

*New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author

NOELLE  
ADAMS

REDEMPTION

*The Worthings*



# REDEMPTION

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THE WORTHINGS

NOELLE ADAMS

# CONTENTS

About Redemption

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Epilogue

Excerpt from Counted

about Noelle Adams

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## **ABOUT REDEMPTION**

I used to be a cliché. A wild, selfish party girl with a rich daddy and an assortment of bad habits and addictions. I was famous for being bad and an expert at getting my way. Except with my bodyguard, Caleb, who was the only person I couldn't manipulate. After going through rehab, I've spent the past three years living a quiet life with my art and a few friends in a small town in Maine. I stay out of the spotlight and try to make up for my past mistakes.

But I haven't seen Caleb since the worst day of my life, and I don't want to see him again. He reminds me of everything I did wrong. But when my family's stalker gets out of prison and turns his attention to me, I need extra protection, and Caleb has always been the best.

So now I'm forced to confront the memories I've tried to forget and a lot of intense feelings for Caleb that I've never acknowledged before.

# 1

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MOST PEOPLE HAVE MOMENTS THEY WISH THEY COULD ERASE from memory. The recollection will flash into their mind unexpectedly, making them flush or cringe or pray the earth cracks open and buries them in obscurity.

I don't have a single moment. Or even a few. I have four entire years of my life.

In my daydreams, those years never happened. I remained the good girl I'd been all through high school. I never hooked up with that one particular hot guy during my sophomore year of college. I didn't fall into a downward spiral of rebellion, addiction, and public notoriety. I never threw away my friendships and my future for an endless series of temporary highs.

But the reality of life is simply this: daydreaming doesn't change things. Nothing changes who we are and what we do except making one better choice after another, and even that can't cancel past sins.

At twenty-three, I hit rock bottom. The bodyguard my family hired to keep me from dying through my own stupidity found me wasted yet again on the bathroom floor of another club. He made me puke my guts up and walked me around outside until he was convinced I hadn't overdosed on whatever I took. We both ended up in the back of the SUV he drove me around in, him sitting in the back seat and me sprawled out, sobbing with my head on his lap. I distinctly remember begging him to help me.

*Help me, Caleb. Please. I need help.*

The first time I really meant it.

I didn't want to live like that. I didn't want to be that person. I didn't want to claim that life.

Caleb hauled my ass to rehab. One he chose rather than me and my dad. It wasn't one of the fancy places I'd tried in the past, ones that cared only about taking rich people's money while feeding them empty rhetoric and feel-good vibes. Because it was different, I actually made progress. It took months, but when I finally left, I felt almost like myself again.

My real self. Louisa Worthing. Only daughter of a billionaire workaholic. Not the wild party girl who'd become famous for being bad and creating scenes.

I was once more the girl I'd been for the first nineteen years of my life. Who loved painting and long walks and a few good friends and the rhythmic sound of the waves.

That's who I've been for the past three years.

The only way I've been able to manage it—both the constant uphill climb to recovery and the crushing weight of guilt from those four years—was to start an entirely new life where no one knew me. I moved to a small coastal town in Maine. Kept to myself. Slowly got to know new people and permanently blocked everyone I used to party with.

I still cringe and burn with mortification when I think of my worst moments—so many of them, one after another, four years' worth—but I try to focus instead on each new day before me.

And I've finally gotten to the point where I actually like my life and the Louisa I am now.

Which is why, on a cold, gray Saturday in February, the last thing I want is a disruption to my peace.

One of my cousins, William, has come to visit me with his lovely, stylish fiancée. William is more than ten years older than me, but I've always liked him, and I've never met Jade before, so I've been excited about their visit.



It doesn't take long for me to realize that this isn't simply a social call.

They arrive in a big fancy chauffeured car, but that isn't unusual for my family. The huge Worthing fortune—made more than a hundred years ago—was split among the heirs of my father's generation, but they've remained successful at business, so it's grown rather than been depleted. I'm the only one of us Worthings who has given up all the trappings of wealth to live a simple life.

I invite William and Jade inside, and we chat for twenty minutes, but I can see they're distracted and have something to say.

So I ask William what's going on.

He's a good-looking man with thick, dark hair like me and the same chocolate-brown eyes that all the Worthings have. He opens his mouth to answer, but then his expression twists. Reluctance.

Jade is a blonde with green eyes that match her name. She reaches over to squeeze William's hand and says mildly, "There's some trouble, and we're afraid it might involve you now. It's my fault."

"It's not your fault," William grits out, slanting her an indignant look. "You've done absolutely nothing to make this happen. He's a stalker. No one asks for that."

I sit up straight. "It's about that guy who was stalking you? I thought he was in prison."

"He was." Jade's remarkably composed but not in that fake way I used to see in a lot of high-society women. She seems real. I like her. "He got out a few days ago."

"Are you okay? Is he coming after you?"

"We don't know," William replies. "Obviously, we're taking as many precautions as possible. But a search of his prison cell and his online communication makes us think he might have moved on from Jade. It looks like my connection to her has brought our whole family to his attention. His obsession may have shifted."

I frown, slightly chilled but not yet registering why. “What are you talking about?”

He hands me a sheaf of paper. Printouts. I scan through the first pages. Freeze all the way down to my heart and belly. “What is this?”

“That’s him. On a shady online message board.”

I gulp, passing the pages back because even the few paragraphs I read made my stomach churn. “He’s talking about me?”

“Yes.” William is sober and somehow gentle at the same time. “I’ve had folks investigating his history, and he used to write that way about Jade on that same forum. Maybe it’s some sort of elaborate misdirection, but we can’t take any chances.”

“You think he’s going to start stalking me?” It’s surreal. So far removed from the way I’ve been living my life these past years that I can barely process it.

“We think it’s a possibility. So we’d like to assign you some security.”

“But I don’t... I don’t do anything! I stay home and do errands and volunteer at the community center. That’s it. I’m not in the public eye anymore.”

“I understand that, but Jade wasn’t in the public eye when he latched onto her. She lived a very quiet life just like you do. That’s one of the characteristics that evidently appeals to him.”

I feel a spiral of panic rising inside me, so I breathe slowly until I have it under control. “O-okay. So you want to assign me a bodyguard?”

“Yes. That’s what we’d like to do. I’ve spoken to Arthur, and he agrees it’s necessary, but we both understand it’s your choice. If you say no, we won’t push it on you.” He meets and holds my eyes. “But please, Louisa, don’t say no.”

I stare at him for nearly a minute until I’ve controlled my internal shaking. “All right. That’s okay with me. I don’t actually want to be stalked or hurt, so I’ll accept a bodyguard.

But I don't want any security measures to stifle my life. As I said, I don't go out all that much, but I'd like to keep doing what I'm doing."

"That's fine. You don't have to stop your normal routine. Jade and I aren't planning to hole up now that Montaigne is out of prison. We just want to take some reasonable precautions. If you agree, we'll assign you a rotation of three guards on eight-hour shifts."

I nod. "Okay."

"Caleb Morrison will lead the team. You remember him?"

The name makes me freeze. My heart tightens into a heavy clench. "Wh-what?"

"Caleb?" William is frowning slightly, appearing sober and focused and slightly concerned. "Maybe you don't remember him."

"I do." I swallow hard. "It has to be him?"

Jade and William slant each other a quick sidelong look.

"No," William says. "We can make a change if we need to. But Caleb is the best we have. Is there a problem with him?"

"Are you not comfortable with him?" Jade asks in a soft follow-up.

"No, there's not a problem. He was always great at his job. I just..." I glance away, my face working slightly as I fight through the rise of emotion.

The problem is that all these emotions are completely irrational. Unfair. Caleb isn't to blame in any way for the intense discomfort I feel at the idea of his being around again.

He never did anything wrong.

I did.

*I* did.

I was always the one who was wrong.

"Louisa?" Jade prompts. "It's really okay if—"

“It’s fine,” I burst out. “Caleb was always great. I’m... Well, the truth is I’m kind of embarrassed about how I acted when he was last assigned to me, but that’s been three years now. I can get over the embarrassment.”

William scans my face quickly, as if searching for proof that I’m telling him the truth. Whatever he sees in my expression must reassure him, because he gives a brief nod. “All right. We’ll go with it then. He’s outside right now. I’ll go—”

“He’s outside *now*?” There’s a slight squeak in my voice despite my attempt to sound coolly composed.

“Yes. We’d like him to start as soon as possible.” He glances again at Jade, as if silently asking for help in navigating a tricky social scenario.

*Me.* I’m the tricky social scenario. Because I’m clearly resistant to the idea of Caleb for absolutely no good reason.

I hate feeling like a burden after being a huge, messy problem for my family for so long.

“If you’re really okay with it,” Jade adds immediately, stepping over and putting her hand on William’s back in a casual, intimate gesture that’s both natural and incredibly sweet. “We’re not trying to push anything on you. We’re just worried, and honestly, I feel responsible.”

“You’re not responsible,” I counter immediately.

“You’re not responsible,” William says at the same time.

“Okay, okay.” Jade’s smile is adorably self-deprecating. “I know it’s not my fault. But sometimes we feel things that aren’t entirely logical.”

“That I know.” I smile at her and then shift it to William. “I really do appreciate you both looking out for me and trying to help. You talked to my dad, I assume?”

“Yes, I gave him a call. He requested Caleb specifically, although we’d already decided he’d be the best for this job.”

I talk to my father once a week on the phone, and I visit him at Christmas and his birthday every year. He comes here

to see me at least twice a year, whenever he has room in his schedule. We've never been exceptionally close—work has always been the most important thing to him—but we get along fine, and we're both committed to keeping up a basic familial connection.

“Okay. That makes sense.”

William looks relieved. His expression relaxes as he glances out the big bay window in the front of my living room. It offers a clear view of the car they came in. “Good. I'll go out and tell him. Then maybe we can have lunch?”

“Of course. That's what I was hoping. But if Caleb is staying here, who will take you back home?”

“Ray will be here shortly. He'll take care of us.” William is barely finished speaking before he's out my front door.

Jade smiles fondly as she shakes her head at his back. “He's been really worried about you.”

“I appreciate it. Really. But I don't want him to be worrying too much. I think I'll be fine—especially if I have protection.”

“Thank you for agreeing to it. I know it can be kind of stifling.” She peers at me closely. “So did something uncomfortable go on with Caleb? I never would have suspected him of acting inappropriately, but if he has, you need to—”

“No, no! He's never been remotely inappropriate.” My mouth twists as I swallow over another surge of internal resistance. “I told William the truth. The problem was always me. I was a total mess back then, and I feel like I've done a decent job moving past it, but...” I take a weird, ragged breath.

“Caleb reminds you of that part of your life?”

“Yeah. Exactly. It's not fair to Caleb since he helped me so much back then, but I was... It's mortifying now. Everything I did. How completely out of control I was. And he saw all of it. More than anyone else. He saw... everything.”

“I get that.” Her face is quietly sympathetic. “But he’s a good guy, at least as far as I can tell. He must have realized you might be uncomfortable, because he insisted you agree to it before he would finalize the plans for your protection. I don’t think he’s holding anything against you from back then.”

“N-no. I know. I didn’t think he was holding a grudge or anything. It’s just—” I have no idea how to put it into words.

I want him to think well of me. And knowing the person I was back then, there’s no chance he ever will.

But that’s my problem. No one else’s. All these people are going far out of their way to help me, and I’m not going to throw it back into their faces like an ungrateful teenager.

It doesn’t matter that I can’t finish my explanation to Jade, because William pushes back in through my front door. He steps into my small living room, followed closely by another man.

Caleb has always been one of the most attractive men I’ve ever known. He’s built big, and he’s in excellent shape. It feels like he’s filling far too much of the room. He’s got a broad forehead and a square-cut jaw and blue eyes so vivid I can see their color from all the way across the room.

He’s wearing a pair of black trousers and a gray oxford shirt, a variation of the outfits he always used to wear. Neat and of good quality. No-nonsense. Intended to help him fade into the background.

Not that he ever could. Not because of his behavior but because of how much he commands the space.

He’s not smiling as he meets my eyes and nods at me. He was never a smiler. Always stoic and professional, making it clear I’ve always been a job to him.

And not an easy job back then. Far too often, he got puked on and cursed at and mocked endlessly. He had to follow me to bars and nightclubs and friends’ yachts and back alleys and strangers’ apartments. He had to pick me up, sling me over his shoulder, and haul me back to the car more times than I can possibly count, sometimes with me kicking and screaming the

whole way. I came on to him more than once while I was drunk or high, trying (and failing) to feel him up and tease him into submission.

I spit on him at least once. A couple of times I tried to slap him, but he always caught my hand before I did. I resisted him like a defiant toddler.

And those are just the times I can remember.

I nod back at him, also not smiling. My hands are damp, so I twist them together behind my back. “Hey,” I manage to say. “Thanks for helping out.”

“Of course.”

There’s no possible way of reading on his face how he feels about this situation. It’s utterly composed. His eyes are sharp and observant but not soft in any way. They look over me rather than at me most of the time.

He hasn’t changed. He’s exactly what I remember.

I can only hope I’m not the same person he used to know.

“I don’t have much room in this house,” I say, forcing myself to be practical instead of pulling inward into a tight ball in the face of the flurry of chaotic emotions. “There’re just two bedrooms and the sunroom, which I use as my studio. So I’m not sure where you guys will—”

“I’ve already arranged for rooms nearby for us. We don’t have to all stay in your house. One of us will always be on duty, but we’ll do our best to give you privacy.”

“Thank you.” Thank goodness Caleb won’t always be lurking around my house. “You’re welcome to have use of the spare bedroom. I almost never have anyone stay there, and that would give you a space to set up here in the cottage.”

“That would be helpful,” he says, his eyes resting on my face briefly before shifting away. “Thank you.”

“I’ll show you.” It’s a relief to have something to do as I walk out of the living room, pointing out the small kitchen and dining area and the sunroom beyond them before going down

the short hall and showing him the hall bathroom, master bedroom and bath, and the spare bedroom.

The furnishings are simple but good quality—solid wood furniture and handmade rugs—and the walls are decorated by paintings I’ve done and other pieces I’ve picked up here and there. For the past few years, this cottage has been a solace to me, always clean and pretty and peaceful, reflecting the person I want to be now.

But it’s a lot different from the way the other Worthings live. I suddenly wonder what Caleb will think about it.

Reminding myself that his opinion shouldn’t matter doesn’t entirely convince me.

“This will work great if you’re really okay with giving up the room.”

“It’s fine. I almost never use it.”

“I can keep most of the security equipment in here so it will be out of your hair.” As if his choice of words prompts the gesture, his eyes focus on my hair, which is long and straight and dark brown.

It’s several inches longer than it used to be, and it’s hanging in a shiny fall down my back.

I smooth it down restlessly. “That will work fine.”

“We’ll set up a sophisticated security system here on your property, and if you don’t mind, I’d like to get access to your phone. This guy likes to send messages and make calls, so if you’ll let me, I can block all strange numbers from your phone—everything except the numbers already in your contact list.”

That’s something I wouldn’t have predicted, but the only people I ever want calling me are already in my contacts, and I definitely don’t want to get messages from a stalker. “Okay. You can do that.”

“Thanks. That should be the most intrusive thing I have to do.”

“I understand.” Prompted more by duty and responsibility than anything else, I take a shaky breath and add, “I did want



to say..."

He's been eyeballing the scene out the window—like he's taking mental measurements rather than appreciating the winter view—but he turns to face me at my words. "Yes?"

"I want to apologize." I lick my lips nervously before I catch myself and stop. "For everything back then. I was... terrible to you, and I'm sorry about it. You may not believe me, but I am doing better now."

"I know you are," he says softly. "I hear a lot of what your family says, so I know how well you've done since you got out of rehab. And even if I didn't, I can see for myself how much you've changed."

My cheeks flush, and I'm not sure whether I'm pleased or embarrassed by his acknowledgment. "I should have apologized to you a long time ago, but I felt awkward about it."

He's looking at me for real now. Still not relaxed or smiling but really seeing me. "I did my job. You have nothing to apologize for."

"It feels like I do. So that's what I'm doing. And I also wanted to thank you. For saving me so many times and for taking me to Hartwood Center. That's the place that really made the difference."

He nods. "I'd heard good things. I'm glad it worked out."

"It did." I wish he would give a little more. Soften up. Warm up. Show something other than the professional mask.

But that's silly and selfish. This is a job to him. I'm a job. He's always made that clear.

And that's all I'm supposed to be.

"So anyway," I say with another loud, ragged inhale, "I'm sorry for everything. And thank you. I hope your job this time will be a lot easier."

"Whatever the job is, I'll do it."

Well. Okay. That's... something.

“I know you’ve made a good life for yourself here,” Caleb says, glancing around at the small, pretty room. “We won’t get in the way of that. We’ll keep you safe for as long as necessary, and then you’ll be free of us again.”

“O-okay.” I have no idea how to respond to what he said. It sounds like he’s trying to make me feel better, but it only makes me feel weirder. More resistant.

I ignore the feelings. They don’t matter. None of my awkwardness and embarrassment matter.

They’re all part of a past that I’ve moved on from.

I’ve been doing better, and I can keep doing better.

And I’m not going to let these weird feelings for Caleb pull me back into the person I used to be.

The person I never want to be again.

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, MY DAYS DIDN'T BEGIN UNTIL WELL after noon.

I'd wake up around one or two in the afternoon and lie around for a couple of hours until I managed to make it out of my apartment. I'd go to my flashy health club for massages, skin treatments, and occasional exercise. Then I'd get together with friends to shop or visit the salon. Afterward, I'd return home and take it easy until it was time to get dressed to go out and party all night.

Sometimes I'd travel, and occasionally my dad or cousins would talk me into sponsoring some sort of pretentious charity event. But for the most part, my days were empty and self-serving.

I wasn't happy. I can't remember ever really feeling at peace in my own skin back then. I was always chasing one high after another—a drink, a pill, a man, a certain kind of attention. And even when I got it, it was never what I'd thought it would be.

It's all a hackneyed cliché. I can see it now. Anyone could have predicted the spiral of my life, and anyone could have told me how to start changing it.

But it took me four years to figure out.

At rehab, they focused a lot on cultivating a healthy routine with my days rather than allowing them to remain empty. I'm still holding on to those habits. When I get up at

eight the morning after my cousin's visit, it feels like I've slept in.

I'm actually surprised I slept so late since I usually wake up closer to seven. I'd have thought I'd be restless and anxious from having a bodyguard on duty right outside the house all night, but Trey, the friendly freckled guy who is going to be on duty in late afternoons and evenings, is so laid-back and unassuming that he didn't bother me the way Caleb's stern presence would have.

When I told Caleb yesterday that most of my activities outside the house occur in the mornings and early afternoons, he decided he would work that shift. Trey would take the four-to-midnight shift, and Mick, the other guard in the rotation, would cover midnight to eight.

I lie in bed for a moment, listening to a muffled murmur of voices from outside. I can't hear any words, but I know one of those voices belongs to Caleb.

Shift change. Caleb is here to relieve Trey.

The idea of Caleb lurking outside somewhere propels me out of bed. I pull on a soft, fuzzy robe over my tank and pajama pants, make a quick stop in the bathroom, and then head to the kitchen to make coffee.

While I wait for it to brew, I check my hair and face in the hallway bathroom. My hair is smooth and perfectly straight. I've got a few flyaways, but they settle neatly when I smooth them with my hands. My face is clean and slightly flushed. My brown eyes are a little too big for classic symmetry, but my lashes are so thick and dark that my second-grade teacher once made a fuss because she was convinced I was wearing eye makeup. My nose is small and straight. My lips are wide, and my teeth are perfect after years of orthodontic work and the best whitening treatments available.

I'm tall with a slim build and long limbs. My friends used to grumble that I could eat whatever I want and never gain weight. In fact, I used to be seriously underweight because I ate sporadically and unhealthily and drank way too much.

I'm used to looking good. Everyone has always said I'm beautiful. But the truth is it's only in the past couple of years that I've actually liked the image I see in the mirror.

She looks almost like a stranger now, staring back at me with the Worthing brown eyes. Probably because Caleb's presence has thrown me back into the past so fully.

I shake off the feeling, reminding myself of who I am and how far I've come in three years.

I'm not going back.

Instead of brooding, I pour two cups of coffee and carry them out through my front door. It's a chilly morning, and the pavement and trees and grass are all shimmering with a thick coat of frost. Caleb is standing halfway down the front walk, looking at something on the tablet he's holding. He's wearing one of his typical outfits—gray trousers and a blue button-up—covered with a black wool coat.

“Hey,” he says without looking up. “Good morning.”

“Good morning. Everything okay?”

“Yeah. Just checking on the security system I installed yesterday. Got to make a few tweaks.”

When he glances back at me, I offer him one of the cups of coffee.

He comes over to take it. “Thanks. Did we wake you up?”

“No. I always wake up around this time. Or sometimes earlier. Is Mick already gone?”

“Yeah. He just took off.” Caleb's blue eyes scan me from head to toe with almost clinical efficiency. I'm glad I put on the thick bathrobe since it fully covers my body. “It's too cold out here. Get back inside.”

I frown at his bossiness, but I don't argue. I used to be sassy with him—always ready with a smart response to anything he said—but I have neither the energy nor the inclination for useless conflict anymore.

When we've moved into my living room, I can't hold back a shiver. Since Mick is gone, I claim his coffee as mine and take a sip.

"So what's your schedule for the day? You going to your health club?"

"Yeah. I almost always go in the morning. If that's okay?" I add the last sentence, lifting my voice to make it a question because I'm feeling anxious and self-conscious around him.

"Of course. They cleared me to be there with a weapon, so we're good to go."

"Okay. Then I usually leave by nine. I swim for an hour or so and then shower and get dressed there. This afternoon I have an art thing at the community center. It starts at one and will go through four."

"An art thing?"

"They call them art experiences. I'll take whatever group signs up to a scenic spot and guide them through painting the landscape. They're a lot bigger and more frequent in spring and summer and especially fall when the leaves change and we have a lot of tourists. Today I think there are only three or four people signed up. One couple traveling through and a couple of locals who enjoy them."

"Where are you planning to take them?"

"There's a spot on a hill with a view of a rocky coastline I really like. I'll probably take them there. It's not very far out of town."

"Can you show me beforehand?"

"Of course. We can stop by on our way back from my club."

He nods. He's tapping out something on his tablet, maybe making notes for himself. "Anything else today?"

"I'm having an early dinner with friends at five thirty when they get off work."

"Here?"

“No. We’ll go to the Mexican restaurant in town probably. That’s usually where we end up. I guess that will be Trey’s shift.”

“I’ll probably do everything today so I can get the lay of the land.”

I nod, staring down at my coffee cup. I’m not too excited about his being attached to my hip all day, but it would be irrational to complain about it since it’s exactly what I agreed to.

