMILY WOULD NORMALLY be the best way to keep it small and intimate. With a family as large as mine, however, 'small' was a relative term. It also meant that Freedom and I'd had more hands to call on after she'd agreed to a short engagement. We'd gotten engaged on the twenty-eighth of December. Now, it was the day after Valentine's Day, and we were getting married.

I told Freedom that I'd wait as long as she needed to plan the wedding she wanted, no matter how big or extravagant, but that, in my mind, the sooner, the better. She'd insisted that she wasn't interested in lavish and wanted it as soon as possible too. Boaventura de Caires Vineyard was exactly what she'd been looking for, and thanks to a bride running off with her fiancé's sister, today had been open. So here we were.

With my vast number of siblings, Freedom and I had agreed to have only one attendant each, so Alec stood behind me as we watched Aline come up the aisle. I'd considered asking Eoin since Aline was his fiancée, but before I'd been able, he'd told me that he and Alec had already talked about Eoin sitting with Lumen during the ceremony since I'd always been closest to Alec.

Then Aline was taking her place, and everyone stood.

As Freedom stepped into view, I made a mental note to send an expensive thank you gift to Carson. He'd designed Freedom's dress as his wedding gift to us, and I knew he was doing the same for Eoin and Aline.

Freedom had wanted something sleek and elegant, and Carson had delivered in spades. It hugged her curves perfectly and went down to the tops of her feet, not quite covering the front of the low heels she'd chosen. She'd said that she needed comfort more than height.

I only cared that she was smiling. And she was. The biggest, brightest smile I'd ever seen, and it made my chest tighten.

When she and her father reached me, he put her hand in mine and said, "Take care of her."

To everyone else, he might've sounded as if he was choked up with emotion, but I recognized the unspoken *or else*.

"I will," I promised, looking him straight in the eye.

He nodded slightly and then went to sit with his wife. I turned back to my wife-to-be and didn't take my eyes off her again until the minister told me to kiss my bride. Even then, it was only to close my eyes during the kiss. Sweet and unhurried, we put everything we felt into it, ending it with a promise of more once we reached the honeymoon suite on Isaiah's 'couples cruise.'

"May I now present to you, Brody and Freedom McCrae."

Our loved ones rose to their feet, applauding. A few of my siblings whistled, and Paris cheered alongside Evanne, putting my niece onto a chair so she could see over everyone's heads. All four parents were wiping tears from their eyes, beaming at us. The sun was bright overhead, giving us just enough warmth that we could be outside without getting chilled or roasted. The sky was blue, with just a few clouds.

It was absolutely perfect.

As Freedom and I made our way down the aisle, hand-in-hand, she leaned closer and whispered, "Think we can sneak away for something quick before the reception? I can't wait until we get to the ship."

Heat flooded me, and I squeezed her hand. "Damn, I love you." She smiled, and my heart flipped.

“Good thing, because I love you too.” She tugged me to the left as we reached the end of the aisle. “I know just the place.”

I laughed as I followed her, every part of me feeling lighter than I’d ever remembered. I knew the world wasn’t perfect and that bad things still happened to good people. I knew that no one’s future was guaranteed.

But I was through letting that ruin the here and now. I was married to a beautiful, intelligent, and strong woman. I had family I loved and who loved me. The future would come at the same speed whether I worried or not. I refused to waste another minute on what might be and focus on what was.

Right now, that was my wife and the dim storage closet she was pulling me into.

Best. Day. Ever.

THE END

Look out for more books in my Scottish Billionaires saga, coming soon.

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