It’s not Caleb’s fault he makes me feel so jittery.

He’s standing a couple of feet away from me, his eyes on me. I know they are even though I’m not looking up to check. I have absolutely no idea what he’s thinking when he stares at me that way.

No doubt remembering the humiliating mess of a person I used to be.

“Okay,” he says at last. “I’ll leave you alone. I need to catch a few loose ends with the security system.”

“Sounds good. Thanks.”

I remove myself into the kitchen and sit down at one of the chairs at the small table in the corner. I finish my coffee and scroll through my phone and try not to wonder what Caleb is doing and thinking at every moment.

It’s going to be different with him and the other bodyguards here. It’ll feel intrusive. Disruptive. There’s no help for that. I wouldn’t even mind that much since it will be the thing that keeps me safe, but Caleb’s presence specifically is even more disturbing to me.

It’s not simply because there’s someone new in my home, my space. It’s that it’s him. Reminding me constantly of the person I used to be. The person I never want to be again.

But maybe that’s not a bad thing. Maybe it’s time for me to confront all my past mistakes.

Hopefully I’ve grown and changed over the past three years, enough for me to face all this now. And it’s not Caleb’s

fault that he happens to embody everything I've ever done wrong.



An hour later, I'm in the front seat of the big black secure SUV Caleb brought with him.

I'm pretty sure he expected me to sit in the back like I used to while he drives, but I don't like being chauffeured around anymore, so I sat in the front instead.

He didn't argue.

It takes about thirty-five minutes to drive to my health club. There's a local YMCA with an indoor pool that's fifteen minutes closer, but the pool and building are dingy and the lap-swimming hours there don't work well with my schedule. So I joined a fancy health club with a nice pool and high-end facilities, and I don't mind the longer drive.

Swimming is good for my mental health. Not just the exercise but the sustained, controlled breathing. I feel much better for the rest of the day if I can swim in the morning.

Caleb and I have been sitting in silence for the first ten minutes of the drive. I'd prefer to have some light, casual conversation, but I honestly can think of nothing to say.

The silence is so thick I actually jerk in surprise when Caleb says, "Tell me about the pool."

Blinking a couple of times, I say, "The pool?"

"The pool at the club. The photos online were stylized, so I couldn't get a clear sense of it. How big is it? How many doors surround it? What about windows?"

I realized he's thinking in terms of security, and the safe, practical topic relieves me. "Oh. It's a twenty-five-yard pool. Eight lanes. So not real big. But it's really nice. There's a whole wall of windows, so it gets a lot of light. There's not a big pool deck. It's not used for meets or anything, so no bleachers. And no free swim times or lifeguard stands since



it's only used for laps. I'm not sure how many doors there are."

I frown, attempting to bring up a mental picture of the pool and blurry about some of the details.

I'm one of those people who intuits the world more than notices exact details. If I were the eyewitness of a crime, I'd immediately know someone was up to no good, but I'd give very bad testimony in court since I'd have trouble remembering clothes, hair coloring, height, and other details that actually matter.

I get the feel of people and situations rather than a precise view of them.

"Three maybe? The door from the main hall that members use. Then an office. Then a fire door to the outside that sets off an alarm. Oh wait—there's also a supply-room door. I think that might be it."

He nods, not appearing annoyed by my fuzzy recollection. "And the dressing room situation?"

"There are two. Men's and women's. They're very nice—private stalls for showers and assigned lockers and good seating in front of a wall of mirrors and hair dryers on the wall."

He frowns. "The shower stalls have real doors?"

"Yes. I can dress and everything there if that makes it easy."

"But the shower doors exit into the dressing room, not the main hallway?"

"Yes. Oh, I see. You can't be in the women's dressing room with me, guarding the shower."

"Right."

I think about that for a minute. "Well, there are private dressing rooms for the premium members. I can ask if I can upgrade for this month so I can use one of those instead of the main dressing room. Would that work?"

“The doors to those dressing rooms are on a main hallway?”

“Yes. You could stand right in front of it, no trouble.”

“Okay. Good. That should work.”

We drift into silence again. I glance over at him a couple of times.

He looks a lot like he used to look. His brown hair is a little longer, but I think that’s just because he’s gone too long without a haircut. It’s starting to curl a little at the nape of his neck. I’m sure he shaved this morning, but I can still see a faint hint of bristles on his jaw and neck. His beard grows quickly. By the end of the day, he always had visible stubble.

He seems bigger than he used to be. Not like he’s been obsessively lifting weights but like he’s been eating more. He’s still in great shape, but his cheekbones aren’t cut so sharply, and his thighs are thicker beneath his trousers.

The weirdest wave of explanation wafts over me. In the past, when he was responsible for me, maybe I stressed him out so much he wasn’t able to eat right or relax enough. I was a constant, unrelenting burden. An endless weight on his shoulders. He did get time off, although he always worked longer than his assigned hours. But maybe even in his downtime he was worrying about keeping me from accidentally killing myself.

That interpretation of his physical changes closes my chest like a vise. It’s true. I know it’s true even without the slightest shred of evidence.

My stomach roils, and I blurt out, “I’m so sorry!”

He frowns again and turns his head to check my face. “What are you talking about?”

“About the past. How terrible I was to you.”

“You apologized yesterday, and I’ve accepted your apology. Do you think I’m holding a grudge?” He’s almost scowling now.

“No, of course not. I was just thinking about... looking at you. You look happier now. More relaxed and not as... not as tense. I must have been such a source of stress to you and given you so much extra work. I feel... I feel like shit for it now.”

He doesn't answer immediately. He's driving on a country road that winds through trees. He's going the speed limit, and there's no one else on the road. His eyes never leave the stretch of pavement in front of us.

“You're still mad,” I say at last in a hoarse murmur. “Anyone would be. I wouldn't have blamed you for turning my cousin down when he assigned you back to me.”

“I'm not mad,” he says at last, soft and slightly thick. His eyes slant over to me briefly before turning back to the road. “I was never mad.”

“Weren't you? Didn't you hate trying to take care of me?”

He works his mouth for just a few seconds. “Honestly, it wasn't the best time of my life.”

I give a surprised giggle at this dry tone. “That's what I thought.”

“But it wasn't because I was angry. I mean, you did sometimes make me angry—you often made me angry—but I never held on to it.”

“It was stressful. Burdensome.”

He inclines his head slowly in a half nod. “Yes. It was. But I knew you needed help. And I was always torn about how much I should step in to give you that help.”

I swallow hard. “I get that. It was a bad situation for you. I'm going to...” My voice breaks weirdly. “I'm going to try very hard not to make this a bad situation for you again.”

“Thank you.” He meets my eyes briefly. Not long enough for me to get a good sense of what he's feeling. “I appreciate it.”

I'm not sure what to say to that. I feel better—less guilty—but also kind of tense and jittery.

I definitely need to swim today. Being around Caleb is its own kind of stress, and I'm not used to stress in the life I've been living.

It's going to take some getting used to.



When we get to my club, I ask my friend who works at the reception desk about upgrading my membership temporarily. It's not a problem, and she gives me the key to a private dressing room that I can use today.

I swim for an hour and a half—longer than usual—and I'm a bit more relaxed afterward. I'd feel better if Caleb wasn't standing near my lane, eyeballing anyone who approaches, but that's inevitable with him on the job. When I'm done, I shower and dress and dry my hair in the dressing room while Caleb stands outside, looking intimidating.

On the way back, we go over the rest of the day. I tell him as much as I can remember about the community center, the location for my art experience this afternoon, and my friends who will be attending dinner. He takes mental note of that information as he drives and asks a lot of follow-up questions. Some of them don't feel relevant to me, but I answer them all anyway since he's the professional and he clearly knows what he's doing.

I'm starving by the time we get back to town, so I ask him to stop at one of my favorite restaurants to pick up a chicken wrap for lunch. Caleb says he doesn't need anything, but I get him a club sandwich anyway.

I know he's on duty, but surely it's okay for him to eat when we're back at my house.

When we get home, I eat and do a few things around the house while he double-checks the perimeter and the security system he installed yesterday. I do notice he takes his sandwich with him, and he's finished it by the time he returns.

By that point, it's time for us to head to the community center to get things ready and meet the folks who signed up for my art experience. My cottage is less than two miles from the small downtown area filled with historic buildings and cute shops aimed at tourists, so I usually walk, but Caleb prefers to drive and I don't argue.

Gracie, the older lady who handles the administrative duties for the community center, is intrigued and excited by Caleb's presence. I give her a brief explanation, which only interests her even more. I double-check the registrants today—one has added, so there will be five—and then go to the storage room to pull out enough easels, canvases, and art supplies for everyone.

I don't ask Caleb to help. He's not allowed, and it's not fair to put him in that position, although I used to demand he carry my shopping bags all the time. He's supposed to be on guard and can't be distracted by hauling my stuff.

When I've got it all pulled out and ready, I sit down to wait for the first arrivals. Caleb stands next to me and leans down to ask softly, "Why did you scowl when you looked at the list of folks signed up today?"

I glance up in surprise. "Did I?"

"Yes."

I was trying to subdue my negative response, but evidently I hadn't succeeded. "It's nothing much."

"Tell me anyway."

I want to roll my eyes at him since I'm not entirely fond of the understated bossiness of his tone. But I remind myself yet again that he's trying to do a job. "It's just that someone else signed up. Marcus Trent. He's a local, works for a car dealership in town."

"Why don't you like him?"

"I don't know. He hasn't done anything genuinely inappropriate. But he seems... too interested. He used to attend all the time when I was doing these experiences in the evening and on weekends. He asked me out a couple of times

and I turned him down, but he still... hovered. There's no specific reason for it, but he kind of gave me the creeps. I actually switched up my schedule to afternoons so he couldn't attend as often."

"Can't you ban him from attending?" Caleb's expression hasn't really changed, but it still feels like he's glowering.

"I guess so. But that would make a big production, and he hasn't done anything. I might be blowing it out of proportion because I've been avoiding relationships lately."

His blue eyes search my face. "If he gave you the creeps, there's a reason for it. I'll have a word with him if you want."

I can only imagine what "a word" from Caleb might look like. I certainly wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of it.

To my shame, I actually like the idea. The thought of him scaring Marcus off fills me with intense relief and an unexpected kind of excitement.

But that isn't Caleb's job. I'm an adult and responsible for my own situation. Plus Marcus would no doubt resent it and cause a fuss in town, which I'd like to avoid.

So I shake my head and say, "Thank you for the offer, but no. He's never done anything threatening. I just don't like being around him. I can deal with it."

"Okay. I'll keep my eye on him today."

I have no objections to that.



One of the locals doesn't show up. Unfortunately, it's not Marcus. Other than his smarmily smiling presence, everything goes fine as I explain the purpose and procedure for the experience, and then we make our way over to the scenic spot I've chosen. It's only a mile away, so those who want to walk do, while the others ride in the van with me and the supplies.

Usually I drive, but Caleb does today.

When we arrive, I set up an easel too and talk them through how to begin. The locals are fairly experienced and so don't need my introduction, but the tourist couple want some help getting started.

After about a half hour, they're able to experiment on their own, asking me questions every five or ten minutes and at one point wanting me to paint the tree leaning over the cliff for them.

Since this isn't an art class, I'm happy to help as much as they'd like. The point is for them to enjoy themselves. Not become good painters in three hours.

I spend most of my time paying attention to them since the middle-aged woman who lives in a cabin in the woods and the retired banker who moved out here two years ago both do fine on their own, mostly wanting my validation that they're doing a great job.

Marcus wants more attention than he's getting. He told me when he first arrived that he had the day off from work, which is why he's able to attend today. He'd started to tell me about how well he's been doing and that he bought a new boat when Caleb called me away.

Caleb didn't have anything to say to me. He was simply giving me an out, which I appreciated.

Since we've gotten here, he's consistently planted himself between me and Marcus. I can tell by his frown that it's frustrating Marcus, although he's kept it to himself thus far. My sense of fair play compels me to go over to check on his painting every half hour to give him a compliment and answer any questions he has. But when he tries to shift it into a chat, I politely move away to talk to someone else.

Overall, I'm pleased by how smoothly it's all gone when it's time to pack up and leave at five. We return to the community center and the group disperses. I'm congratulating myself on getting out of the situation without any awkward encounters with Marcus when he catches up to me as I'm leaving the supply room.

I thought he already left, but he hasn't.

“Why are you being so standoffish today?” Marcus asks, way too close to me.

I tighten my lips. “I’ve been busy. I have to help everyone.”

“But it feels like I never get to see you anymore.”

“Oh well. It happens.” I glance down the hall and see Caleb approaching. He was waiting at the other door to the storage room, where I went in. It was my mistake in coming out the second door. “Excuse me.”

“Don’t you have a minute to chat? I was hoping we could get a drink.”

“No, thank you.” I have a forced smile on my face, and I’m trying to get around him so I can reach Caleb.

I feel trapped. Kind of panicky. My cheeks are flushed, but it’s from upset rather than embarrassment. I desperately want to get away from this man. He’s not a bad-looking guy—longish hair, thick lips, and a beefiness from working out all the time—but I find him incredibly unattractive, and he’s really crowding me right now.

“Back away,” Caleb mutters, soft but gritty. He’s about the same size as Marcus, but he conveys real strength and confidence rather than overblown machismo.

Marcus turns on Caleb, his eyebrows and lips forming slashes across his face. “Who the hell do you think you are? Her bodyguard?”

He thinks he’s being sarcastic. Maybe some kind of resentful joke.

Caleb meets his gaze evenly, as calm as Marcus is indignant. “Yes.”

Marcus blinks, clearly surprised.

“I do need to leave now,” I say, trying to smooth over the tension. Not because I don’t like Caleb stepping in but because



I don't want there to be a big scene. "I'll see you later, Marcus."

Caleb takes a step, easily blocking Marcus to let me get past him. Then he puts a hand on my back and guides me down the hall.

I'm shaky for no good reason. Just that I'm not all that fond of confrontation, and I'm not used to feeling helpless like that.

I wasn't helpless. I could have called out for help, pushed Marcus away. But he hadn't been aggressive, and I'm always afraid my past experiences may cause me to overreact.

I used to get felt up by strangers on the dance floors of clubs. I fucked in bathrooms and back alleys. Men I'd call boyfriends were sometimes rough with me if we were out of Caleb's sight. I was nearly always too high or drunk to care.

Once, after a night of hard partying, Caleb found me in one of the bedrooms of a friend's yacht. He'd tried to get me to go home earlier, but I'd refused. He'd picked me up to carry me the way he often did, but I'd screamed until my friend's security staff stepped in and made Caleb wait outside. In the early morning, he discovered me in that room with a torn dress and tangled hair. I was bruised. There were hand marks on my throat. And I had—and still have—absolutely no memory of what happened to put me in that condition.

It should have been traumatic, life changing, but it blurred into the rest of the highs and lows of my life back then. Even after Caleb took me to the hospital to get checked out and treated, I wouldn't let myself care.

Mostly I was angry with him for making a big deal about it.

No one ever touches me anymore. I haven't dated since I got out of rehab, and I have no plans to start anytime soon.

I don't like to feel crowded anymore.

Caleb doesn't say anything until we're back in the SUV. I've stowed the canvas I painted in the back seat, although it isn't my best effort.

He still doesn't speak as he starts the engine and begins driving. We only have a few blocks to go to reach the Mexican restaurant where I've arranged to meet my friends at five thirty.

Caleb finds a nearby parking spot and shifts into park before taking off his seat belt and turning to face me. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I'm fine." I can smile at him now. My heartbeat has slowed back down to normal. "I don't know why he makes me feel so... gross."

"Because he's a creep, exactly as you've recognized. I know you're trying to be polite, but any inch you give him, he'll try to take a mile."

"I know. But guys like him don't react well to rejection. I've been trying to avoid that."

"Yes. I understand. But I'm not sure there's any balancing act you can manage with him that will keep him from throwing a fit. His ego is an impossible stumbling block for handling him with civility."

"Yeah." I sigh and close my eyes for a moment. "Oh well. I'll keep trying to avoid him. Not sure what else I can do."

"Like I said, I can talk to him if you want."

I once again imagine the nature of the talk Caleb would have with Marcus. "No. Thanks, but let's just leave it alone for now. If it gets worse, maybe you can do that."

He nods soberly. "Understood."



My best friends in town are Greg, Brandy, and Davida, and I'm meeting them for an early dinner.

Greg is a friendly, laid-back guy in his thirties who works as an accountant. He asked me out when I first moved to town, but he wasn't at all offended when I said no and was happy to become friends instead. Brandy is in her late twenties—she's a

librarian at the public library and is single and always looking for a man. And Davida is forty—she got a good settlement from her divorce and so spends her time making pottery, thrifting, and supporting every do-good cause she encounters. She’s bisexual, but she only occasionally dates and isn’t interested in anything serious.

As different as the four of us are, we’ve become a close friend group. I see them at least a couple of times a week, and we talk daily on our group text.

We get to the restaurant early. Caleb scopes it out and talks to the manager while I stay in the SUV. Then he comes out to get me. He’s gotten us a table in a far corner, and he plants himself nearby, staying on guard as my friends arrive and we order drinks and food.

They’re excited about the bodyguard situation. Brandy wants to know if Caleb is single, and she doesn’t appear to care that he can probably overhear our conversation. I give her a look that quiets her, and we talk about other things instead.

I have one margarita. That’s all I allow myself anymore and only when I’m out with my friends. My primary addiction was never alcohol. It was those designer drugs I took. So when I got out of rehab, I never had many struggles with the temptation to overdrink. But because binge drinking was associated with my bad behavior, I’ve been careful about the amount of alcohol I consume. Only one at a time, and only once or twice a week on social occasions.

I no longer need alcohol or drugs to have a good time, and I’m in an upbeat mood when the group breaks up two hours later.

Caleb is still standing in position, and he’s quiet as he drives me back home, though he raises an eyebrow at the bag of takeout I got for him. He should have gone off duty hours ago. If he keeps it up, I’ll have to have a word with him—or maybe William.

I feel safe with him. I always have. But his shifts should only be eight hours long. He used to work twenty hours

straight when I was really going at it hard in the past, but I'm not going to let that happen anymore.

No one should be taking advantage of him now.

Not even me.

THREE WEEKS LATER, I WAKE UP AT EIGHT THIRTY ON A FRIDAY morning. For a few moments, I'm confused about why I slept in since I usually have an alarm that goes off at eight in case I haven't naturally woken up by then.

Then I remember that today is ice-skating.

For the past two weeks, Davida and I have been planning to go to an outdoor ice-skating rink today, but yesterday evening she got sick and had to pull out. Since I've had my heart set on the outing, I'll simply go by myself.

It might not be quite as fun on my own, but I'll still enjoy it. I'm not the kind of person who needs a companion for every activity anymore. I like my own company.

And Caleb will be tagging along anyway, so it's not like I'll be all alone.

Despite our difficult history and the job he's here to do, Caleb has been pretty good company these past weeks. Not that he talks to me much except for practicalities. But his presence is more comforting and companionable than I would have expected.

I would have said that's only because of the years he spent taking care of me, but we got along from the beginning. I vividly remember the first day I ever met him. Before I fell for a selfish bad boy. Before I lost myself in untethered behavior. Before I took my peaceful, privileged life and threw it in the trash.

Caleb started working for the Worthings and was assigned to my father near the end of my freshman year of college. I had my own apartment by then, and I wasn't hanging out a lot at my father's house, so I didn't meet Caleb until my summer break. My dad was working in Paris for a month, and as soon as my exams were completed, I flew over to spend part of my break with him.

It was Paris after all, and the romantic, artistic girl I was back then didn't want to miss out.

My flight landed in the early morning, and I was determined to stay awake all day to get over the jet lag as soon as possible. So I had plans to take my easel, canvas, and paints to a scenic spot near a bridge over the Seine and stay there all day, painting. It felt like a very Paris thing to do for a nineteen-year-old girl.

My dad's driver brought me to the hotel, and in the luxurious suite my dad introduced Caleb as new security staff. The first thing I noticed was how big and handsome he was. The second thing was that he never smiled but managed to come across as a nice, decent guy anyway.

When I explained to my dad my plans for the day, he approved—only he wanted Caleb to come along so I wasn't wandering around all alone in a city I didn't know very well.

I was nineteen back then. I could have told him no, I'd rather go by myself. But I had zero argument with being escorted around Paris by a guy as good-looking as Caleb.

So I took a quick shower and changed into my favorite pretty bohemian dress—a red print with a long, soft skirt and a cinch under my breasts that actually made me look like I had some sort of figure. I collected my supplies, and Caleb carried my easel until I found the spot I wanted.

I tried to chat some with Caleb but soon determined he wasn't a talker. It didn't bother me. He was never rude or cold. Just professional. And there was something about his eyes that made me believe he wasn't having a bad time.

I was painting for almost an hour when a sweet, elderly American lady stopped to talk to me, thinking I was a street artist and asking if I could do a painting for her. She was so nice I hated to disappoint her, so I painted her into the landscape I was working on. I had the broad strokes of the bridge and street scene done, so it was easy enough to add her in. It was quick work, but she loved it.

When she started to pay me, I tried to say no but she insisted, so I told her to put the money into the tip jar of another artist farther down the bridge.

As I was doing her painting, a friendly Canadian couple stopped to watch, and they asked me to put them in a painting too. I'd had fun with the elderly lady, so I agreed and had them give the money they wanted to pay me afterward to a different street artist.

By then I had a line of tourists wanting paintings of their own. Caleb asked if he should tell them all to move on, but I was having a great time. Everyone was warm and appreciative and friendly. Instead, he called back to the hotel and had one of the staff members there bring us more canvases and supplies so I'd have enough.

I stayed all day, painting tourists into my simple landscapes. I met so many interesting people, laughing and chatting with them as I worked. They'd also ask me about myself, and I'd share various stories about my life. Caleb stood nearby the whole time, keeping his eye on the crowds and getting rid of a few whiners who didn't want to wait and more than a few obnoxious men who were interested in my body more than my paintings. But I kept glancing over to him whenever something was touching and amusing. He'd meet my eyes, and—although he never smiled—we'd share something in the look.

Like he understood. Like he was in this experience with me. Like we were connected.

It might have been—even to this day—the best day of my life.

That particular memory has been drowned by all the messy years that followed, but I think about it now as I lie in bed. I once again feel that connection to Caleb through nothing more than the meeting of our eyes.

I wonder if I'll ever feel it again.

It's not a worthwhile thought. I'm a different person now than I was back then. Caleb might have liked me well enough at nineteen—assuming I was a somewhat decent human being to him and to other people—but he knows better now.

I spent far too long being anything but decent to him.

The turn of my thoughts is starting to depress me, so I push them away and think about ice-skating instead. My world is better now than it was, and there are things in my life I can still enjoy.

I've been looking forward to this, and I'm not going to let bleak reminders of my past bring me down.

I'm going to have fun today. I'm still allowed.

That thought propels me off the bed. After going to the bathroom, I stuff my feet into slippers and pull on a fuzzy robe before heading out into the hallway and toward the kitchen.

The guest room door is half-open, so I glance in automatically. I'm not surprised to see Caleb in there, sitting in the side chair and working on something on his tablet.

“Did you spend the night here again?” I ask from the doorway.

He glances up. “Yeah.”

He hangs out in the guest room a lot after one of the other bodyguards comes on duty. He says he prefers it to a hotel room, but I suspect it's more that he wants to be close in case anything happens.

For the past week or two, he's been sleeping there as well—at first occasionally when I was out later than normal, but now he's spent three nights in a row.



That's okay by me. I've offered him use of my guest room for whatever he needs, and honestly it makes me feel safer to know he's near. But it still worries me. He's supposed to have his time off, and this schedule doesn't feel like it gives him any downtime.

"Do you mind?" he asks, evidently seeing something on my face.

"Of course not. But are you sure you're sleeping okay? It's not right for you to never feel like you have a real break."

"I sleep fine. Better, in fact, than I do at the hotel. But if I'm crowding you, you need to tell me."

"I don't feel crowded." I'm telling him the truth, but not the whole truth.

I'm not about to admit that my heart gives a little jump of excitement every time I notice he's still around.

"Okay, good. Let me know if that changes."

"I will. And you need to tell me if you're feeling overworked. I know I took advantage of you before."

"You didn't—"

"Yes, I did. We both know it. You had to stay out all night most nights and then clean up the mess I made of myself. I'm obviously not going to put myself into any risky situations on purpose now, but I also don't want you responsible for me for more than eight hours a day. And you have to keep taking Sundays off completely."

His eyes drop briefly to the screen of his tablet, then lift back up to my face. His mouth twitches slightly. "Understood."

I nod, satisfied he's heard me and knows why I'm concerned. "Did you make some coffee?"

"Not yet."

I roll my eyes with a little groan. "How long have you been awake without coffee? I told you you're welcome to make it whenever you want."

“I know. I’ve been fine.”

“Well, I’m making it now, so come get it if you want.”

Caleb stands up and follows me down the hall. He’s already showered this morning—his hair is still damp. He’s dressed more casually than normal in jeans and a long-sleeved black shirt.

“Jeans?” I eye him up and down, wishing I didn’t find his big body quite so attractive. He feels warm and solid and masculine, standing only a few feet away from me. It seems like the vibes are radiating off him in waves and overwhelming me as I grind some coffee beans and then measure them out to brew.

“You’re still planning to ice-skate, right? If you are, then I am too.”

“Right.” I guess the activity is the explanation for his clothing alteration. It makes sense he doesn’t want to try to skate in his normal trousers and dress shirt. “Is Mick still outside?”

“Yeah. We shifted hours so he’ll be on duty until you and I leave.”

When the coffee is done, I pour a cup for Caleb and offer it to him. Then I pour another mug and take it out to Mick, who is smilingly appreciative.

Then I finally get my own cup and sit down at the kitchen table, where Caleb has made himself comfortable.

“Anything new on the stalker?”

He gives me a quick glance. “He’s still posting online.”

There’s something about his expression that clues me in. “And?”

“He’s used his credit card at a couple of restaurants in Maine. Not here in town, but still.”

“So you really think he’s keyed in on me?” The past three weeks have been so quiet I haven’t even been nervous lately.

But at this news, I feel a jitter of anxiety. It's surreal, but evidently the potential threat is genuine.

"Yeah. I was certain of it from the beginning."

"Why switch targets? Is that normal stalker behavior?"

"It varies. Some have only one target, but there've been a lot of examples of them moving on to someone else when there's not enough to feed an obsession. He must have gotten interested in the Worthing family when Jade got together with William, and that's how he noticed you."

"Could it be a distraction? To make you all think he's after me so Jade will be off guard and vulnerable?"

"Possibly. They're obviously still under tight protection. But I've read everything he wrote about you on that abhorrent message board. It feels real to me."

"What all does he say?" I scanned through the first pages William showed me, but I haven't read anything else. I definitely have no interest in finding the site and reading what's on there.

"It doesn't matter."

"It evidently does matter if it worries you so much."

"The specifics shouldn't matter to you. Just trust me that we should take it seriously. I'd rather you not fill your mind with that kind of garbage."

I make a face and fight off a shiver of revulsion. Despite my instinctive desire to control my own fate, I'm actually grateful not to see any more specifics. I'd keep rehashing it all in my mind and make myself more scared and disgusted. And then who knows what I would do? What I would turn to in order to numb the dark feelings?

After a minute or two of silence, Caleb asks softly, "You okay?"

"Yeah. I'm okay. I'd rather this not be happening to me, but it feels like we're being sensible and reasonable about it, and I haven't fallen apart yet."

“No. You haven’t.” He gives me the slightest of smiles, a dramatic shift of his normally stoic expression. “I’ve never seen anyone handle a situation like this better than you.”

I can’t help the warm wave of pleasure and appreciation at his words, but I file it away with all my other inappropriate feelings for Caleb. In the back of my mind where they won’t trouble me too much.

Hopefully I can make those feelings stay there. It’s getting harder and harder.



Two hours later, we’ve reached the ice-skating rink. It’s a large outdoor venue, open only during the winter. On weekends, it’s packed out, but today there are no more than seven or eight other couples or families.

I have my own ice skates, but Caleb has to rent a pair. We take a few minutes to get ready, lacing up our skates, zipping up our jackets, and putting on gloves. I put on a red stocking cap, but Caleb goes without. I tell him he’ll be cold, but he doesn’t appear to care.

There’s cheerful music playing, and I’m in a good mood as we start off. Caleb keeps pace with me, but his attention is clearly diverted to our surroundings.

It can’t be easy, trying to keep guard over potential threats while we’re circling the rink.

I’m a pretty good skater, but Caleb is even better. When I ask, he says he played a lot of ice hockey when he was younger.

People looking at us probably think we’re a couple. On a date. Despite my attempt to rein in my silly thoughts, I can’t help but like that idea.

I want people to think I’m with Caleb that way. It gives me the most delicious feelings of ownership.

They're not right. And they're potentially harmful to my mental health. But despite my best efforts, I can't seem to help myself.

Whenever I let myself remember how I acted in the past with Caleb, I'm still embarrassed and ashamed, but I don't feel as awkward around him as I did at first. He's given me no sign that he's holding the past against me.

And I've never felt as safe and taken care of around anyone as I do with him.

We skate for a couple of hours until I'm cold and tired and satisfied. Then we change out of our skates and pick up some lunch.

I'd prefer to eat in a restaurant, but Caleb would never sit down and eat with me. He'd stand on guard the whole time, and that won't be enjoyable for either of us. So we get takeout and eat it in the back seat of the SUV. Caleb offers only minimal objection to sitting with me and eating too, so that's definitely progress.

The first two weeks, he absolutely refused to do anything more than drink coffee with me even when we were at home.

I bought us steak sandwiches and pasta salad. The food is tasty, and I'm tired but still in a good mood as we start eating.

He doesn't say anything as he takes a few big bites. I glance at him to see if he gives any hint at enjoying the sandwich. He catches me watching him and gives an exaggerated "Mmm."

I'm surprised into a ripple of giggles.

"It wasn't that funny." His eyes have warmed just slightly. He's not smiling, of course. I've still never seen a smile that's more than the faintest twitch of his mouth.

"Maybe not." I'm still laughing a little. "But in all the years I've known you, that was the first clue I've ever gotten that you possess a sense of humor."

His forehead wrinkles. "That can't be right."

“I don’t think it’s right either, but it’s true. You’ve never cracked a joke or laughed at someone else’s jokes or even responded to something funny with a smile.”

“It’s probably because you’ve only known me while I was working.”

“What does that have to do with having a sense of humor? People still laugh and smile while they work.”

“Maybe. But my job is different.”

“Why?” I’m asking for real, not challenging him. I’m certain he’ll be able to tell the difference.

“Because what I do requires me to have access to my client’s intimate lives. I see a lot more than a person should. I have to be careful not to overstep boundaries.”

I think about that for a minute. Eventually nod. “That makes sense.”

“Glad you approve of my work philosophy.” His voice is as even as always, but there’s a slight edge that makes me peer at him.

“Are you humoring me?”

“Definitely not.”

“Teasing me?”

“Maybe a little.”

I burst into giggles again and then retreat behind a forkful of my pasta salad.

In the time it takes me to chew and swallow, he’s taken three more big bites of his sandwich.

“I figured it’s just your personality,” I say at last.

“What is?”

“The way you kind of resemble a granite statue.”

His eyebrows arch up.

“Your behavior,” I clarify. “Not your appearance. You definitely look like a human, but you’ve always acted like you

don't feel anything at all."

"My job isn't to feel things. It's to keep you safe."

"I know it is. Honestly, I'm not trying to insult you or anything. But you've got to admit you've always acted pretty impervious."

"Maybe." His mouth does that little tilt up at one corner.

"So I figured it was just how you are naturally. I didn't know you had a whole work philosophy that precluded you from chatting and showing emotion and otherwise behaving like a human being. I thought you were just closed off."

"Well, you aren't entirely wrong."

I'm enjoying this conversation more than anything in a really long time. It feels like a victory I didn't even know I was pursuing. My eyes widen. "So your personality does resemble a granite statue?"

He gives a slight huff, and his shoulders rise and fall with the quick breath. There's no way of knowing for sure, but it might actually have been the briefest of laughs. "I wouldn't say that. But I'm kind of closed off."

"Why is that?"

He gives a half shrug.

I frown. "You aren't going to tell me?"

"Do most people actually know the answer to why they are the way they are?"

"Some people do. I know a lot of it because I've done years of therapy where I talked it all out. Were you like this as a kid?"

He glances away from me for the first time. Something nameless twists on his face.

"What is it?" I lean forward, suddenly worried and deeply sympathetic. "Did you have a bad childhood?"

He gives another one of those shrugs. "It was okay. It was just me and Mom. She did her best to take care of me, but she

never had much. I started working early so I could help out.”

“How early?” I ask in a hushed voice.

He glances away again.

I know—*I know*—he’s hesitating because I’m not going to like the answer. “Caleb, tell me. How early?”

“I started doing odd jobs when I was ten, and then at thirteen I got a better job at a local farm. Between that and what my mom earned, it was the first time we had anywhere close to enough.” He’s talking lightly, like it’s nothing.

It doesn’t feel like nothing to me. “You started working at ten?”

“Just odd jobs. Lawn mowing and washing cars and stuff like that. A lot of kids do that kind of thing.”

“Maybe. But they don’t get real jobs at farms when they’re thirteen. You did get to go to school, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. I finished high school.”

“Did you join the military after high school?” I don’t actually know this part of his background, but it makes sense in his situation.

“Yeah. I enlisted in the Army. I got out after ten years, and a buddy of mine hooked me up with a security job. That was how I started doing this.”

“How’s your mom doing now?”

His face softens palpably. “She’s in Florida now. She’s good. I bought her a condo. She’s so proud of it.”

Warm pleasure washes over me. “I bet she is. But it’s really you that she’s proud of.”

He looks almost sheepish for a moment before his normal composure regains control of his face. “Probably. But I haven’t done anything sacrificial. Your family has always paid me really well.”

“Well, that’s because you’ve earned it. Everyone always tells me you’re the best we have, and I have no reason not to



believe it's true.”

He clears his throat, obviously not sure what to say. “Well.”

I stifle a laugh and focus on my food again. He's already almost done with his sandwich while I've barely started.

We've been eating in comfortable silence for a few minutes when he asks out of the blue, “Are you still in therapy?”

I'm surprised by the question, but not annoyed or offended. “Yeah. But I just go once a month now. I actually have an appointment next week.”

He nods to acknowledge my answer.

“Why?” I ask when he doesn't follow up in any way.

“Just wondering. Did you go to meetings?”

“I did. A lot of them at first, after I got out of rehab, since they gave me accountability I needed. I didn't have any real friends back then, and I needed something. I don't go to them much anymore. If I'm struggling for some reason, I'll just book extra appointments with my therapist.”

“That makes sense.” He takes a bite of pasta salad and finishes chewing. “You've done really well. You should be proud of yourself.”

“Thanks.” Our eyes meet, and then we both look away quickly. It's an odd moment—like we both suddenly felt uncomfortable.

My cheeks are flushed, and my heart is racing, and I'm definitely feeling things I shouldn't be for Caleb. I keep my eyes down until I've reminded myself of who he is and has always been.

A professional. A man who's incredibly careful about not overstepping boundaries. And a man who has seen me at my absolute worst.

Even if he was interested, he'd never make a move on me.

And he's never given me any reason to suspect he's interested in me as anything except a protectee.



That evening I turn in early.

As soon as we got home from our trip, Trey was ready to come on duty, so Caleb disappeared into the guest bedroom and I didn't see him again. I spent a couple of hours painting and then had a light dinner of soup and bread.

I could have called one of my friends. Even gone out to visit someone. Or I could have kept painting or watched TV or amused myself on my phone. But I'm tired and restless and weirdly lonely, so I change into my pajamas and get cozy in bed to read.

It's strange to have Caleb here in my house but not with me. He's behind a closed door, and he's going to stay there.

I shouldn't want or expect anything else.

I've been reading for about an hour when a loud crashing sound causes me to sit up straight in bed, shocked and terrified.

Before I can make my mind work, Caleb is at my doorway. "Don't move," he bites out.

I wasn't planning to move. I'm not even sure I'm capable at the moment.

Caleb is wearing sweats and a T-shirt, so he was clearly relaxing, but he's got a gun in his hand right now and he's barking out orders to someone—probably Trey—on a headset.

It's only a minute before his stance changes. He glances back into my bedroom. "It's fine. There's no problem. Something fell in your studio."

"Oh." Relieved and confused and still jittery, I get up to check out what happened. Caleb follows me down the hall and into the sunroom I use as a studio.

It's made up entirely of windows, and I usually just leave the blinds open because my backyard is private. But ever since they've been securing the house, Caleb has pulled down every single blind at night so no one can see into the lighted house.

There's nothing in the room except my easel, a shelf with supplies, and a bunch of completed and half-finished canvases.

It's easy to see what happened. I'd stacked several against each other to make more room this evening, and I must not have balanced them well.

They all fell to the floor.

Trey is crouched down, picking them up. He's taking great care as he moves them.

"They're not important," I tell him, coming over to help. "You don't have to be careful. They're just some experimenting I've done."

He stares down at an abstract landscape I painted in soft pastels. "These aren't good?"

I laugh softly. "I mean, they're not terrible, but it doesn't matter if they get damaged. Anything I paint that I really care about, I take better care of."

Without further ado, I stack the canvases up flat this time so they won't all fall down again.

"They look amazing to me," Trey says, looking around at the variety of paintings visible in the room.

Fortunately, the one I'm actively working on is covered so he and Caleb can't see it.

It's a painting of Caleb, so I really don't want that to be public knowledge.

Caleb clears his throat. When Trey glances back to him, he must read something on his expression because he says, "I'll get back outside. Always nice when an emergency turns out to be nothing."

I thank him and say good night. Then I glance over to Caleb. He's got his granite-statue expression going again.

I sigh. I really liked how he was as we ate in the car earlier today.

“Sorry it woke you up,” he says.

“I wasn’t sleeping. I was just reading.” I glance down at myself, for the first time realizing I’m in fleece pajama pants and a tank top. The top does little to hide my body.

My breasts are nothing special, but the outline of my nipples is clearly visible beneath the fabric. And a strip of skin is exposed between the hem and the top of my pants.

When I glance up, I see that Caleb’s eyes are on my body too.

They are. I’m sure of it. They run up and down the length of me before he looks away with a jerky move of his head.

A wave of heat slams into me. Excitement and interest and a physicality I’m not used to experiencing. But I suddenly am conscious of nothing except my body.

And his body.

In his casual clothes, he seems less guarded. Easier to get to. I could reach out and run my hands along the width of his chest. His shoulders. Down the contours of his arms.

Even lower.

My breath catches, and I take a ragged gasp to clear it.

His eyes shoot up to my face.

We stare at each other, and I swear the air is suddenly hot and thick between us.

Then he makes a guttural sound and turns away. “All right. Good night.”

I sigh as he walks away.

Well, that answers the question of whether he has any interest in me at all. He at least has noticed my body.

But that doesn’t really mean anything. Any guy might have noticed.

Attraction is simply that. A physical pull that usually goes no deeper.

I'm really not interested in surface-level lust. I had enough of that in my past, and I always came away from those encounters feeling nothing but dirty and used.

And even if I wanted something purely physical, I could still never have it with Caleb.

Because it doesn't change the absolute fact that he will never, ever act on it.

THE FOLLOWING EVENING, I GO OUT FOR DRINKS WITH MY friends.

Usually my version of drinks nowadays is one margarita or cosmo and then several glasses of sparkling water with lime. I still have a good time. In fact, I enjoy myself much more than I ever did when I was binge drinking and popping every designer pill I was offered.

But tonight I'm still feeling restless and vaguely dissatisfied, so I end up having two drinks.

Just two.

If I tried to drink more, my friends would intervene, which is something I appreciate about them. As it is, they each individually ask me if everything is okay.

It is. I'm really fine.

But for three years I've been perfectly satisfied with my safe, healthy, quiet, drama-free existence.

And for the past few days, I've been wishing I could have a little bit more.

It's probably selfish of me. Maybe, after everything I've done in my life, I don't deserve any more than I have.

My therapist would give me the stink eye at that thought, and I know she'd be right. But it's hard to not let the small voice at the back of my mind mutter about exactly how entitled a person can be.

A lot of people would kill for a life like mine. I've got everything I need and a lot that I don't need. Because of my family's money, I don't even need to hold a full-time job, so I can spend much of my time on painting, which would never be able to pay the bills for me. I've got really good friends and successful sobriety. Peace and lifelong security.

I don't need a man.

I haven't even really missed sex that much for the past three years since I can easily take care of the occasional urge on my own. Most of the sex I had in the past can only be classified as fucking, and it's the last thing in the world I want to participate in now. So I'm not sure why sex—a different kind of sex—is all I can think about lately.

It probably has something to do with the recent proximity of Caleb. I'm not used to a virile, attractive man being at such close quarters for so long. It's just gotten me going.

It doesn't mean anything more.

Despite my extended rationalizations, I feel the need for something extra tonight, so I end up ordering a second cosmo as I hang out with my friends.

Trey is on duty tonight, so I don't even have the exhilaration of knowing Caleb's eyes are on me. But that's just as well. I don't need that.

I'm doing just fine on my own. I don't need a man. I don't even need Caleb.

The evening is uneventful, and I head home before midnight, which is still a late night for my friend group.

I'm tired and wired and very slightly buzzing from more alcohol than I've had in years. Trey checks the house before he lets me out of the car. When he's cleared it for me, I go inside, toe off my shoes, drop my little bag, and wander into my studio, staring around blankly at my collection of canvases in various stages of completion.

Weirdly, it feels like my life. A series of attempted starts and restarts, never getting the canvas exactly as I envision it.

It's a bleak thought and not a rational one. Clearly a result of the alcohol. I shake it off and go fill up a cup with filtered water, then swallow down half of it as I stand by the counter.

"Everything all right?"

The voice surprises me so much I jerk and slop a little of my water. It dribbles down my lips as I turn to find Caleb standing at the kitchen entrance.

He's wearing gray pajama pants and a white undershirt. His hair is kind of ruffled. He clearly got up from bed.

I gulp at the sight of him. Since I have a mouthful of water, it's a convenient gesture.

"Yes," I manage to say after I lower my cup. "Fine."

He narrows his eyes as he peers at me. "Have you been drinking?"

I scowl. "I had two drinks."

"Why?"

"Why? Because I'm an adult, and I'm allowed a couple of drinks if I want."

"I thought you stuck to one." He's taken a few steps closer, so now he's standing directly in front of me, frowning and vaguely intimidating.

It's probably the extra drink, but he's really annoying me right now. "Usually I do. Tonight I had one more. I'm not drunk. I'm not even close. Your job is not to boss me around."

"I wasn't bossing you around. I asked a question. And you didn't really answer it."

I blink, momentarily distracted from my irrational indignation. "What question?"

"Why? You changed your habits. In a way you decided years ago wasn't good for you. I want to know why."

"I can have two drinks without falling off the wagon!"

I've seen Caleb faintly annoyed before. Impatient. Condescending and cool and obnoxiously unflappable.



But I've never seen him angry. I'm not actually sure he's angry right now, but he's closer than I've ever seen him before. He's simmering with something, and it's leaking around the edges of his typical composure. His jaw tightens. His eyes narrow. "I never said you weren't allowed," he grits out. "I'm asking why you felt the need to do so."

"It's none of your business. I felt like indulging. I didn't do anything wrong."

His expression changes, his frown becoming thoughtful. "You felt like indulging?"

"Yes. Occasionally, I don't want to live like a nun. Is that all right with you?" I feel way too emotional for this conversation. It really doesn't make sense.

I don't want Caleb to see it, so I step around him and try to stride away.

He grabs for my arm, holding it loosely. The grip manages to stop me anyway.

I whirl around with a scowl. "What exactly do you want?"

"I want to know what's going on with you. Something is wrong, and you won't tell me what it is."

"Nothing is wrong."

"Now you're lying to me."

"I'm allowed to lie to you. You're my bodyguard. You don't get to pry into my soul."

If anything, my words make him even angrier. His frown intensifies, as does the tension in his jaw. "Yes, I do."

"No, you don't."

"Yes, I do, Louisa. If something is bothering you, then I'm the one you tell."

He means it. I swear he genuinely means it. He sincerely believes that he has every right to hear all the secrets of my soul.

And the most ridiculous thing is that I believe it too.

My indignation crumples. My mouth twists. “I’m just... restless. Lately. I know my life is good now, but sometimes it feels like I don’t... I don’t quite have enough.”

His face softens at my words. “If you don’t have something you want, you’re allowed to try to get it.”

My breath hitches. I wonder if he knows what he’s saying, if he knows how I’ll take it.

“But drinking more isn’t the way to get it,” he adds.

“I know that. I won’t do it again. I just... I’m really happy with my life now, but sometimes I’d like to be a little less... good.”

His mouth relaxes even more. Until it’s almost shaped in a smile. “Well, then be a little less good. But maybe do it in a way that doesn’t threaten your sobriety.”

I give a little huff of dry amusement. “Yeah. I mean, alcohol has never really been the thing that threatens my sobriety, but it still feels safer for me to stick to only one drink. So you’re right.”

“But you don’t have to keep living like a nun if that’s not what you want.”

I can’t actually believe I said that to him since it so clearly brings up the topic of sex. “You think so?” My eyes have been downcast, but I lift them in a quick, darting look.

Something changes in his stance. He must suddenly understand what’s in my mind.

He evidently didn’t realize it before.

“Louisa.”

“I know,” I say quickly, looking up at him again. “I *know*. But that doesn’t mean I don’t occasionally... want it.”

His eyes hold mine, and I can’t look away.

His face is motionless, but his eyes have changed. They suddenly look almost hungry. He lifts a hand and brushes his knuckles against my cheek.

I suck in a thick breath at the light caress. Then I reach out to brush my fingertips against his jaw. His bristles scratch against my skin deliciously.

His hand moves to the back of my neck, cupping the base of my skull.

I'm not actually sure whether I move myself or whether he draws my head up toward his, but one way or the other, we end up kissing.

His lips are light at first, almost questioning, but the touch sends ripples of pleasure down my spine. Then he takes my head in both hands and holds me in place so he can kiss me harder. His tongue slips into my mouth.

My body erupts in shivers of excitement, sensation. I cling to his shoulders and return the kiss eagerly.

“Louisa,” he murmurs against my lips, suddenly grabbing, pulling me closer. He edges his own body against mine, sliding one hand down to the small of my back.

I've never had a kiss like this before. Not once in my life. It's never felt like my soul would burst out of my skin from nothing more than the touch of a man's lips and tongue. My head is so full I can't think, can't process, can't do anything but feel.

I comb my fingers through his hair and then suddenly clench a fistful of it as his hand moves down my body even farther so he's palming my ass through the thin fabric of my stylish pants. Arousal pulses between my legs as he strokes my body with bold entitlement.

This is Caleb. Touching me this way.

Making me feel better than... anything.

I moan into his mouth as his hand keeps moving.

I lift a leg to hook it eagerly around his legs. He's already hard in his pajama pants. I can feel the bulge. I rub against it, thrilled with the evidence that he wants me.

I'm starting to slip a hand under his shirt when he jerks dramatically.

He tears his mouth away from mine and pushes me away. Not violent but forceful.

I step back clumsily, about a foot away from him now, and I gasp in disappointment and bewilderment. “Wh-what?”

“No.” His face twists painfully. “No, we can’t do that.”

“But... why not?” My body is still pulsing. I want him so much. I don’t understand why he isn’t still touching me.

“I’m not going to be that man.”

None of this is making any sense, or maybe my mind is too clouded to figure it out. “What man?”

“The man who... who takes ad—” He makes a strangled sound and takes a couple of steps away from me. “Your life is in danger. I’m the one responsible for protecting you. You’re scared. This is not...” He gives his head a rough shake. “No. I’m not going to be that man.”

I stare at him dazedly as he takes a deep breath and then walks stiffly down the hall and into the guest bathroom, closing the door behind him.

In just a few seconds, I hear the shower spray turn on.

I collapse against the kitchen counter.

In some ways, the rejection is worse than if he wasn’t even attracted to me. Didn’t even want me.

He does want me. I’m sure of it now.

At least his body does.

He was hard. I didn’t imagine that.

His body might want me, but Caleb is clearly not the kind of man to obey the dictates of his body.

His heart is buried away somewhere.

And he isn’t going to let it out.



For the next several days, Caleb returns to his former stoic professionalism, and I don't resist or complain.

Mostly because I don't want to be hurt or rejected again.

It's fine. It's not really that big a deal. Saturday night was a very small backslide. It didn't do any real harm, but I'm not going to risk it again.

Neither the drinking nor the interrupted kiss with Caleb.

So I go through my normal routine. Brunch on Sunday morning with Davida and painting all afternoon. Swimming and then volunteer work in the afternoons on the weekdays.

On Thursday, I've got another art experience scheduled, and I'm relieved to see there are only two out-of-town couples signed up.

Caleb stands guard as usual. It's harder than it used to be to have him fade into the background of my consciousness. But I do the best I can, and I manage to enjoy the interaction with retired couples who are traveling through New England together.

When I'm done, I load up the van with the easels. Both couples drove their own car, so there's no one to shuttle back to the community center.

Caleb hasn't said a word to me for hours. If I wasn't sure the memory of his hot hungry expression on Saturday night really occurred, I might have wondered if the whole thing happened only in my imagination.

I'm doing my best to remain in a decent mood as we drive back to the community center and I return the supplies to the storage room. I chat with Gracie behind the welcome desk for a few minutes to perk myself up before making one more trip to the van for the last two easels.

Caleb follows. Not for an instant do I consider asking him to help me carry all the stuff.

It's not his job. In fact, it would interfere with his job.

And the fact that his granite-statue imitation is getting on my nerves is not reason enough to act petty or immature.

Even though I kind of feel like it.

I've set the last two easels back in their place when a noise from across the storage room distracts me.

Shit.

Marcus.

What the hell is he doing here?

"You missed the art experience," I say coolly, hoping to stave off any longer conversation. "I'm on my way out now."

"I know." He gives me one of his most obnoxious smiles—one that's supposed to be charming. "I just got off work and thought I'd stop by. I was afraid you'd been avoiding me."

"No." I don't meet his eyes. Don't stop walking over to put the case of paints on a shelf. "Just busy."

"I see your escort is still following you around."

Caleb is currently manning the hallway. I'm not sure how Marcus managed to get in here without his seeing. Maybe Marcus has been here since we arrived. Waiting.

The idea creeps me out. I try not to shiver or make a face. With the same cool, aloof expression, I get the paints and brushes back in place, fold up the drop cloth, and head back to the door where Caleb is waiting.

He probably should have come in here with me. It looked like he was about to, but I wanted a little distance from him, so I closed the door in his face, and he didn't argue.

That was my mistake.

His was allowing me to get my way.

Not that Marcus is a danger. He's a pest. A big one.

When I turn around, he's standing directly in front of me. Only a few inches away.

"Excuse me," I say, trying not to panic. There's no reason for an overreaction here. I'm nothing more than disgusted and creeped out. He hasn't even touched me.

“Just wait a minute. Why are you always running away from me?”

“I’ve got to go. Please back up.”

I move to get around him, but he reaches for my arm. His fingers start to wrap around my forearm.

I jerk back. “No!” I don’t scream the word, but I say it firmly and louder than before.

It’s loud enough. The door to the room slams open, and Caleb barks out, “Back the hell up. Now!”

Both Marcus’s advance and Caleb’s arrival startle and upset me. I take a couple of clumsy steps backward and stumble into a large freestanding shelving unit.

It wobbles slightly but doesn’t fall. Unfortunately, a box was perched on a high shelf, not pushed back all the way. The slight imbalance of the shelving unit is enough to cause it to fall.

It glances painfully against the side of my head, and I end up sprawled on the floor with the box beside me.

A lot of things happen at once.

Caleb comes running over, saying to Marcus in an icy voice, “Walk away. Now. If you come close to Louisa again, you won’t be walking afterward.”

Marcus appears as startled by my reaction, Caleb’s appearance, and my fall into the shelf as I am. He evidently understands the understated threat in Caleb’s words and expression because he leaves immediately, mumbling something about how it was an accident and he’d never dream of hurting me.

I am hurt. My head is already pounding from the sudden blow. My leg got folded uncomfortably beneath me in the fall. And I’m dazed and winded. I can’t seem to think. Can’t seem to clear my vision.

“Damn it, Louisa,” Caleb mutters, kneeling on the floor beside me. “Why the hell didn’t you call out for me sooner?”

“He wasn’t—” I’m trying to get the words out, but for some reason I’m choking on them. I do a weird cough and cover my eyes since everything is spinning. “He wasn’t—”

“He might not have intended to physically hurt you, but he was being aggressive and intimidating. You wouldn’t have been so scared otherwise.” His voice is hoarse. Not quite normal. He’s feeling my scalp with his fingers, trying to push my hair out of the way so he can see where the box hit me.

I wince when he finds it.

“Damn it, Louisa,” he says again. “This looks bad.”

“It’s not that bad. Just an unfortunate accident.”

“It wasn’t entirely an accident. I swear if I see that guy again—”

“Caleb, stop. I got a little bump on the head. Mostly my own fault. You’re right. I should have gotten you in here quicker and then it never would have come to this. I just didn’t want him touching me.”

My mind is still fuzzy. Otherwise I never would have said that.

Caleb’s expression darkens, and he makes a low, guttural sound.

“He was just reaching for my arm,” I say quickly. “Please drop it. I really want to go home now.”

Since Caleb is still fully occupied with peering at my head, I try to push myself up on my own.

It’s a hopeless endeavor. I’m immediately dizzy and give up, gasping and blinking.

If only my head would stop hurting.

“I think we better take you to the ER.”

I suck in an outraged breath. “That’s ridiculous. Talk about overreactions. I just need an aspirin and a nap.”

“That’s the last thing you need.” He eases back on his haunches, lifting my chin slightly. “Look at me. In the eyes.



Right here.” He gestures to his face.

I try to do what he says because there’s no reason not to. I’m sure he’s still assessing my condition, and if I prove I’m fine, he’ll back off.

But, although I manage to meet his eyes for a couple of seconds, the act of focusing makes me dizzy again. I can’t hold the gaze. I close my eyes and put a hand on my belly when a wave of nausea overwhelms me.

“Okay. That’s it. You probably have a concussion. Even if it’s minor, we’re not playing around with that. We’re going to the hospital.”

“Caleb.” My protestation is feeble. Distressed.

“No argument. I’m responsible for your safety. You’re not going home until a doctor looks at you.”

I want to object. I want to put up a fight. To prove that I’m my own person and can make my own decisions. But fighting with Caleb in this would be futile. And it would take energy I just don’t have.

And also a tiny voice at the back of my mind is fuzzily acknowledging he’s probably right.

So I let him help me to my feet. It takes a minute until I can stand on my own. I really don’t want him to carry me—which I’m kind of afraid he will—so I make myself start to walk.

He keeps an arm around my waist as we go, so at least I can lean on him. I’m honestly not sure if I could have made it otherwise.

I’m conscious the whole time, but I lean my head back with my eyes closed on the drive to the nearest hospital, which is twenty minutes away. I feel like crap. Still dizzy. Still pounding in the head.

I really hope the box didn’t do any serious damage. It doesn’t seem like a simple tap on the head should make me feel like this.

At one point I'm so dizzy I sit up straight, breathing loud and ragged.

Caleb slows down, glancing over. "You okay?"

"Yeah." I'm not even sure I'm telling him the truth. I'm being hit by wave after wave of nausea.

He pulls over onto the shoulder of the road and puts the SUV in park. "If you need to throw up, just open the door and lean over."

"I don't—" I almost choke on the words. Then gag.

Then I am, in fact, fumbling with the door until I get it open, leaning over far enough to aim at the ground before heaving as my stomach empties itself.

Sometime in the midst of it, Caleb reaches over to put a hand on my back. Then slides it up to gather my hair into his fist, holding it out of the way.

When I sit up straight again, I feel a little better. But my nose is running and tears stream out of my eyes, and I have the worst taste in my mouth.

He hands me a half-drunk bottle of water.

It was his, but I don't care. I take a few small sips.

"You all right if I start driving again?"

"Yeah." I sniff and wipe my mouth and nose with the back of my wrist. I'm sure I have a tissue in my bag, but I can't coordinate the effort to find it at the moment. "I'm okay for now."

"We should be there soon."

I lick my lips. Take another sip. I don't feel so nauseated now, but I still feel terrible.

It's my own fault. If I hadn't wanted to handle it myself, if I hadn't overreacted to Marcus reaching out, I'd be perfectly fine right now. Finished with my day and on my way home instead of on my way to the emergency room.



By the time we reach the hospital, Caleb basically carries me in. We only have to wait about fifteen minutes before we get a room, and then they're taking my vitals and asking for details about what happened.

I answer as best I can, but it's mostly Caleb who's taking charge. Normally I'd resent his interference, but right now it's saving me from the painful effort of holding a lucid conversation and making good decisions for myself.

The doctor agrees I have a concussion. As far as I can tell, he isn't too worried, but he wants to take a scan of my head to make sure there's no serious damage.

I say yes because Caleb's expression makes it clear that's the only answer he'll tolerate. I doubt I would have said no anyway. Medical expenses aren't a concern of mine, and I try not to make foolish decisions based on a petty, mindless resistance to authority.

Caleb might be bossy, but it doesn't mean he's not right.

The scan reveals there's no worrisome damage, so we just need to take care of the concussion for the next couple of days. Caleb is to make sure I can regularly wake up from sleep and that I can eat and talk and function like normal.

It sounds easy enough to me.

It's been about three hours when I'm discharged. I feel quite a bit better now, although my head is still aching. I can probably walk on my own, but Caleb puts his arm around me anyway so I can lean on him.

So judge me if you must. But I don't pull away.

When we get home, Caleb helps me change into one of my pajama sets. I'm sure I could do it on my own, but he doesn't ask. He simply begins to help me, and I don't see much reason to stop him. He sees me in my bra, but he keeps his gaze away from my chest level. Then I turn my back to him to take it off and pull on a tank top.

I go to the bathroom, wash up, brush my teeth, and splash water on my face. Then I braid my hair into two plaits to keep it out of the way but not poke into my scalp the way ponytails always do.

When I come out, Caleb is waiting. He's turned down the covers of my bed and gotten me a glass of water.

"Thank you," I tell him, climbing in.

I'm glad he's here. This whole thing would have been a lot worse without him.

"You're welcome. Do you need anything else?"

"No. I think I'm okay. I'm just going to listen to music and close my eyes."

"Okay. But I'm going to wake you up every hour like the doctor said. Try not to get mad at me." His face is a little softer than it's been since Saturday night. It makes my heart clench slightly.

"I'll get mad at you if you deserve it."

He huffs with what sounds like amusement. "Yes, you will. But I'll be waking you up anyway."

"Understood. Thank you."

He frowns, standing beside the bed and gazing down at me. "For what?"

"What do you mean, for what? For helping me. You really helped me. Thank you."

He nods slightly, barely more than an incline of his head. "You're welcome."

I still feel like shit as I close my eyes, but better because I know Caleb is still there, looking out for me.



The night isn't all that great. Every time it feels like I really get to sleep, there's Caleb, shaking me awake and making me

talk to him and follow a small flashlight with my eyes.

I do as he says each time, but I can't promise I don't sound kind of grumpy.

My moods have never fazed him in the slightest. It's long past time when he should be off duty, but it's always him who wakes me up. And once when I wake up terribly thirsty and lift my head in the dark to look for my water, he's suddenly by my bed, moving the water into my hand so I can sip it.

When I close my eyes, I'm warmed by the thought that he must be sitting in the pretty turquoise slipper chair in the corner of my bedroom. How else would he know I needed water?

In the morning, Caleb makes me get up—something I really don't feel like doing—and even worse, makes me take a shower.

I'm actually feeling better today. The headache and dizziness are gone. I mostly feel unusually weak and sleepy. But that doesn't mean I want to take a shower at eight o'clock in the morning.

I make sure I don't mention to Caleb that I feel a lot better afterward.

I braid my hair again and put on a cozy blue lounge set since I'm not planning to go out today. I can skip swimming for one day, and I didn't have anything else planned.

Since I'm feeling so much better, I actually get excited about the unexpected day off. I text my friends to tell them about my adventure, and then—with a flash of family feeling—I end up texting Jade since William will be working at this time on a Friday, and also Arthur, my oldest cousin.

I've got several other cousins, but I'm not close to them, so it would feel weird to randomly update them on a concussion.

By midmorning I'm starving, so I make myself some breakfast.

I make a breakfast sandwich for Mick, who's on duty outside right now. And then I make up plates for me and

Caleb.

If I ask him, he'll say no, so I've learned not to ask. If I stick food in front of him, he'll usually eat.

He normally stays in the guest room when he's not on duty, but today he's planted himself in the leather armchair in the corner of my living room. He's been focused on his tablet, but he puts it down when I hand him the plate and a fork and take his mug so I can get him more coffee.

When I come back, I turn on the television and find my favorite BBC Jane Austen adaptation. It will take several hours to watch, so it's perfect for today.

Caleb glances up several times as the first part begins. He keeps working.

After about an hour, I see him watching it more regularly, although he still keeps up the pose of working.

When the second part begins, he's not even pretending to work anymore.

"It's good, isn't it?" I ask when he catches me watching him.

"It's interesting." He appears to be taking both the movie and my question seriously. "Not my normal thing. She's kind of silly, isn't she?"

"Well, she means well."

"You think so?"

"Yes. She's a little spoiled, and she's used to having things happen the way she wants them. It's hard to adjust when the world doesn't always function that way."

His shoulders shake in a very brief laugh. "You can empathize?"

"Well, I don't think I'm that bad." I frown as I think it through. "But I do understand being spoiled. When you're born with people who give you what you want most of the time, it's hard not to expect it."

“Yeah. I get that. Not that I ever experienced it, but I can see how it would happen.”

“It’s still my responsibility to not act like a spoiled child, but having the family I did was not in my control. But I never went around interfering in everyone else’s life the way she does.”

“She’s probably kind of bored. Not much for her to do.”

“Yeah. That’s probably a lot of it. She’s not married with children, and she doesn’t work. So she’s making up activity to feel useful.” I sigh and lean back against the couch cushion. “I can kind of sympathize with that too.”

“Eh. At least you do something real. You volunteer and help your community and create art, which is worthwhile in and of itself. You’re not wasting your life, Louisa.”

I gulp, strangely touched. My eyes dart from the television screen to his face and then back. “Thanks. I hope not.”

“You’re not.” His expression is sober. I know he’s looking at me, although I’m not quite brave enough to meet his gaze. “After you dropped out of college, you were... flailing. Desperately searching for something to do to fill your life. Make you feel like you were needed. You had value.”

I sit up and stare at him, astonished by the insight of his words. “How did you know that?”

“What do you mean? I was there. For all of it. I saw you every single day. I knew you. I understood you. I heard the things you said. Some of it you even said to me.”

“Only when I was drunk or high. You shouldn’t put too much stock into drunken ramblings.”

“Really?” His mouth twitches up. “So you don’t think I’m the most miserable excuse for a human being you’ve ever encountered in your life? And you don’t sometimes want to claw the fucking grimace off my face? You don’t wish I’d take my big, obnoxious body and bury myself in a deep hole?”

“Oh my God!” I’m half giggling, half fighting the urge to cover my face with embarrassment. “I don’t even remember

saying that to you. I'm so sorry."

"It's fine. I heard all that and worse. I never took it seriously."

"But still. I was terrible to you."

"I think I was the target because I was always there. I didn't take it personally even though sometimes it kind of seemed like it was personal." He's still almost teasing. He doesn't look hurt or offended or even guarded.

"I'm sure I thought it was personal, but you never did anything to deserve it. I was a mess. I can't ever apologize enough."

"You've already apologized. And, what's more, you've turned your whole life around, and you've treated me with nothing but kindness and respect since I started working for you again. This is who you really are. I knew it back then too."

My cheeks flush with pleasure at the mild words and at the look in his eyes. It's not hot or passionate or intense in any way. It's gentle.

Almost sweet.

I've never seen that look on Caleb's face before.

It makes me nervous and excited at the same time, and I don't know what to do with it.

So I do the only logical thing for a woman in my situation.

I turn my head and focus on the movie again.



MY FATHER ASSIGNED CALEB TO ME FULL TIME AFTER I dropped out of college halfway through my sophomore year. I got into a car wreck with my then boyfriend, and my dad insisted that the least I could do was let him make sure I didn't put myself in physical danger. I could say no, but then he could refuse to fund my lifestyle.

Those were his exact words.

I didn't really want the bodyguard, but I also didn't want to lose the financial support, so I begrudgingly agreed.

After that, Caleb went everywhere I did.

At first he was basically my driver. My days revolved around my boyfriend, so we spent most of our time at his place or at clubs or parties. Caleb would drive us, stand in the background glowering, and generally not get in the way.

But after I broke up with that boyfriend, my days changed. They were wilder. Less predictable. And I was usually on my own or with a group of girlfriends who would drop me in an instant if a man showed them interest.

That was when Caleb's job got much harder and when I started to resent him a lot more.

One night I was supposed to meet a friend at a new club, but she never showed up. That kind of thing didn't bother me back then. I went inside anyway, easily finding guys to buy me drinks or offer me the hottest designer pills.

I'm not sure what I took that night, but it's one of the few nights when I got high that aren't blurred or blank. I can remember details. After a few hours, I was on the dance floor being pawed by a couple of guys I just met. Caleb was standing against the wall, near enough to keep his eye on me, but as usual I was ignoring his existence.

One of the guys suggested we go into a back room, and I was so out of it I saw absolutely no reason not to agree. He and the other guy started escorting me through the crowd. Another guy joined us, so there were three of them.

I was startled by the extra guy but in no shape to disagree.

We'd reached the door when our way was blocked by a big, unsmiling man.

Caleb.

"What's your problem, asshole?" That question was from one of the three guys, the tallest one with overblown muscles and a smarmy kind of attractiveness.

Caleb didn't say anything. He also didn't move.

"Get out of the fucking way." The guy reached out to shove Caleb out of the way, but he simply would not be moved.

"Caleb, stop blocking the way," I said, dizzy and flustered and rattled and also really annoyed with him. I was trying to have a good time, and he was disturbing things.

"No," he said, meeting my eyes.

"See," the other guy said. "She wants to go back there with us. Her choice."

"She's not in a condition to make an informed choice," Caleb said, completely composed, completely in control. "So she's not going back there with the three of you."

I got mad then. Not simply annoyed but angry. "That's not your job! You're only supposed to drive me around!"

"My job is to keep you safe. Letting you into that room with these three assholes while you're high is not safe."

“Fucking hell with that,” the beefy guy said. “Out of the way now!” Then he went for Caleb, making a lunge like he was going to tackle him.

Caleb elbowed him in the face, and he went down.

The other two guys went for him then. Both at the same time. The fight lasted about five seconds before the other two were on the floor too.

“How dare you!” I was absolutely furious with him. Angrier than I can ever remember being in my entire life. Not because I had any particular attachment to those guys but because Caleb was taking my choices away. “You can’t stop me from doing what I want!”

“I can stop you from putting yourself in danger. Do you have any idea what these guys had in mind for you in that room?”

I didn’t. I wasn’t capable of thinking far enough ahead to even consider possibilities. I just wanted to have fun, and I liked getting any male attention.

Those guys liked me, and I wanted to be liked.

“Bastard,” I hissed at Caleb. I swatted at his chest, but he was too big and hard to make any sort of impact. I tried to slap his face then, but he caught my wrist before my palm connected.

I lost it then. I was half screaming and half crying as I launched myself at him. Wanting to hurt him. Wanting to stop him. Wanting to do anything.

He grabbed me, swung me over one of his shoulders like a sack of grain, and carried me out of the club and into the alley where the car was waiting. I was sobbing and trying to pummel him the whole time.

When he dumped me into the back of the car, I choked out, “You’re going to be fired for this!”

He slammed the back door on me and then got into the front. Looked at me over his shoulder. “I doubt it.”

“You will be! I’ll tell my dad to fire you!”

“Your father isn’t my employer. Your cousin is.”

“But you’re assigned to my dad. He can fire you if he wants! You don’t get to boss me around and stop me from living my life. I was having fun!”

“No, you weren’t.”

My head was starting to clear from the drug, and I suddenly felt sick. I slumped over in the back seat with a whimper.

What made it worse was that I knew he was right. I was trying to have fun, but nothing about what happened that night was fun or enjoyable. It felt like I was always reaching for something and could never quite wrap my fingers around it.

“You’re still going to get fired.” I felt like utter shit—like everything and everyone in the world was horrible—and like Caleb was to blame for all of it.

“We’ll see. If I get fired, I get fired. Until that happens, I’m going to do my job.”

I started to cry after that, and I was still crying when we got home and Caleb dragged me out of the car and carried me up to my apartment.

He put me to bed. It wasn’t the first or the last time he had to do that.

I’m sorry to say that I did whine to my dad and try to get Caleb fired, but my dad wouldn’t do it. Arthur wouldn’t do it. They insisted that Caleb was doing exactly what he was hired to do.

So he stayed. And he took care of me for years until I was finally able to take care of myself.



Caleb insists on taking me back to the doctor Monday morning. This time I get the all clear. No apparent damage and no worries now that all the side effects are gone.

I'm glad to get confirmation, but I wasn't particularly anxious about my condition since, after taking it easy all day on Friday, I've been feeling normal for the past two days.

Getting the okay from the doctor is mostly important so Caleb will finally relax and stop questioning every extra effort I make.

Even last night, he woke me up once to make sure I was okay. Now, I'm not one of those people who treat sleeping like a religion, but still... I wasn't entirely polite when I told him I was fine and to go away and leave me alone.

I rescheduled the art experience I had planned for this afternoon since last week I wasn't sure I'd be up for it. So I tell Caleb I'm going to swim after the doctor's appointment and if he thinks I need more rest and doesn't want to drive me, he can stay at home and I'll drive myself.

He rolls his eyes and takes me to my health club.

I have a good afternoon and feel more like myself.

That evening, after Trey switches on duty and Caleb disappears into the guest room, Greg and Brandy come over for Crock-Pot chili and cornbread and to catch up on the happenings since Thursday.

When I'm done telling the story of my encounter with Marcus, the trip to the emergency room, and my concussion afterward, Brandy leans forward and whispers, "So is Caleb still hovering now that you're better?"

For some reason, the question makes me blush. "He wasn't hovering. He was just doing his job."

"Uh-huh," Greg murmurs, looking amused and skeptical both.

"Right. His jo-o-o-ob." Brandy stretches out the final word far too long.

"Stop it. Both of you. He was concerned. His job is to keep me safe, and he was worried I'd really gotten hurt."

"And exactly how many nights did he sit in your bedroom in the dark, watching over you, all devoted and protective?"

Brandy is grinning openly now.

“Stop!” I hiss out the word in a stage whisper, glancing back in fear that Caleb might somehow overhear. “It’s not anything like that.”

“Maybe not,” Brandy says in a different tone, relenting enough to give me some breathing room in the teasing. She can probably see I’m starting to get a little upset. “But does any part of you maybe want it to be?”

We’ve finished eating now. I stir the leftover chili at the bottom of my bowl, staring down at it as I search for a response. “I... don’t know.”

“Don’t you?” Brandy is still doing the talking. Greg is listening in that grave way he has, nodding occasionally. “Isn’t this the guy who took care of you all those years when you were wild?”

“Yeah. I mean, I had other bodyguards too that traded off, but it was mostly him.”

“You always seemed to have certain feelings about him. All of us noticed it.”

I blink. Flush deeper. “Guilt. Shame. Those are the feelings I’ve always had about him.”

“Sure,” Greg says softly. “But those are just the most obvious ones, so those are the ones you always focused on. But why would you feel so intensely about it—so much that you preferred not to even think about him—if he didn’t matter to you?”

They’re right. Of course they’re right. And just because I’m trying to be smart and make good, healthy decisions now doesn’t mean I can vanish or file away my own feelings.

Very real feelings.

The way I’ve always felt so attached to Caleb, even back when I was barely twenty-one and actively throwing my life away.

He shouldn’t have mattered so much to me if he was really just a bodyguard in my mind.

“Maybe. But it doesn’t matter,” I mumble.

“What? Why doesn’t it matter?” Brandy sounds utterly outraged. “If you’re into him, maybe—”

“Maybe nothing. I’m a job to him.” I’m still talking in hushed tones. I doubt our voices will travel all the way back down the hall and through the closed door of the guest room, but I’m not about to take a chance. “I’m a job. He’s obsessive about boundaries. He’ll never think about me that way.”

Even as I say the words, I know they’re not entirely true. He kissed me, after all. It’s been more than a week now since it happened, but it definitely occurred.

But the heart of my protestation is real. Accurate. No matter what passing attraction he might feel, he holds his heart and his feelings in a merciless grip. He’ll never let himself fall for a client.

And hoping it will happen is a recipe for heartbreak.

“You don’t know that. It seems like he’s been acting pretty devoted.”

“It’s his job,” I snap toward Brandy, then feel bad for my tone and soften it. “I’m sorry. But you’re not helping me by trying to convince me to pine for this. It’s one of those hopeless deals. And honestly, I don’t need the stress and angst of a relationship—particularly not a doomed one. It’s not going to be good for me.”

“Okay.” Brandy doesn’t look convinced, but she’s clearly backing down.

“We get it. You know yourself best. If you say it’s a no-go, we believe you.”

I smile at Greg, feeling better. Still flustered but more composed. “Now can we please change the subject and talk about something else?”



That evening, after my friends have left and I've cleaned up the kitchen, I head for my bedroom, ready to get lost in a book. My focus has returned after my concussion, so I'm finally able to read again.

As I'm walking the hall and passing the guest room, the sound of a voice inside the room distracts me.

It's Caleb. Obviously. He's the only other person in the house since Mick is checking the perimeter, which he does every hour all through the night. The voice has to be Caleb's, and I'd recognize it even in a different context. Even muffled by the closed door.

I assume he's talking to Mick or Trey or maybe reporting in with an update to William or Arthur, and I'm about to keep walking.

Then I hear him saying clearly, "Mom, you need to stop."

I pause again. It's wrong. Absolutely wrong to eavesdrop. But it's also irresistible, and clearly I'm not strong enough to withstand the temptation.

So I listen.

"I told you you're wrong about that." He sounds different than usual. More relaxed. Almost soft, even though he's clearly impatient about their conversation.

He sounds like a son might sound with his mother.

"I know what you think. It's what you've thought for years no matter how many times I tell you to stop hoping for ridiculous things."

I wish I could hear the other side of the conversation. There are too many things this might be about, and I have no clear background to work with in deciphering it.

"Yes," he continues after a minute. "I know. You're not imagining the whole thing out of nothing. But there's not anything to hope for here, and I don't want you to be disappointed when it doesn't work out with the happy ending you're looking for." A brief pause. "Yes, I do know how she feels. She's a client. And anything more than professionalism



is prompted by a very unnatural situation rather than anything real.”

Oh shit. Is his mom actually quizzing him about me?

Maybe it’s a different client. Maybe I’m misunderstanding. I need to get my heart back into its proper place in my chest because it’s suddenly exploded into wild flutters.

“I know, Mom. I know. I know you just want me to be happy. I am happy. I’ve got a good life. I don’t—” She must have interrupted him because he’s quiet for a minute before he adds, so softly I can barely hear it, “Yeah. Maybe I sometimes want more. But that doesn’t mean I have to have it.”

My throat aches so much I can barely swallow. That’s how much the admission touches me. Even without the full context.

“Okay. I can’t stop you from hoping. But in this situation, I don’t think you know better than me.”

I smile at that and then realize it sounds like the conversation is about to end. There’s no way in hell I can be caught eavesdropping. I quietly walk the rest of the way down the hall until I reach my bedroom. I close the door, making the latch click as soundlessly as I can.

Caleb doesn’t have another client. Not right now. Not anytime recently. He’s been working exclusively for the Worthings for years.

He must have been talking about me. His mom must believe he’s into me or something, and she wants to encourage the relationship.

That’s not really surprising. Moms will often do that kind of thing. Not that I have personal experience since I never knew my own mom, but still... It’s common knowledge.

She’s trying to press for something to happen between me and Caleb, and he very obviously shut her down.

Exactly as I did with my friends.

He said sometimes he wants more. Could he possibly have been referring to me?

Unfortunately, logic pushes into my fluttery responses. He could just as easily been referring to relationships in general. Sometimes he wants more in his life, wants a real relationship. He hasn't had one as long as I've known him. Sure, he might not have told me, but there's no possible way I can conceive of a relationship lasting with Caleb's routine work schedule.

No. He has no relationship. But sometimes he'd like one. Anyone might.

That's a much more likely interpretation of what I overheard than that he might be secretly yearning for me.



I can't read. I can't watch TV. I can't even begin to sleep.

I change into my pajamas, brush my teeth, and do my minimal skin routine. Then I brush out my hair and leave it loose and straight since I like how that looks best.

Not that it matters. Caleb has turned in for the night. He's not going to see me again even though I'm looking pretty and almost sensual with my loose hair, clean face, and the lace straps of my camisole.

I stare at myself in the mirror for a minute or two, wondering if Caleb likes how I look or if he'd like me better if I had bigger boobs or poutier lips.

If he would, he's out of luck—I'm not planning on getting any work done on my face or body. I used to talk about getting a breast augmentation, and for a while I was seriously considering it, but that was back when I was too immature and unfocused to actually commit to a procedure like that. I figured I'd probably do it in the future, but after rehab, I changed my mind.

Part of recovery has been learning to accept and be content with who I am, and for me that includes my appearance. Since my reasons for change would be outward focused—what I imagine men might prefer—I wouldn't be making the physical alteration for myself.

So I'm not going to do it at all.

I hardly ever think about it anymore. I've been happy with my life and my appearance lately. It's only since Caleb has become part of it again that it's even crossed my mind.

I'm conscious of my body again because I want *him* to be conscious of it too.

Finally I leave my bathroom and walk over to my bed, determined to pick up a book and make myself read.

Or at least scroll through videos on my phone.

I last no more than ten minutes before I'm climbing out of bed again. I can't.

I simply can't.

I'm anxious and jittery and restless and lonely, and I need something.

If it's not company, I'm afraid it might be getting high.

I leave my bedroom, walk down the hall, and knock on Caleb's door.

I'm doing it before I can think through why, before I can conjure up some sort of plausible excuse.

"Come in," he calls out, sounding surprised and alert. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." I open the door and look in on him.

He's stretched out on his bed on top of the covers, wearing his old sweats but no socks and no shirt. He's sitting up already, reaching toward the dresser where I can see a T-shirt wadded up haphazardly.

"No, don't get up," I say hurriedly, embarrassed by my spontaneous gesture. "I shouldn't have bothered you. Everything's fine."

"What's going on then?" He's still sitting up, his eyes scanning me closely. His hair is slightly mussed, he's got an obvious five-o'clock shadow, and the waistband of his sweats

is riding low, revealing a whole tantalizing stretch of firm skin and dark body hair.

“It’s nothing. I didn’t think about the time. I was just wondering...” I grapple for a somewhat believable explanation. “I was feeling kind of anxious for some reason. I don’t know why. Has there been any more news on the stalker situation?”

There.

That wasn’t too bad for an excuse.

Maybe he’ll buy it.

His brows pull together, and his mouth turns down into a frown. “You haven’t gotten any strange messages or hang-ups, have you? I blocked all numbers on your phone except those in your contacts, so he shouldn’t be able to get through.”

“No. Nothing like that. There’s no reason for me to be jittery. I just am. It could be anything. Even the time of the month. I’m sure it’s nothing. As far as I know, he hasn’t made even the smallest move in my direction except using his credit card somewhat close to me and posting on that message board.”

When I see something twist briefly on Caleb’s face, I take a few steps over. “What? What is it? Has something else happened?”

He gives a rough sigh. “Yes.”

“Then tell me.” I sit down on the edge of the bed. When he scoots over to the other side, I move into a more comfortable position, folding my legs up beneath me. “Caleb, you have to tell me. It’s not fair otherwise.”

“I know. I just don’t want you to be too frightened to live your life.”

“I’m not too frightened. But I can’t even be prepared if I don’t know the danger.”

“He’s been leaving you roses.”

“What?”

“Roses. That’s how he started with Jade. Single red roses at random places she regularly went.”

“You’ve found roses for me?”

“On the SUV. Near the art supplies in the storage room of the community center. And earlier this evening, Mick found one at the end of your driveway.”

“Oh my God!” I rasp out the word softly, completely distracted from my physical restlessness just a few minutes ago.

“I’ve been catching them before you see them. You haven’t found any other roses anywhere recently, have you?”

“No. Not at all. I can’t believe it. So he’s really fixated on me now?”

“It looks that way.”

“And we can’t just send him back to prison?”

“Not for the roses, no. Even with his history, he’ll have to convey more of a threat. The laws still haven’t adapted to deal with stalking effectively.”

“Okay.” I work my lower lip with my teeth until I realize what I’m doing. I turn my body and prop up on the pillows. “Well, then we’ll keep doing what we’re doing and not take any unnecessary risks.”

“Yes. That’s the best plan.”

“And if there’s any real danger, you need to tell me. I’ll back off on my outings if you really think it’s too risky.”

“I’m glad to hear that, but we’re not there yet. He’s one guy. He’s relatively smart for a criminal, but he’s not some sort of mastermind. I’m going to handle it. I’m going to take care of you.”

My chest clenches. So does my throat. “Okay. Thanks.”

We’re silent for a moment. He’s reclining back now, and I’m slumped against two pillows and the headboard. We’re both on top of the covers, so it doesn’t really feel like we’re in bed together.

I'm glad to be close to him though.

"So did you sense something?" Caleb asks at last.

"What do you mean?"

"You came in here. Nervous and trembly. It's not like you. Did you sense something? Even a minor detail might be an important clue."

I shake my head. "No. I don't think I noticed anything. Maybe it's intuition." Then I think back to what he said and frown at him. "And I wasn't nervous and trembly."

"You said you were—"

"Anxious. I wasn't trembly!"

He chuckles at that. "If you say so."

"I do say so."

"I thought you seemed a little shaky."

"I was not shaky! Don't exaggerate."

"Understood." His lips twitch, his eyes warm and soft. "You were a tower of strength, as you always are."

"Thank you. That's more like it." I'm fighting off giggles. I stretch out my legs and feel better now than I have all evening. "Not to cast any doubt on my tower-of-strengthness, but would you mind if I stay in here for a little while? I won't be a distraction if you want to work or do whatever."

"Is that what you think?" He seems to be silently laughing now. His shoulders shake a couple of times.

"Yes." I peer at him questioningly. "You think I'm going to bother you?"

"Not bother. Distract."

"Oh." I'm not sure what to make of his face, but my first instinct is to be slightly hurt. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—"

"For fuck's sake, Louisa," he says, reaching out to grab my arm before I can get up. "I was teasing. If it makes you feel better, you can stay in here for as long as you want. If you don't mind, just stay on top of the covers."

“Of course.” I beam at him since I suddenly realize he didn’t mean I would be a nuisance. He meant I might be a distraction in an entirely different way.

I’m not about to push through any of his boundaries, but I don’t mind being a distraction like that.

I reach down to the bottom of the bed to grab a soft throw blanket and use it to cover my legs. Then I unlock my phone and start scrolling through recent notifications.

When I slant a look over at Caleb, he’s still doing that silent laugh at me.

But I don’t mind it this time. It’s warm and fond and... intimate. I really like him this way.

It would be nice if he was always this way.

I shoot him a quick smile and turn back to my phone. He continues doing what he was doing on his tablet.

I assume it’s not looking at porn.

We lie together on top of his covers for a long time, until I start to get sleepy. I put down my phone. I should get up and go to bed. I feel better now. There’s no reason not to.

Instead, I close my eyes and pull the throw blanket farther up over me.

In a minute or two, I’ve fallen asleep.



It’s later that night—how much later, I’m not sure—that I wake up again.

It’s dark in the room now. Caleb is still on the bed beside me. Neither one of us are under the covers yet.

But something has definitely changed.

His body has changed.

I’m not fully awake—just conscious enough to know that it’s Caleb beside me and there is something about his body that

I really like.

He's pressed up against me. He wasn't before. One or both of us must have rolled in our sleep. I rub myself against him and he groans, low and hoarse.

Washed with pleasure at the thick sound, I rub against him some more.

"Louisa." His voice isn't normal. It's groggy, like he's barely awake the way I am, like he isn't fully conscious any more than me.

I'm glad. It puts him on my level—acting on pure instinct rather than self-will and reasoned control.

Moving my hands, I start to stroke his shoulders, arms, back.

He moans again and slides his hands down to my bottom. "Yes," he says in almost a hiss. "Baby, touch me."

I like being called baby. I've been called that before—plenty of times—although more often it got shortened to "babe," which I've always hated. But the way Caleb says it sounds different. Intimate. Emotional.

It feels like we're more than bodies moving together.

Since he told me to touch him, I do. I slide my hands to his chest, rubbing them along the firm, rough breadth of him and then down to his flat abs. Then even lower.

He's wearing a pair of old sweats, and his erection is very obvious beneath the loose fabric. I feel him over his pants, and he groans again.

My body is throbbing now, and my breathing has quickened. The fabric is an annoying obstacle, so I slip my hands underneath his waistband. The pulsing between my legs intensifies as I find the warm, hard flesh of his erection. He's big in my hands, and I explore with a brazen entitlement I've never experienced before.

Like he's mine to touch like this.



“Oh fuck,” he gasps, his whole body jerking as I stroke him. “Just like that. Oh fuck, Louisa.”

He starts to rock his hips into my hands, and it’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever known.

I tighten my fingers around him, and he makes a choking sound.

Then he suddenly rolls me over on my back and moves on top of me. “Louisa. Baby.” He finds my mouth in the dark and kisses me, and I open for him immediately, letting his tongue delve and explore. I still have his erection in my hands, and I keep stroking him as we kiss.

I’ve known Caleb for a long time, but I’ve never known him like this before. All his boundaries and defenses are down. He isn’t stoic, isn’t controlled, isn’t forever holding back.

Part of my mind knows it’s because he’s barely woken up, and that glimmer of knowledge prompts me to ask when he finally breaks the kiss, “You’re awake?”

“Yes.” He’s kissing a line down my neck and dragging my camisole off over my head at the same time.

“And you want this?”

“Fuck, do I want this.” He’s bared my breasts now, and he takes one of my nipples between his teeth, giving it a gentle tug.

I arch up off the bed with a breathless cry.

Then he does it again. “I’ve always wanted this.”

I dig my fingers into the back of his neck and hold on. “You’re not going to push me away this time?”

“No. Never. I’m going to take you just like this. I’m going to make you mine. At last.” The words are soft and hoarse, and he keeps teasing my breasts as he speaks.

I almost come right then and there, simply from the pure hotness of it.

He pulls down my pajama pants and panties, and I kick them off over my feet. Then I’m completely naked, and one of

his hands is between my legs.

He kisses me again as he explores, and I whimper into his mouth as his fingers grow bolder. I'm already wet and so aroused that I can't lie still. I'm trying to ride his hand when he penetrates me with two fingers.

"Shit, you're already ready for me." He breaks the kiss and ducks his head, panting against my neck. "Shit, baby, I can't wait much longer. I've wanted you for so long."

"Then take me now." I push down his pants, relieved when he helps so we can get them off completely. "Please, Caleb, don't make me wait anymore."

He kisses me hard, deep. And as he does, he settles himself between my legs. He uses his hand to guide himself into position, and I bend my knees as he eases himself in. I moan low and long as he enters me, the size of him forcing my body to stretch around him. My hands are still on the back of his neck, and I dig my fingernails in as he sinks deeper.

"Yes. Fuck, yes, you're so tight. So sweet. So perfect. Fuck, Louisa, tell me how it is for you." Tension and heat are radiating off his body.

"It's so good." I arch my back and bend my legs up even more, trying to relax around the length of him. The pulsing at my center has intensified. It wants me to move. It wants *him* to move. We need to answer the pulsing. We need to move together.

I rock my hips, and both of us gasp.

"Please, Caleb. I need... I need it." I rock my hips again, compelled by that deep pulsing that's overwhelming everything else.

He readjusts his weight, moving one hand to grip my bottom as he starts to thrust. His motion is steady, and the friction makes me groan helplessly.

"How's that?" he asks thickly. "Is this what you need, baby?"

“God yes. Yes. Oh God.” I’m babbling and can’t stop as my body rushes after the pleasure. I claw at his back as my hips move shamelessly, trying to match his rhythm. “Take me just like this. Make me come. I need it. I need it so…” My words get swallowed up in a little cry as his motion accelerates.

“Fuck, you’re close, baby. You’re close already.”

I’m almost sobbing now as he thrusts hard and fast. My feet have come up off the bed as I pull my knees toward my shoulders, and his hand is strong against my butt, guiding the motion of my hips.

“Oh God!” I gasp and freeze as all the sensations coil down tight.

Caleb’s motion hasn’t slowed even as my body clamps down around him. “There you go. Here it comes. Come for me. Come for me now.”

I choke on the pleasure as my body erupts in a hard climax. I shake through the spasms, making all kinds of helpless sounds as I try to ride out the pleasure with my hips.

Caleb is still talking me through it. “That’s right. So hot. So sweet. So fucking sweet. Ride it out, sweetheart. Take all of it. It’s all for you.”

There are tears on my face when I finally start to relax, and I can feel the heat and satisfaction through every inch of my body. Caleb has stopped thrusting as I come down, but he’s still hard inside me.

I can feel him. I can feel all of him.

He lowers his head to kiss my mouth. Then my cheek. Then the pulse in my throat. “Your heart is racing like crazy,” he murmurs over my skin.

“Well, I just had a really good orgasm. What do you expect?”

He presses another little kiss on my pulse point. “It feels like it’s beating just for me.”

“It is.” I stroke his hair, the back of his neck, the line of his spine. When I reach his ass, he gives a little thrust. “Yeah. Like that. Take me again. I need more of you.”

“You have me. All of me you ever want. Okay, baby. Let’s try it this way this time.” He moves my legs so they’re wrapped around him, and I keep holding on to his butt as he starts to thrust again. “How’s that?”

He’s deeper now, but I love it. I arch up and toss my head against the pillow as I groan uninhibitedly.

“Talk to me, baby.” His voice is hoarser than before. More breathless. He isn’t going to last much longer.

“It’s good. So good. I want you to let go.”

“I will.”

“Now. I want you to let go now. I want...” I lose the train of thought as a jolt of pleasure shoots through me. My channel clamps down hard.

He lets out a stifled exclamation, and his motion gets even faster, harder. “Fuck. Oh fuck, Louisa. You’re gonna—”

“Come again.” I gasp as I do. This orgasm isn’t quite as powerful, but it slices through me in a fast, hot rush. I’m not prepared. I cry out as my body shudders through the release.

He comes right after me, pushing clumsily against my contractions with loud, rough, animalistic grunts.

He lets go exactly as I wanted him to. He isn’t holding anything back and bangs the bed against the wall with the force of his motion, letting out a loud bellow as he falls over the edge.

Then we collapse together on the bed, tangled together, both of us panting raggedly.

Eventually I manage to unwind my legs from around his hips, but I still can’t move the rest of my body. When he shifts on top of me, I whimper.

He finally rolls off me with a groan.

I'm fully awake now. Moisture is spilling down my inner thighs.

We didn't use a condom. My period should be starting any day now, so the timing isn't likely for pregnancy, but still...

What happened to us? It's like we were possessed by some carnal, primal force. Both of us.

Neither one of us is normally like that.

I'm already sore between my legs, and I'm terrified about what Caleb will say once he finally catches his breath.

He didn't want to do this.

He said very clearly he didn't want to do this.

He didn't want to be *that man*.

And yet...

He's going to hate himself—and maybe even hate me.

“Come here, baby.”

He's rolled over onto his side of the bed, and I scoot to reach him. He pulls me against his body, wrapping one arm around me.

He kisses my hair. “It's going to be all right.”

It's still dark in the room, and I know there's a conversation waiting for us when the morning finally arrives.

But Caleb is holding me right now, and he said it would be all right.

I let myself relax.



I drift into a light doze, but it's only a couple of hours later that I wake up as Caleb is pulling away from me.

Blinking a few times, I make out him dropping his legs over the side, then sitting up on the edge of the bed.

It's still mostly dark in the room. It's just after six in the morning. But my eyes have adjusted, and I can see clearly. I focus on the stretch of bare skin over Caleb's strong back and broad shoulders.

There are a few light scratches down low. I must have made them, although I don't remember doing any such thing.

I sit up too. "So should we talk about it?"

He turns his head. Lets out a long exhalation.

"You don't want to do it again?" I ask softly.

When he gives his head a brief shake, I'm hurt but not surprised.

I say, "I know. It was a mistake, and it shouldn't have happened, and you're sorry about all of it, and it can't happen again."

He turns around all the way to face me. His mouth opens and then closes again.

"It's okay. I'm a big girl. We both got carried away. You don't think I was expecting a proposal or something, do you?"

"No, of course not. The problem is... it should have been a mistake, but it doesn't..." He shakes his head again with a throaty sound. "It doesn't feel like a mistake to me."

"Oh." I perk up. "Then maybe it wasn't."

"It must have been. It's entirely inappropriate in our situation. You aren't in normal circumstances right now. Danger always heightens and confuses feelings. And I crossed one boundary after another like a horny teenager getting lucky for the first time."

I can't help but giggle at that. "You didn't seem like a teenager to me."

"Well, that's good, I guess." He groans and combs his fingers through his hair distractedly, making more of a mess of it. "I really don't want to take advantage of you, Louisa."

"I promise I don't feel taken advantage of. Look, I don't know what any of this means any more than you do, but we're

good together. You have to admit that.”

“Yeah. We’re definitely good.” His mouth and eyes soften almost imperceptibly.

“So let’s not make any final decisions about it never happening again. We’ll put it on pause. Play it by ear. See what feels right.”

Very slowly he inclines his head in a single nod. “Okay. That’s sounds reasonable.”

“It is reasonable. I agree it’s a little awkward in this situation, but that doesn’t mean we should throw away something really good. So no hasty decisions. Not until we get a better feel for things between us.” I can’t believe I sound so sensible and mature. Almost laid-back, as if this isn’t the most important thing I’ve experienced in years.

But I need that slight distance right now. We both do. And I do think waiting and seeing what happens is the best option in this case.

The worst would be Caleb ending things for good.

“That’s a good plan. Thanks for... offering it.” He stands up and walks over to the dresser, grabs his T-shirt and pulls it on. “You’re sure you’re okay with things? If anything bothers you, I can... Shit, I can trade off with someone so I’m not always around.”

He makes a face, clearly expressing how much he hates that idea.

I hate it too. “No way. I don’t want you going anywhere. Not unless it’s really what you want. We’re both adults. We can deal with the fact that we had sex.”

“We didn’t even use a condom.”

“I know. That was our main mistake.” I shake my head, hoping we won’t end up with long-term consequences from that. “I think we’ll be okay because of the time of the month.”

“Okay.” He eyes me soberly. “Let me know either way.”

“Of course.”

We stare at each other for a minute.

Then he gives his head a shake and moves to the door.  
“You’re really okay with this?”

“Yeah. I’m okay. What about you?”

“I’m always okay.”

I’m not sure what to make of that comment, and I don’t have the chance to figure it out. He’s leaving the room. Walking across to the guest bathroom. I hear the door click behind him.

I sigh and collapse back on the pillow, reminding myself that what I told Caleb is true.

I am okay. The sex I had last night with Caleb was the best in my life—not just physically but also emotionally. And despite what I told him, I would have been very happy had he burst out with a declaration of love and eternal devotion.

But that’s a daydream. A rosy fantasy. That’s not the world as it is.

The real world is messy and complicated and sometimes dangerous, and it never gives us easy answers.

Not to things that mean the most.

So I’ll live in the real world and keep making decisions that are best for me.

And wait to see if Caleb can ever be one of those decisions.



MY PERIOD STARTS TWO DAYS LATER, SO I'M DEFINITELY NOT pregnant.

I'm relieved. Of course I am. A tiny part of me gets a thrill out of the idea of having Caleb's baby, but that's an irrational impulse I know better than to indulge. This would be the worst possible timing for a pregnancy. We're not together. I'm in danger because of my family, and he's in danger because he's protecting me. Nothing is clear or decided yet.

Plus Caleb has been standoffish since our conversation the morning after we had sex.

We agreed to put any major decisions on pause until we give it time and figure things out, but I didn't think that meant he would back off so much that it's like we're strangers. He's as cool and stoic as he used to be years ago. As he was the first week or so after he started working for me recently.

It's confusing. And it hurts.

It also pisses me off.

I try to rein in my instinctive indignation since it's not fair for me to try to control Caleb's preferred method of dealing with a messy situation. He might feel like his job is on the line. It's not. I'd never let having sex with me affect his livelihood. At very worst, we could do as he suggested and have him reassigned to another family member.

But the truth is the lines are blurry for him, and they probably should be for me too. I'm not his supervisor. I don't

pay his salary. But my family does, and I need to make sure not to exert any sort of pressure on him or make him feel uncomfortable.

In truth, I don't think that's the main issue holding him back. If he wasn't being such a guarded, closemouthed jerk, he might actually tell me what his problem really is.

He doesn't, of course. And I don't shake the answer out of him, which is what I really want to do. Instead, we go through the next five days with our regular schedule and routine, and he doesn't touch me even once.

It's not a good week, and I'm annoyed for most of it.

Caleb... Well, I have no idea what Caleb is.

On Saturday, I have dinner at a local seafood restaurant with my friends, but I'm not feeling all that energetic, so I'm back by nine (with Caleb in tow, of course). I take a shower since I still faintly smell of beer, and that lingering scent always makes me nauseated. Then I put on my pajamas and wander into my studio.

Caleb has retreated into the guest bedroom, and Trey is on duty outside, so I pull the cover off the canvas I've been working on for weeks now. It's an impressionistic portrait of Caleb from behind. He's walking into darkening woods, wearing dark clothes that blend into the scenery.

It feels like Caleb to me, but even someone who knows Caleb might not recognize it as him.

I work on his hair, the line of his shoulders. The creases on the back of his shirt. The stubborn cut of his jaw.

Then I take a step back and gaze at the painting.

It's good so far. It's him. Walking away from me.

Glancing at the clock, I'm shocked to see it's almost midnight. I have no idea how the time went by so quickly.

I don't feel sleepy, but I've gotten too unfocused to work any longer, so I put up my paints, wash my hands, and carefully re-cover the canvas so no one but me will see it.

It probably wouldn't reveal anything significant even if everyone else saw it. But it feels private, so I'd like to keep it that way.

I should go to bed now, but I don't want to. Instead, I flop down on the couch, stretched out lengthwise with a throw cushion behind my head.

Caleb has probably gone to bed. He's asleep. No matter how much I chide him, he always works long hours. Far too long. He needs to rest. And evidently he's not being driven crazy with frustration and uncertainty like I am.

My mind won't settle, and—perhaps predictably—it keeps landing on an evening years ago. It was during the month or two when I'd started to party pretty hard but hadn't yet dropped out of college. I was on the last legs of my relationship with the guy who got me into the wild lifestyle, and my dad was worried, so he'd talked me into spending a couple of weeks at his place over Christmas and New Year's while my boyfriend was on a skiing trip in Europe.

Caleb was still assigned to my dad back then. I'd seen him around for several months, ever since I first met him in Paris, but I'd had other things to focus on, so he existed only on the periphery of my mind. Interesting but inconsequential.

But those weeks I stayed with my dad, I saw him all the time. I didn't have a lot to distract me since the friends I'd been hanging out with were home for the holidays. And Caleb was always there.

He never said a word to me, but I kept feeling his eyes on me. I tried to chat. I tried to flirt. I wore skimpy outfits in the hopes of teasing him into a reaction. But nothing. He remained an impervious statue, and I couldn't get him to budge even an inch.

He was a challenge that slowly drove me crazy, and I couldn't get even the slightest response from him.

Back then I lived my life used to getting my own way in almost everything, so I wasn't a bit happy with my failure with Caleb.

On New Year's Eve, I went out with a couple of friends and got sloppy drunk. My dad was already in bed when the driver took me home. It was a warmish night for the first of January—even in the relatively temperate DC area. I liked the feel of the outside air, so I didn't want to go inside. I collapsed outside on a chaise by the pool and either passed out or fell asleep.

A couple of hours later, I came back to consciousness with someone shaking me.

Caleb. He was leaning over, gripping my shoulder, literally shaking me awake. "Louisa," he was saying. "Louisa. Wake the hell up. Right now."

Everyone called me Lulu back then. No one but my dad called me Louisa. For some reason, the sound of my name on his lips struck me strangely. Felt intimate. I smiled up at him groggily. "I knew you had a thing for me."

I didn't actually know any such thing, but I used to say a bunch of really stupid stuff.

"I was making sure you weren't dead or comatose," Caleb said, his brow lowering into a frown. "Drunk little girls really aren't my thing."

I gasped in indignation, horribly offended by the words even in my fuzzy state. "Asshole!"

"Yes. Get up and go to bed. In your state, you're likely to roll over into the pool and drown."

"I'm not that out of it. I'm not even drunk anymore."

"Call it whatever you want. You're something, so go to bed."

"I'll go to bed whenever I want to. You can't boss me around."

"So we're going the little-girl route again, are we?" He must have been sounding snide on purpose to jar me into alertness because the tone really wasn't like him. Even back then, he was never curt or dismissive with me. He was professional.

“Asshole!” I almost spit out the word that time. I was so, so angry.

“We already covered that. No argument from me. So get your little ass moving and go to bed.”

Then, before I could react, he turned and walked away, as if I weren't even worth the trouble of lingering.

It was his walking away that made me the angriest. I might not have been dead drunk anymore, but I was definitely not at my best. I never made good decisions in that condition.

I stood up. Glared at him as he walked away. Then I stripped off my little gold dress and bra, leaving me in only my heels, my panties, and my jewelry. With a malicious kind of glee, I followed him across the pool deck.

He opened the door into the house and only then turned around, clearly planning to wait until I got inside so he could lock up.

He froze when he saw me. Stood motionless. Staring. There wasn't much in the way of emotion on his face, but his eyes did run up and down my mostly naked body several times before he managed to yank them away.

That wasn't much. But it was something. It felt like a reaction at least.

I had him at a disadvantage. It felt like a victory. A petty, immature victory, but the nature of it didn't matter to me back then. At least not in the state I was in.

He stayed, frozen except for his eyes, as I sauntered into the house, holding my clothes and bag, and gave him a teasing glance over my shoulder.

Remembering that evening now, I flush hot. Shudder through a full-body cringe of mortification.

I was such a bitch. He must have despised me. Or worse, pitied me.

It's a wonder he's treated me so well since he came back into my life. No wonder he's still keeping me at arm's length

even after our having sex. Anyone with half a brain would be doing the same thing. He can never trust me. No one can.

He's such a good guy, and I don't deserve a relationship with him.

I don't even deserve to have sex with him a second time.

I already have more than I should hope for after the way I trashed my life and treated everyone around me. If that means I go through the rest of my days in a kind of three-quarters life, cutting off the parts of my nature that can't be indulged, then I'll be grateful for even that.

Not positive thoughts. Not healthy thoughts. Not even accurate thoughts, although they feel both true and inevitable at the moment.

It's been a long time since I've fallen into this kind of mental spiral. I'm working on dragging myself out of it by reminding myself of all the good things I know to be true about myself and my life when a voice from the hallway surprises me.

"You okay?"

Caleb. I know it's him without even opening my eyes or turning my head. No one else sounds like Caleb.

I'm so startled I jump up into a sitting position on the couch and turn to face him. "Yes. I'm fine."

"Are you?" He's wearing pajama pants and a white undershirt that's not pulled down all the way. He must have put it on before leaving his room. His hair is ruffled, he needs to shave, and his bare feet seem unnervingly intimate against my hardwood floors.

"Yeah. Just couldn't sleep. Why?"

"I don't know. Felt like something was wrong out here."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you up. But everything is fine."

I have no idea what kind of vibes he managed to pick up from inside his room, but the fact that he knew something was

wrong is even more disturbing.

He walks over and lowers himself onto the couch beside me. Glances over, his eyes scanning my face with a scrutiny that misses nothing. “Tell me what’s up, Louisa.”

With a sigh, I slump back against the couch. “It’s nothing really. I just... usually I do a good job of looking forward, but sometimes I glance backward instead. And it’s... It doesn’t make me feel good.”

“Oh.” His expression relaxes, although he still looks thoughtful, reflective. “I get that. Everyone has regrets, but you shouldn’t beat yourself up over them.”

“What I have are a lot more than regrets.”

“Why are yours worse than other people’s?”

“Are you serious? I spent years spinning out of control, indulging every passing whim at other people’s expense.”

“You hurt yourself more than others.”

“Maybe. But I hurt other people too. I treated the people in my life like trash.” I pause, sucking in a weird, ragged breath. “I treated you like trash.”

He gives a dry huff. “That was my job.”

“No, it wasn’t. Not all of it.”

“Were you out here stewing about me?” he asks, looking genuinely surprised and vaguely disturbed by the idea.

I lick my lips. Glance away from him.

“Louisa, what the hell?”

“What the hell, what?” I demand, turning back. “Why shouldn’t I feel bad about the way I treated you? You’re the one who got the brunt of it.”

“I told you I’m not angry about it. I’m not holding it against you. You were making bad decisions, but even at your worst, you never actively tried to hurt other people. Not even me.”

“Sometimes I did.”

“You teased me, acted out because I represented control over your life. It wasn’t personal. I never took it personally. Give yourself a break, Louisa. You’ve taken responsibility for your own actions, and look at how far you’ve come since then.”

He’s making me feel better, but I’m still not sure I *deserve* to feel better. “You’re taking it too easy on me. You should make me grovel a lot more.”

Caleb chuckles at that. “What will groveling serve? You’ve apologized. You’ve changed. You’re living a good life now. And you offered me grace when I messed up.”

“When did you mess up?” My eyes are wide, confused.

His mouth twists. “Uh, less than a week ago. I lost control and had sex with you even after I promised myself I wouldn’t take advantage of you like that.”

“You didn’t take advantage.” My cheeks are warm. I’m too self-conscious to check his face. “I wanted it.”

“But still... I shouldn’t have done it.”

“I think you should have.” I’m not sure what’s gotten into me, but I’m suddenly tired of not admitting it.

“What?” He kind of chokes on the word. He’s turned halfway toward me, staring at me in startled disbelief.

“You heard me. I don’t think we did anything wrong. We both wanted it. It didn’t compromise my safety. Why shouldn’t we have had sex when both of us wanted it? I wouldn’t mind doing it again.”

I’ve gotten brave enough to meet his eyes now, and I can see his expression change. Get hotter. Hungrier.

My whole body clenches in excitement. “We said we’d play it by ear. I thought that left things open to doing it again.”

“It did,” he says thickly.

“So what’s the problem? You’ve been treating me like I’m contagious ever since.”



He gives his head a firm shake. “The problem is—” He breaks off, his expression changing. “Wait a minute. Wait just a fucking minute.”

I frown at his sudden indignation. “Wait for what?”

“Is that what you’re upset about?”

“Is what—?”

“You weren’t really out here stewing over all your sins because of me?”

“Not because of you,” I say quietly, wanting to tell him the truth despite the raw and naked nature of the conversation. “Because of me.”

“But was it triggered because I’ve been trying to...?” He trails off with a throaty half cough.

“You’ve been trying to what?”

“To be good.”

“I’m trying to be good too. I just think maybe we can be good together.”

He chuckles again at that. A real laugh. One that lights up and warms his eyes. “Louisa, you have to already know I want you again. I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings by trying to be careful. I never wanted to do that.”

“I know. You didn’t do anything wrong. I’m just tired of always being *careful*. I want to...”

“What do you want?”

“I want to not always have to cut myself off from the things I want just because I’ve made mistakes before.”

He meets my eyes. Holds them. We share something deep in that gaze. It touches me. Reshapes me.

“I want that too,” he murmurs thickly.

We sit in silence for a long minute, saying nothing. Just gazing at each other.

Then I finally exhale. “So anyway. Those were my spiraling thoughts this evening when I should have been

sleeping. What about you?"

"I wasn't asleep either."

"What were you spiraling about?"

"What do you think?"

My breath hitches. "And what was the nature of your mental spiral?"

"Mostly just giving myself lecture after lecture about not leaving the bedroom and coming to find you."

"Oh." I let out a silly giggle. "Maybe you should shut up with some of your lectures."

His laugh is abrupt. The sound of it makes me smile.

He has several different kinds of laughs, and I like them all. I never realized he laughed at all until the past few weeks.

As we smile at each other, I think of something else we could be doing.

I remember that hungry look I caught on his face earlier.

He wants to do it too.

I know it.

I *know* it.

I lick my lips. My cheeks grow warmer. My blood starts to throb.

"Don't," Caleb says gruffly, his shoulders stiffening.

"Don't want?"

"Don't look at me like that."

I roll my eyes, my sudden arousal mingled now with annoyance. "You can't go around demanding someone else change how she looks. I can't help how I look."

He shifts his position on the couch. "You can stop thinking things that make you look that way."

"And you definitely can't go around telling someone else how she's supposed to think. If I want to think about having

sex with you, I'll damn well do it."

See, that's what happens when I get caught up in the moment and don't have time to think through the smartest things to do and say. Words come tumbling out in an embarrassing, far-too-revealing rush.

And I end up saying something like that.

Caleb tenses up even more. "You should not be thinking about anything remotely like that."

It's too late now to hold back. It feels like Caleb is already inside me. There's nowhere left for me to hide.

Besides, he already knows I want to have sex with him.

"Why not?" I demand. "My thoughts are my own, and you don't get to decide what they are. So if I want to fantasize about you throwing me down onto the bed, tearing off my clothes, and fucking me until we're both satisfied, I'm allowed to do so without any say from you on the matter."

"Louisa." The one word was low and breathless and raspy. The heat has taken over everything else in his eyes now, and one of his hands is clutching the couch cushion hard.

"It's sex, Caleb. We had it less than a week ago."

"You think I don't know that? You think I'm not reliving it in my mind every other minute?"

"Then why are you acting like it's the end of the world?" I scoot closer to him, mostly to add impact to my words.

"What's going on with you tonight?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'm just tired of accepting less than what I want. Tired of never asking for it. Tired of being so guilt-ridden from everything I've ever done wrong that I'll never even try for something that might make me happy. Tired of being afraid to feel good even a little because I might not be able to control it." My voice cracks at the end because my burst of words has suddenly gotten too close to the core of insecurity in my heart.

I turn away, not wanting Caleb to see that he's upset me.

I don't even know why I'm upset except it feels like he was rejecting me—in the deepest, most intimate way.

He whirls me back around, his hands on my shoulders, his expression fierce. “No. Don't ever think that way about yourself. I never do.”

“Then *what*? What do you think about me? Why can't I be like any other women and ask for what I want?”

“Because you're not like any other women,” he rasps, his hands tightening on my shoulders. “And I've never been able to stop myself from wanting you no matter how off-limits you are—like a star that's so bright you think you can touch it but will always be forever out of reach.”

I'm panting now. Literally panting. His blue eyes, his strong jaw, his familiar face blurs briefly in front of my eyes before becoming clear again. “But... I don't want to be out of reach. Why do I have to be?”

He doesn't say anything. Just stares—that intense heat and hunger flaring up again on his face and not going away this time.

I've never—never—felt so desired, so beautiful, so yearned for as I do from the look in his eyes right then. Men have kissed me, touched me all over, fucked me, poured out an endless spiel of dirty talk or over-the-top romantic declarations, and they never made me feel the way Caleb is making me feel right now.

Just from the look in his eyes.

“Caleb?” I put a hand on his chest. “I'm not a star. I'm not a fantasy. I'm right here. You *can* reach me.”

He's breathing so raggedly I can hear it, feel his chest moving against my hand. Very slowly, one of his big hands lifts until he's lightly touching my cheek with his fingertips.

“See?” I'm trembling now—from an overload of excitement and emotion. “You can reach me. I'm sitting right here.”

He pulls in another ragged breath. Takes my head in both his hands. “I’m supposed to be good.”

“This is good. This is what I want.” I sway toward him unconsciously.

He bites off a groan and leans forward, claiming my mouth in a hard kiss.

It isn’t like it was the other night—groggy, instinctive, two bodies finding each other in the dark.

This is realer, harder, deeper. It’s all of me kissing him, and it’s all of him kissing me back.

My head nearly explodes from the pleasure, the power of it.

His tongue is in my mouth, delving deep, dueling with mine, possessing me completely. His hands move back slightly so they’re tangled in my hair. One of them fists around a handful of long hair, and I gasp against his lips at the shock of sensation the move triggers.

I’m clawing at his shirt, his shoulders, trying to rub myself against him.

Before I know what’s happening, he’s reached down to cup my bottom over my pajamas.

He lifts me up slightly and then lays me down on the couch before grabbing a throw blanket, and I raise my hips and then my shoulders so he can spread it out beneath me, protecting the couch.

Then he leans over, moves over me, doesn’t stop kissing me.

I’m already so aroused that I’m throbbing between my legs. The ache is deep, overwhelming, seems to radiate out through my whole body. I grind myself against him, thrilling when I find the hard bulge of an erection in his thin pants. I rock up into it until he breaks his mouth away from mine with a low groan.

“Jesus, baby. You’re going to kill me. I was going to be good. Not take advantage of you again. But I have no control

when it comes to you.”

“Good. I don’t want you to have control. I want you to let go. You aren’t taking advantage.”

He kisses me again—hard and deep and ravenous—and as he does, he works on my pajamas, pulling off my pants and panties and then tugging up my tank before breaking the kiss to yank it off completely.

He stares down at me, and it isn’t dark in the room. His eyes run all over my small breasts, flat belly, toned thighs. My body isn’t perfect—not even close—but the hunger in his eyes belies that knowledge.

He looks like he loves my body.

He looks like it’s his.

With a soft groan, he buries his face in my neck for a moment, sucking my throbbing pulse point. “Jesus,” he mumbles. “You’re beautiful. You’re... just for me.” Then he kisses a trail down to my breasts, teasing one nipple until I’m whimpering and squirming.

He pleasures one breast and then the other until I can’t keep quiet. I’m on fire, ready to explode.

Not just my body. Also my heart.

“You’re trembling.” He slides his mouth in a line between my breasts and even lower. “You’re so excited. I love how excited you are.”

“Of course I’m excited.” I arch up eagerly when he cups my breasts with both hands, mouthing kisses against my belly. “Fuck, Caleb, please. Please make me come.”

“I will, baby. Just for you. Open up for me.”

I part my thighs to make room for him, and he nuzzles me intimately. I’m wet and swollen, and he breathes me in.

“Now, Caleb, please.”

He licks a line along my folds, and I buck up off the couch.

Then he holds me open with his fingers and flicks my clit with his tongue. I toss my head against the cushion and try not to squeeze his head between my legs.

He slides two fingers inside me, pumping as he works with his lips and tongue. Just as I'm on the verge of coming, he backs off, and I sob as I lose the momentum of the orgasm. "Caleb!"

"Patience, baby. I want to make it good for you."

"It's already good. It's already—"

I fumble for purchase on the couch as he works me up to a peak again. When he backs off at the last minute, I cry out raggedly, trying to grind myself against his mouth and ride his fingers at the same time.

"So beautiful," he's murmuring. "So sweet. So eager. Let me do this for you."

I relax my body intentionally and have to bite back a loud exclamation when he sucks on my clit.

It goes on for a long time, him teasing me to the edge but not letting me fall over. Until I'm sobbing and clutching the couch throw beneath me and rocking shamelessly against his face.

Then he scrapes his teeth very lightly over my clit, and I fall apart completely. I cry out and shake hard as the pleasure washes over me in wave after wave.

When the intensity dissipates, Caleb is still stroking me gently. He presses a kiss against my groin before he straightens up.

I pull him down into a kiss, not even embarrassed when I taste myself on his lips.

This time, as he kisses me, he works on his pants, pushing them down and out of the way so he can free his erection. My hands move to his shaft irresistibly, and I squeeze and stroke until he's moaning. We have a brief interruption as he remembers a condom—he gets up to limp into the guest bedroom and comes out with a foil packet—then tears it open

and rolls it on. Then he guides himself into position between my thighs, and I wrap my legs around him as he enters me.

He's groaning helplessly against my neck, his hips making delicious little rocks and pushes. My hands slide down so I can dig my fingers into the firm muscles of his ass.

When he raises his head and straightens his arms, I can't hold back. I try to ride him from below until he begins to thrust for real.

He takes me fast and hard, and I'm right there with him, urging him on with hoarse pleas and wordless whimpers. We move together urgently, shamelessly, our bodies slapping against each other and making the couch shake.

Caleb is grunting like an animal, but occasionally he forms real words. "Louisa. Baby. Louisa. Yes."

As I reach another orgasm, I claw lines down his lower back and ass. "You... let go... too."

"Louisa."

"Yes. Let go, Caleb. Let go."

Then I'm coming hard and he's right behind me, his face contorting with pleasure. I feel him come inside me in a series of short spurts. He jerks his hips through the spasms, moaning out my name.

I pull him down on top of me, my legs still wrapped tight around him.

I hear him whisper again. "Louisa."

I can't catch my breath. We need to take care of the condom soon. And my feet are tingling painfully from lack of circulation.

But I wouldn't change a thing.

This is different from the other night.

This wasn't fumbling together in the dark.

This is real.

This is us.



All of us.

He knows me completely—everything I've ever done,  
everything I've ever been—and he still wants me.

Right now it feels like he always will.

THE NEXT MORNING I WAKE UP IN MY OWN BED. ALL ALONE.

I'm not surprised or particularly worried since I remember going to bed the night before. Caleb walked me to my doorway. Leaned down to kiss me gently. Then murmured, "Good night, baby" before he went to his own room.

So I was happy going to sleep at last and I'm still happy waking up. The kind of giddy where I want to giggle and hug myself.

I try to be mature and reasonable and remind myself that nothing is settled yet. There's still a stalker out there, and Caleb has made no promises. We've had sex twice. We're not in a serious relationship, and any number of things could happen to pull us apart.

None of my wise lectures make much of a dent in my mood. The only thing that does is when I go out to look for Caleb and discover he has some business to do away from the house this morning, and so he's not even here. Trey will be driving me to my health club to swim.

I manage not to overreact to the news or assume it's a sign of Caleb pulling away again. Especially since Trey's tone and expression indicates there's a real and potentially serious reason Caleb can't be here this morning.

Since I won't know anything more until he returns, I try to put the worries away so I can focus on swimming. Trey is a nice guy, and he's easy to chat with on the drive there and back.

My mood is still decent when I get back home, and it perks up immediately when Caleb comes out the front door as Trey and I come up the driveway.

“Is everything okay?” I ask him after jumping out of the car and hurrying over.

I want to throw myself at him in a hug, but I restrain the impulse. He reaches out and touches my hair before he appears to remember himself and withdraws his hand.

“Yeah, it’s fine. Sorry if you were worried.”

“What was going on?”

“I found the hotel where Montaigne has been staying this past week, so I drove over to check it out.”

“Is it close?”

“Yes. Within thirty minutes. I was hoping I could lay eyes on him, but he’s being careful. Evidently he’s away from his room during the day and only comes back at night.”

“So you think he’s stalking me?”

“I think that’s the most likely scenario. Since we haven’t seen him yet, he’s either a lot smarter than we gave him credit for or he hasn’t gotten very close yet.” He’s frowning. His eyes are distracted—like he’s not really seeing me.

“You’re worried.” When he starts to object, I continue on, “I can see it on your face. You think he’s about to do something?”

“Yeah. I don’t know why. We don’t have any clues to indicate he’s going to make a move, but my instincts are triggered. That usually means something.”

“Okay. Well, we’ll keep being careful then. Do you think I should cancel stuff on my schedule? I just have coffee with Brandy today and an art experience tomorrow.”

“If you don’t mind, it might be smart to cancel the art thing tomorrow. Those are in environments that are really hard for me to control. If you’re okay having coffee at Grindstone

today instead of one of the other places, I think it's fine to go ahead with that."

Grindstone is a small, local coffee shop—barely more than a hole in the wall. It doesn't have any trendy decor or creative flavors, but the coffee is good and it's never very busy. Plus there are only two doors and two windows for Caleb to watch.

"Sure. I'll tell Brandy we can meet there. She won't mind. Otherwise I'll stay in today and tomorrow, and maybe we can figure out what he's up to."

I sound optimistic, but I don't entirely feel that way. After all, this situation has the potential to go on forever. The only way for us to make progress is for Montaigne to make an actual move.

And that means moving against me.

But Caleb is the expert, and I'll follow his advice in this. Maybe he can catch him before he does anything to hurt me.

The last thing I want is to get hurt when it feels like I'm on the cusp of something really good for the first time in my life.



I meet Brandy at four for coffee since she took the afternoon off from work. We have a good time, although I can't tell her about any of my recent relationship occurrences because Caleb is standing a few feet away from our table the whole time.

Grindstone is mostly empty, and there are no threats or signs of danger, so overall the outing is uneventful, including the stop at the grocery store on the way home where I get preordered groceries brought out to the car curbside.

When we get home, Mick is checking around the house. Caleb explains they're doubling up on guard duty for the next few days until they can get a clearer line on Montaigne.

I have no objections to any of these arrangements. I simply mention if it goes on too long, we'll have to pull some more

help from other locations since the three of them can't work themselves to the bone with no end in sight.

After we park, Caleb checks in with Mick, and then he comes back to the car to help me lug in my groceries. I got a lot so we won't have to go out again anytime soon.

He's got about ten bags hooked over both his forearms, and he's reaching for more when I swat his hand away. "I can carry a few myself!"

He smiles. Warm. Soft. Fond. Genuine. It feels like an embrace. "I know you can. But that doesn't mean I don't want to do it for you."

I giggle. "Understood. But you've got enough. I'll get the rest."

"Fine. Just know that a man likes to show off for his woman. It's built into our DNA, so it's a hard impulse to fight."

My cheeks flush at the indication that I'm his woman. I thrill with a shudder of excitement that runs up and down my spine. "Well, do your best to fight it enough to let me carry these last three bags on my own."

"Done." He's still smiling as he turns toward the house, looking warm and relaxed and happy and *mine*.

That's when it happens.

There's a weird swooshing sound. I'm not sure I'll be able to describe it later. But I feel air moving beside my face just as Caleb is turning.

He keeps turning with an awkward jerk. Something strange happens to his expression. It's surprised. Then frozen for a couple of seconds.

Then he's suddenly moving. Pushing me down onto the ground, covering me with his body.

I hear gunshots. It must be Mick shooting back because Caleb is still on top of me. His weight is a lot. He feels tense and stiff, and there are groceries everywhere.

I can't even breathe for what feels like a long time.

Then I'm conscious of something else.

Blood. It's on me but not from me. It can't be. I would have felt if I'd been wounded.

It's not until Caleb hauls me up and drags me into the car before climbing in after me that I realize where the blood is coming from.

It's coming from him.

He's the one who was shot.



Two hours later, we're in the emergency room of the hospital for the second time in two weeks.

Caleb kept me in the back seat of the car, head pushed down so it wasn't exposed through the windows, for an endless eternity. He barked out orders over his phone. Called Trey in to help search for Montaigne. After an hour they declared that the area surrounding my house was clear, but Montaigne got away.

It was only then Caleb let me get him to the hospital. He was bleeding all this time.

When I discovered the wound was in his upper arm, I pulled off a strip of my long cotton top so I could bind it as tightly as possible, but it wasn't enough. It bled through the fabric, and Caleb simply ignored my pleas for him to get the medical attention he needed.

He kept saying, "Not until you're safe."

I'm not sure I've ever been more scared and desperate.

We finally get to the hospital, and the doctor confirms what Caleb kept saying. It's a clean wound. The bullet went all the way through, and it hit flesh but not bone. So it wouldn't have been serious had he not delayed so long and lost so much blood.

The doctor lectures him. I try not to give him a cool look of vindication, which he blithely ignores.

The police come and take our statements. We tell them who it was, but they don't appear to be convinced since things like that don't happen in small-town Maine. They keep speculating it was a hunting accident. Finally they leave. They're clearly not going to be much help.

There's a lot of waiting around in the emergency room, as always, and at some point my heightened adrenaline finally comes down. As it does, I feel sicker and sicker until I finally have to lean over and vomit into a trash can.

It's embarrassing, and I feel like collapsing afterward. The worst thing is Caleb tries to get up off the bed to help me, so I have to order him to stop being stupid in between heavens.

All in all, it's a miserable several hours, but he's finally discharged and told to take it easy and come back in if there's any sign of fever or unexpected symptoms.

Caleb is a grumpy bear on the way home, responding to my reasonable questions and suggestions with mutters and refusing to take the most basic of precautions with his health.

He wants to get back out and search for Montaigne himself, and I absolutely refuse to let him do it.

We're still in an argument when I park the car in front of the house. Stupidly, he tried to insist that he should drive us home, but I won that round. I'm prepared to be absolutely relentless in order to keep him here, but when he climbs out of the car, his knees buckle and he almost falls over.

So that ends the argument. He's too weak to do anything right now. I tell Mick to help him into the house and get him settled in the guest bedroom.

I take a quick shower and clean up, exhausted and still sick to my stomach and jittery from so many fears. After I change into my pajamas, I check on Caleb.

He's in sweats and a T-shirt. In bed with a sheet draped over him.

And he's scowling malevolently.

"Don't even start," I tell him. "You were shot. You don't get to kill yourself by running around aimlessly with a bullet wound."

"It wouldn't be aimless. We've got to find him."

"We will. At least we can take comfort in the fact that he's a bad shot." I speak lightly, hoping to break his mood.

It doesn't work. He shakes his head soberly. "He didn't miss."

"What?"

"He didn't miss. He wasn't aiming at you. He wouldn't kill you. Not from a distance. Not when he's never gotten close. Never gotten what he wants."

I gasp as the realization finally hits me. "You think he was aiming at you?"

"Yes. I'm in his way. I'm making it impossible for him to reach you. I've stopped him from getting you his roses. I've stopped him from getting messages through to you. And I'm stopping him from getting close to you. He wants me out of the way, and I'll be damned if I let him get what he wants."

"What about Mick and Trey? He'll go after them too, won't he?"

"Probably. I've instructed them to wear bulletproof vests until we get this resolved. And we've got two more guys coming up from DC to help us out."

"Okay. Then they're on the case, and you don't need to get out of your sickbed to help them. You need to get better, or you won't be any good to anyone."

"I know that," he grits out, glaring at me with narrowed eyes.

For the first time in hours, I almost laugh at his mutinous expression. "The better you take care of yourself, the sooner you'll be back up to full speed."



“I know that too. Doesn’t mean I have to like it. It’s some sort of torture. Stuck in this bed while you’re in danger.”

“Well, how about this? I’ll stay here with you. I need to take care of you anyway, so I’ll just hang out in here with you. That way you’ll know I’m not getting into any trouble when you aren’t there to protect me.”

He makes a grunting sound that I take for agreement.

“Okay then. So you stay in bed and try to rest, and I’ll stay where you can see me. Then we can both get what we want.”

“If I was getting what I want, I wouldn’t be injured.”

“Well, same, but it is what it is. Nothing to do about it now. At least you’re not dead.” My voice breaks as I realize how close the bullet came. How the unthinkable could have happened.

I could have lost him forever.

“Damn it, baby.” He shifts, making moves like he’s trying to push himself up out of the bed.

“No! Don’t you dare get up.”

“You’re about to cry.”

“No, I’m not. I’m fine.”

He doesn’t appear to believe me. I can hardly blame him since a tear slides down my cheek just then.

With a sigh, I walk around to the other side of the bed and climb in beside Caleb. I scoot close, and he wraps his good arm around me.

I hear him let out a thick exhale, like he’s finally relaxing.

“I’m okay, baby,” he murmurs, nuzzling at my hair. “I’d much rather I get shot than you get shot.”

“Well, maybe you can believe that I feel the same way. I mean, I’d rather get hurt than have you hurt. It works both ways, you know.”

He tightens his arm briefly. We adjust our positions to get more comfortable. Then I finally close my eyes, trying to let

go of the stress and fear of the day.

Nothing is resolved yet, but for right now Caleb is okay. He's safe, and so am I.

So we can finally rest.



The next day Caleb is feeling better. So he says.

From what I can tell, the wound is doing okay, and he doesn't have a fever, but his mood is in the pits.

I'm stuck in the house, unable to do anything to distract myself. And there's still no sign of Montaigne.

At the end of the day yesterday, I felt so close to Caleb as he held me, but today he's acting like he hates everything and everyone—and that includes me.

It's probably just being injured. For a man like Caleb, feeling helpless, unable to manage his body, has to be the worst. But he doesn't have to take it out on me when I'm just trying to help. After getting him breakfast, checking the wound, assisting him to get up and go to the bathroom and then straightening the bed while he's in there, I give him some space for the rest of the morning.

I try to amuse myself by working on painting. But Caleb's portrait annoys me, and I can't get inspired by anything else. So I go to the kitchen and work on preparing a homemade beef stew that needs to simmer for a couple of hours. We can have it for a late lunch, and at least it gives me something to do with my hands. It's gray and freezing out today, so hot stew will taste good.

Cooking occupies me for about an hour, but once I get it simmering, I'm bored and depressed again.

I check in on Caleb. He should be resting, but he's scowling at his tablet. When I ask if he needs anything, he mutters, "I need to get out of this fucking bed."

All right then. I leave him alone again after that.

Returning to the kitchen, I stir my stew for a minute and then slump down against the counter, annoyed with Caleb and the rest of the world.

“Something wrong?”

The voice startles me. I straighten up, turning to see Trey standing in the doorway. He’s been on duty this morning along with another guard they pulled in from Arthur’s rotation. “I’m fine. Just blah today.”

“That’s normal. After something like yesterday. The next day is always the worst, when it feels like the height of crisis is over but you’re left with all the unpleasant consequences. It doesn’t help that we haven’t caught the bastard yet.”

“Any news on what happened?”

“We found where he’d set himself up. He bought a specialized weapon that basically does the aiming automatically so he was able to shoot from a farther distance than we were predicting. Sorry about that.”

“Why are you sorry?”

“Because it was our job to be on top of things. Morrison is mad as hell at himself. Never seen him in this kind of mood.”

That piece of information makes me feel a little better. At least his current behavior isn’t at all about me. “Well, I can’t blame you all for not magically foreseeing every possibility. He’s never used a gun before, has he?”

“No. He’s never used violence of any kind that we know about. Even when he came after Ms. Delacourte last year, he didn’t have a weapon on him.”

“Well, prison clearly developed him as a criminal.”

“Yep.” Trey makes a face, staring out the kitchen window. “It’ll do that.”

“So we just have to sit around here and wait for him to make the next move?”

“Well, we got Mick and two other guys out there looking for him. Hopefully they’ll find him. But otherwise, yep. We sit

around here and wait.”

I snarl. “I hate waiting.”

He chuckles. “You’re not the only one. You and Morrison are a matched set. No wonder he likes you so much.”

“Caleb doesn’t—” See, I don’t know why my first instinct is to deny Trey’s claim, but that’s what I start to do. I do stop myself, but not soon enough.

Trey snorts and walks into my studio, which is connected to the kitchen. He makes a circuit around the room, checking out every window as he talks. “Caleb doesn’t what? Because I know you weren’t going to say he doesn’t like you.”

I shake my head and glance away, strangely embarrassed.

“I always liked working for your family,” Trey goes on, evidently needing little encouragement to continue a conversation. “And the first thing that was always made clear was that no one was allowed to mess with you. Fair enough. That’s basic professionalism. But it didn’t take long before I learned another rule. No one was even allowed to look at you too long or Morrison would be all on their case.”

“What?” My heart jumps slightly at those words, and I lean forward, wanting to hear more.

Trey is back in the kitchen now, laughing to himself. “I’ll never forget the first time I was on duty at your dad’s house when you stopped by to visit. You were out by the pool, and I hadn’t met you yet. All I did was glance out the window. I wasn’t checking you out or anything. I was just looking so I knew what you look like. And damn, I thought Morrison was going to bite my head off.”

“Really? When was that?”

“I don’t know,” Trey says with an easy shrug. “You’d recently dropped out of college, I think. I wasn’t leering or anything. How the hell could I have known he’d already called dibs on you?”

I almost choke on my surprise. “Dibs?”

“You know what I mean. He’d already, you know, marked his territory. I didn’t know. I was just looking. I’m a professional, and I wasn’t going to try anything anyway.”

I’m almost shaking with my shock—and something that’s thrilling with pleasure. But what Trey is saying is too close to what I want to hear, so I can’t really believe it.

“I don’t think...” I pause. Reshape my sentence. “He was just doing his job and keeping everyone on task. No one should be making moves on clients. He never thought about me like that.”

Trey snorts again. “He sure as hell did. You think I imagined all the icy glares I got whenever I happened to glance your way?”

“He might have been kind of protective, but that was his job. It wasn’t because...”

“For Christ’s sake, girl, get a clue. He was totally into you. Any fool could see it.”

My heart is jumping with excitement again. “But he never... He never...”

“What, you think because he never made a move that he didn’t want to? You were what, like twenty? Your family would have fired any guy who tried to touch you, and no one pays as well or treats us better than the Worthings. Who would risk losing this gig? Plus Morrison always plays by the rules. You were totally forbidden territory. You think he would have ever crossed that line?”

I’m staring at him, almost bewildered with a tumult of emotion.

“Why do you look so gobsmacked?” Trey asks, frowning at me. “This can’t be a surprise to you. The guy is full-shit crazy about you, and he always has been. You should have heard the endless lecture he gave me in the hospital last night about how you’re my responsibility right now and what he’ll do to me if something happens to you.”

“What did he say?”

“Everything. All the obvious stuff that any fool would know about keeping you safe. And then he tells me I’m not supposed to touch you. Like I’d really think about trying something on you right now when you’re all scared and in danger. For fuck’s sake.” Despite his words, he looks like he’s silently laughing again. “Morrison’s always had a few screws loose about you.”

I have no idea what to say to that, so I end up saying nothing.

My mind is whirling though. I assumed Caleb hated me back then and had no interest in ever seeing me again once I stopped being his job to protect. And that it’s only recently he’s started looking at me in a new way.

Have I had it wrong about Caleb all this time?

All I have are Trey’s casual comments, but he seems so sure about the situation and Caleb’s feelings.

And I’m not sure of anything at all. Not anymore.

“So anyway,” Trey concludes, picking up his phone again and starting to leave the kitchen, “don’t take it personally that I’ve never talked to you much before. I’m not about to risk Morrison’s wrath if I even look at you a little too long.”

I make a strangled sound that might be a laugh.

Then I remember Caleb got shot yesterday and Montaigne is still out there.

There’s no sense in focusing too much on all this while both of us are still in danger.

If Caleb gets killed, nothing else will matter at all.



Caleb appears to improve as the afternoon progresses and his mood also improves, so a lot of my anxiety eases as a result.

I’m still scared of the idea of Montaigne still out there—finally making violent moves. But all the extra security the

Worthings employ are searching for him. They'll find him, and after shooting Caleb, he'll go to prison for a really long time.

If Caleb is okay, everything else will be okay too. I'm sure of it.

Trey and the other guy stay on the whole day, checking the perimeter and watching for any threats. I make a light dinner, and Caleb manages to eat more than I expect. He isn't as pale as he was yesterday, and he isn't sweating all the time either.

I feel icky after a long day of doing nothing, so I take a shower before bed and then change into pajamas. I go to the kitchen to grab us both bottles of water.

"Thanks." He takes the bottle I offer him. "You smell nice."

"Soap from the shower, I guess."

"I wish I could take a shower."

"No way. Your bandage would get messed up, and I'm not good at fixing it."

He makes a face but doesn't argue.

I take a sip of water and think of an idea. I leave the room and find a couple of washcloths, fill a bowl with water, get soap out of the shower, and bring everything over to the bed.

Caleb's eyebrow cocks up. "A sponge bath? Really?"

"If you mock, you're not going to get one."

"No mocking. No mocking from me." His expression is still slightly ironic, but it's also very soft. "You really don't have to do that."

"I want to."

I do want to, but I also feel strangely self-conscious about it. I've never done anything like this before.

But he must feel absolutely terrible right now, and this is something quite small I can do to help him, to make him feel better.

I'm going to do it.

He doesn't have on a shirt and he's just wearing a pair of gym shorts, so he doesn't have anything to take off. I put down my stuff and go get a big towel from the bathroom, and then I ease him up and spread it out beneath him so I won't get the sheets wet.

I wet the washcloth and start to wipe down his chest, shoulders, and arms, putting just enough soap on it to clean him without making it necessary to use a lot of water to rinse it off.

Caleb doesn't say anything as I work, but his eyes never leave my face.

I don't know why I feel so self-conscious, so aware of myself, of each movement of my body—and so aware of Caleb, his body, his expression at the same time. But I do. It feels so intimate, doing this for him.

I'm amazed he's even letting me do it.

I work on his chest, the tight skin, firm muscles, and coarse hair nakedly masculine. I run the washcloth up and down his arms, carefully avoiding the tightly wrapped bandage, over his shoulders, and then lift his arms to reach his underarms. When I'm done, I move down to his abdomen. I clean the skin there and then gently tug at his shoulder until he sits up enough for me to reach his back.

As I wash his back, I say softly, "Trey said you called dibs on me."

I had no idea I was going to say that. Absolutely no idea at all. I'm obviously stretched emotionally to the point where the words tumble out without planning or qualm.

Caleb's whole body stiffens.

"That's what he said."

Caleb lets out his breath in a loud exhale. "Did he?"

"Yeah. Back when he first started working for the Worthings. He said you'd called dibs on me. Marked your territory."

"I didn't say a word about that."



“Maybe not directly. But he said he got the point really quick.” I pause, gently running the washcloth over his lower back. My eyes are focused on his damp skin. “Was he wrong?”

He doesn't answer immediately. The silence stretches on a long time.

I don't prompt him or say anything else. I just keep working on his back.

Finally he says, “He wasn't wrong.”

Something new, inchoate, is trembling inside me. It takes me a minute to get any words out. “I didn't... I didn't know.”

“You weren't supposed to know.”

“Why? I was old enough by then. I mean, I was what? Twenty? Twenty-one? Hardly a child.”

“Twenty still isn't really... But it wasn't just your age.”

“Then what?” I've finished his back, so I ease him down again.

He meets my eyes briefly and then looks away.

With a sigh, I get the washcloth wet again, wring it out, and then start to rub his neck. “I guess it was against your rules for the job.”

He doesn't answer in words, but I feel an affirmative in his body. Like all his muscles tighten and then relax in resignation.

“We could have made something work.”

“Maybe. But you were already in a downward spiral when we met. I was supposed to be someone you trusted. You really think a guy in my position making moves on you would have been a good thing for you back then?”

“No. Of course it wouldn't. But it makes me feel...” I gulp. “It makes me feel even worse. More guilty. If you had feelings for me. And I treated you the way I did.”

“You didn't know.”

“Not about you, but I knew how to be a decent person. And I wasn’t a decent person to you.”

“We’ve already talked about this. I’ve forgiven you. I’m not holding anything against you.”

“I know. But you should. I don’t deserve... that kind of grace.”

The words linger in the room strangely. The air between us is thick and tense.

I’m stroking his face with the washcloth now, and he suddenly pulls my hand down. “You don’t have to do that.”

I frown and move back up to his face. “I know I don’t have to do it. I want to. So stop being an ass and let me help you a little.”

“I—” I can tell he’s starting to argue again, but he stops himself. His body softens. He isn’t meeting my eyes anymore.

I’m supposed to be cleaning him, but it’s more like I was caressing him. I don’t remember ever feeling so tender, so possessive, about another human being. Like he’s mine to care for, to take care of.

Like he’s mine and no one else’s.

When he’s relaxed completely, I say, “I’m still trying to make up for everything I did back then. I’m going to keep trying to make up for it.”

Caleb just shakes his head. His jaw is clenched.

“Why do you look so stubborn, so angry about it?”

He grits out, “Because you don’t understand forgiveness at all.”

“What?” I lower the washcloth.

“You don’t understand forgiveness.”

“I... I think I do.”

“Then you wouldn’t keep endlessly trying to make up for something I’m not holding against you. How the hell do you think it makes me feel? Wondering if every nice thing you do

for me is an attempt to earn a forgiveness I've already given you?"

I gasp at that. Lower my washcloth. Stare at him. "Wh-what?"

"You heard me."

"Yes, but... But it's not. That's not why I do things."

"Isn't it?" He's staring up at me now, questioning and oddly vulnerable.

"No. I just... I just want to. Because of how I feel... for... for you."

He swallows so hard I can see it in his throat. He works his lower lip with his teeth.

"I'm telling you the truth, Caleb. Is that why... why you're always hesitating? I thought it was just the boundaries of your job, which I understand. But you don't seriously think I'd... I'd have sex with you as a way of earning forgiveness?"

He still doesn't say anything. Just stares at me in exhausted bewilderment.

I cup his face with my hand. It feels like this is a very important moment. "Everything I've done with and for you in the past month has been because I wanted to. And for no other reason."

He gives a stiff nod. Finally glances away.

"I didn't even know you had feelings for me. I wouldn't have known that acting on them was something you would want."

"How could you not know that?"

I choke on a laugh. "Uh, have you met yourself, Caleb Morrison? I believe I've mentioned before your close resemblance to a granite statue. It makes it hard to know your feelings. Unless you... I don't know... say something about them."

His face changes. Softens. "Yeah. I guess that makes sense."

“So you really... You really had some kind of feelings for me back then?” Maybe it’s needy, but I want to hear more. Hear everything.

“Some kind?” His voice is suddenly hoarse, urgent. “Yeah, that doesn’t even come close. All I ever did was think about you, want you. I tried not to. I tried to hide it. You were so young and so lost, and I wasn’t one of those men. But I couldn’t help it. Even as you spun out of control, I... yearned for you, and I couldn’t stop myself.”

“I had no idea.”

“Of course you didn’t. You weren’t supposed to. I was too old for you for one thing, and you were caught up in a lifestyle that would have made it impossible to have a healthy relationship even if everything else would have worked out. I couldn’t control my feelings, but at least I could keep you from knowing about them.”

“So all that time, you... You...”

His face twists. Reluctance. Guilt. “I wasn’t lusting after you from the moment I saw you. At least, I never let myself think about it. You were still in college when I joined your dad’s team. I liked you. I liked you from the beginning. That day in Paris still... I really felt connected to you that day, and that feeling never went away. But I never would have... But then you started acting different. Doing stuff you hadn’t done before. Then you seemed to lose all restraint. And I felt like shit because I wanted to help but there was nothing I could do. I hadn’t been assigned to you yet, so I only knew most of it from what I overheard from your dad. Then that one night. By the pool. It was New Year’s. You might not even remember it.”

“I remember.”

He shakes his head. “You were there, almost naked, right in front of me, looking so... Looking like everything I ever wanted. Fuck, I wanted you so much I couldn’t see straight, and I haven’t stopped wanting you since.”

I'm trembling helplessly, and I twist the damp washcloth between my hands. I've completely forgotten I was giving him a sponge bath. "I didn't know. I was so embarrassed about it, especially after you got assigned to me. I was mortified anytime I thought about it."

"You *couldn't* know. I couldn't let you know."

We stare at each other for a minute.

Then I admit very softly, "You were different for me. Special. I wasn't thinking clearly about much of anything back then, and I know treating you like that was inappropriate. But I was clear about knowing you were the one person I could really trust."

His face changes, softens. His head tilts up like he's going to kiss me, but then he must change his mind. He relaxes against the pillow again.

"Do you want me to do your lower half?" I've cleaned every part of his top half I'm able to reach.

He shakes his head.

"You sure?"

"Better not."

"Why?"

He slants me a significant look, and I lower my eyes to his groin.

I see why immediately. He's hard in his shorts. The sheet that covers his legs isn't thick enough to hide it.

I blink. "But you're injured."

"You think a slight graze is enough to keep me from wanting you, Louisa? Did you even hear what I just said about how long this has been going on for me?"

I swallow hard. "I'm not sure sex would be a good idea in your condition."

"I wasn't suggesting it. I'm just saying that if your hands move any lower, it's going to be hard for my body to

recognize nothing's going to happen."

I think for a moment. Shake my head slowly. I wet down the washcloth again, squeezing out the excess water. Then I gently pull the waistband of his shorts down over his erection.

"Louisa."

"No sex. I'm not taking a chance on your wound. But I can still take care of you."

"You don't—"

I lean forward to kiss him gently, silencing his objections. Then I use the washcloth to stroke him intimately.

He groans as I caress him, and a coil of both arousal and tenderness tightens inside me as I see him responding to my touch.

When I wrap my fingers around his shaft and start to pull and squeeze rhythmically, his hips come up toward my hand. His body tightens quickly, his shoulders lifting off the bed and his features twisting. He's groaning uninhibitedly, and it's the sexiest thing I've ever heard.

Then, before I know to expect it, his body freezes on a strangled sound. He works through a long release, his body twitching, his head falling back against the pillow, and thick exhales escaping his parted lips.

"Louisa," he breathes out as his body softens completely.

I lean forward to kiss him again, and his mouth clings to mine sweetly.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

He ejaculated into the washcloth, so I take it and the bowl of water and put them up. Then I go to the bathroom, splash water on my hot face, and try to get my emotions under control.

Too much is happening. Too much that goes too deep.

And I have no idea how I'm supposed to process it all in my rattled mind.

Pushing aside the most intense of the feelings, I return to the room and climb into bed beside Caleb.

He turns his head toward me, his face relaxed and his eyes heavy. "Thank you, baby."

I kiss him. "You're welcome again."

He can't take me in his arms, but he reaches out with one hand and fumbles around until he can pull mine into a firm grasp.

We lie in bed together, holding hands.

We're still holding hands when I fall into an exhausted sleep.

THE NEXT DAY BEGINS AS UNEVENTFULLY AS THE PREVIOUS one. Caleb isn't as grumpy, but he's still restless and stubborn, insisting on getting up and walking around a lot more than I think is wise in his condition.

He does seem to feel better than he did. He's still got the wound in his arm, but he must be recovering from the loss of blood. His color is improved, and he's got more energy.

By lunch it's impossible to keep him in bed.

Eventually I give up. I let him pace around the house like a caged animal while I work on my painting of him and do my best to ignore him.

I'm finally able to focus again, so the next couple of hours pass fairly quickly. I'm not aware of anything until I hear Caleb's voice from the living room.

His tone has changed. It sounds rough and urgent. I put down my brush and hurry into the other room so I can learn what's going on.

He's concluding a phone call when I reach him. "They've got him cornered," he tells me, looking more alert than I've seen him in two days.

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. They think so. At a motel just outside town. I've sent Mick to help them. It should be over soon."



“Oh my God,” I rasp, covering my stomach with one hand since it’s starting to churn with anxiety and hope. “I can’t believe it.”

“If we can catch him and pin the shooting on him, he’ll go away for a long time. You should be safe.”

“That would be amazing.” I don’t say it, but I wonder if it also means that Caleb will go away.

Surely not.

Surely what’s developed between us in the past month means the end of this job won’t be the end for us.

“What’s the matter?” he asks. “I thought you’d be relieved.”

“I am. Or rather I will be when it’s all finally over.”

He nods. “It sounds like it will be soon. I wanted to be the one to get him, but there’s no way I’m going to leave you alone.”

“You’re injured. You wouldn’t be going to get him anyway.” I probably shouldn’t have said that. It makes him grumpy again.

He scowls at me, and I scowl back.

The bathroom is calling, so I leave him alone in the living room.

He said it should be over soon.

Maybe it actually will be.

It will be nice when none of us is in danger anymore.



When I return from the bathroom, Caleb is no longer in the living room. I find him in the studio.

He’s got his headset on, obviously getting live updates on the situation from his teammates, but he’s staring fixedly at the canvas I’ve been working on.

The portrait of him, walking into the dark woods. His back toward me. Not even looking over his shoulder. Walking away into the bleak forest that swallows him up.

“What is this?” he demands thickly when I move beside him.

“It’s a painting.”

“Why are you painting this?” He sounds shocked. Tensely outraged.

“What do you mean?”

I know exactly what he means. He’s analyzed and interpreted the painting correctly. He knows it’s him. He understands the emotions behind it.

The guilt and loneliness and aching resignation.

He’s read all of it with an immediate, unnerving insight, and he can’t stand it.

“This is wrong,” he rasps.

“Paintings can’t be wrong. They reflect how the artist sees the world.” I gulp. “How she feels.”

“But why are you feeling this?” He turns toward me, reaching out to take my upper arm in one of his hands, the one connected to his uninjured arm. “Baby, this is wrong. This isn’t me. I’ll never—” He breaks off, jerking his head to the side in a weird, awkward move.

“I started it a month ago,” I whisper, wondering why I feel so guilty. “Things were different then.”

“But you’re still working on it. Part of you must still feel this.”

It’s like I’ve been stripped utterly bare. Everything in my heart laid out for him to see. “I…”

I have absolutely no idea what to say.

His face twists. I’ve never seen him so openly emotional. “Baby, how can you—?”

This time he doesn't cut off the words himself. His tablet, which has been in his free hand all this time, makes a chirping sound, and he lifts it to look.

His entire stance shifts dramatically.

My heart starts to race. "What is it?"

"A motion-detector alert was triggered. In the woods."

"In the woods here?" My voice cracks on the last word.

"Yes." He's stepped away from me, sliding his fingers across the screen of the tablet, checking out the feed from the variety of cameras they set up as part of the security system they installed on my property. "Shit."

"What is it? Is he here? I thought they had him cornered."

"It must have been a strategic diversion." He turns away, talking urgently into his headset. He's calling back Mick, who must be less than ten minutes away, and updating the others.

Montaigne is here. Sneaking through the woods surrounding my cottage.

And there's no one here to protect me.

Except an injured Caleb.

"Oh my God," I choke out when he's stopped talking to the others. "Can we just get into the car and drive away?"

"We can't risk you being out in the open. And he might be counting on that." He grabs one of my arms again and drags me with him through the kitchen and down the hall.

I'm so scared and disoriented I stumble, and I would have fallen if Caleb weren't holding me up. "But you're injured! You can't—"

"Yes, I can. I have to."

We've reached the guest room, and he grabs something from the top of the dresser. When he starts to strap it on, I realize it's a bulletproof vest and he's putting it on over his T-shirt and sweats.

The sight of it terrifies me. I make a gurgling sound.

“Baby, I’ve got this. I’m not going to let him get to you.”

“I’m not scared for *me!*” The words burst out of me, nakedly true.

The tension on his face breaks just slightly as he picks up two different weapons. “Protecting you is my job. It’s what I do. It’s why I was put on earth. You’ve got to let me do it.”

There’s no arguing with the gruff earnestness of his words. I let him lead me into my bedroom and then over to my big closet.

It makes sense. It’s one of the few enclosed spaces in this house without any windows.

He flips on the light and gently guides me inside.

I’m shaking helplessly as he offers me a handgun. “Be careful. The safety is off. All you have to do is pull the trigger right here.”

I pay attention to what he shows me and nod shakily to prove I understand. I take the gun. Hold it in both hands.

Two tears slide down my face as I look back up at him.

He checks the camera feeds on the tablet again. “He’s coming around the back. He must assume I’m too injured to fight back.”

I can’t do anything but whimper softly.

He grabs my chin and lifts my face so I’m looking at him. “I’ve got this, baby. I promise.”

A nod is the only response I’m capable of.

“He’s alone,” he says. “I can take him. We’re both going to be all right. When I shut this door, you stay in here. You don’t come out until you hear my voice. If the door opens without you hearing me first, you start shooting and you don’t stop.”

“O-okay.” I have to clear my aching throat. Swipe at my eyes with the back of my forearm. Crouch down in the closet because my legs won’t hold me any longer. “I love you, Caleb.”

He makes a weird, strangled sound. Searches my face with what looks like desperation.

“I love you,” I repeat. “And I’m so sorry for—”

“No!” The word bursts out of him. He kneels down to my level and continues thickly, “Don’t you dare say that again. Everything wrong you ever did to me is gone. All of it is gone. My love for you covers everything and fills every gap. My love is the only thing left.”

I sob. *Sob*. Can’t possibly speak. But I manage to control myself as Caleb straightens up and checks the tablet again.

He murmurs, “He’s coming” and then closes the closet door.

I stay huddled there with all my clothes and shoes, wiping my face and then wiping my damp hands one by one on my pants.

I can’t hear anything. I have no idea what’s happening. I only know that Caleb is out there, injured and alone. Mick couldn’t have been very far away, but he’s not going to get back here in time.

Montaigne managed to shoot Caleb once. He might be able to do it again.

It’s been a couple of minutes when I hear a shattering sound. Like something breaking. Maybe a window. I smother a squeal and readjust my position so I’m standing, hoping I’m not going to throw up from the adrenaline-fueled panic.

Then there are gunshots. More than one. Something loud crashing. Someone crying out. It’s all vague and disconnected and without context, so I can’t form a picture to match the sounds.

Please God let it not be Caleb who was shot.

It’s another couple of minutes—it can’t be much longer than that—when I hear a voice from outside the closet door. “It’s me, baby. It’s okay. It’s over.”

I burst into tears as the closet door swings open. Caleb is standing in front of me, sweat dripping all down his face and

blood soaking through his shirt.

It doesn't matter. He's standing. He pulls me in with his good arm, and I sob against his chest.

He takes the handgun out of my loose fingers as I cry and sets it carefully on a nightstand. Then he tightens his arm around me.

I've just started to control myself when I hear new sounds from the other side of the house. I gasp and straighten up.

"It's just Mick."

"Where's Montaigne? Did you—?"

"I didn't kill him, although I was tempted. I shot him, but he kept coming at me, so there was a scuffle before I got control of him. I handcuffed him. He's not going anywhere."

I exhale raggedly. Then notice his blood-soaked shirt again. "You're hurt again!"

"Most of it's from Montaigne, but this damned bullet wound tore open in the scuffle."

"You're losing blood! Damn it, Caleb. Why were you hugging me when you're hurt?"

He makes an adorably sheepish face, although his skin is starting to look pale again. The wound is bleeding way too much. "Hugging you was my priority. You can hardly judge me for that."



We end up back at the hospital.

Because he reopened the wound, they hem and haw about his possibly staying the night so they can keep an eye on him, but he absolutely refuses.

I'm worried, but the doctor says he should be all right as long as someone is there to keep a close watch on him at home.

Even so, we're at the hospital for hours.

We end up in an argument because he wants me to go home and clean up and get something to eat and go to bed instead of staying with him. That's absurd, and I tell him so.

I'm not going to leave him.

He's not happy about it, but there's nothing he can do to stop me. I sit in the spare chair in his room in the ER, and a few hours pass filled with doctors and nurses coming in to check on him and do a variety of tests. And then the police come in to get our statements.

They've taken Montaigne into custody. He'll get his injuries treated, but he's not going to be going anywhere for quite a while.

Just when I think we might be able to get out of here, another doctor comes in. He explains that he just came on shift, and he needs to do his own assessment before he releases Caleb.

He asks Caleb a few questions about how he's feeling, which are answered rather grumpily. Then the doctor turns to me and stretches out a hand for me to shake. "Nice to meet you, Ms...."

"Worthing. Louisa Worthing." I stand up to shake his hand with a smile. "It's nice to meet you."

"You too. You're his partner?" He asks the question as if he's just seeking confirmation for something he already knows.

So I give it to him. "Yeah. I am. You really think he's going to be okay?"

"It looks that way. They've stitched the wound back up, and he's strong and healthy. I don't see why he won't be able to heal fairly quickly."

"Okay, great. Thanks so much."

He checks Caleb out for a few more minutes and then concludes that he's fine to be discharged.

It's almost two more hours before we actually get out of there. The nurse who goes over the paperwork gives me a whole list of instructions I'm to follow to the letter.

Then I'm finally able to drive him home.

Caleb is quiet and grumpy on the drive back, and he's quiet and grumpy as I help him inside and get him settled in the bed in my guest room.

After making sure he doesn't need anything, I take a quick shower and change into a nightgown.

Mick and Trey fixed the broken window in my sunroom and have now returned to the hotel. They'll be reassigned tomorrow. So my little cottage is empty except for me and Caleb.

Not that he's much company at the moment.

He's scowling at me when I return to the guest room and sit down in the side chair.

"What?" I ask.

"Go to bed."

"I'm not going to bed. The doctor said I need to keep my eye on you. That's the only reason he agreed to discharge you."

"You can keep an eye on me without hovering."

"Not very well. So you're going to have to put up with my hovering for a while."

He makes a face but doesn't argue. We sit in bad-tempered silence until he mutters, "You shouldn't have said that to the doctor."

"Said what?" I'm confused for a minute before I think back to the earlier conversation. "What? About saying you're my partner? Why shouldn't I say that?"

"You know why."

"No, I don't. It's true, so I'm going to say it."



He doesn't say anything. Just looks at me. And I know how to interpret that pained reluctance on his face.

"Caleb?" My voice is soft, gentle, despite the rising panic in my heart at what I know is coming. I thought he was just grumpy because of the injury, but there's more going on with him than that. "Why shouldn't I say it?"

"I'm sorry, Louisa. I really am." His face—normally so stoic—twists in obvious emotion.

I straighten up and clear my throat, putting both my hands on my lap. I'm tempted to reach out and strangle Caleb for being so endlessly stubborn, but this is him. It's always been him.

I wouldn't love him if he were anyone else.

"You can't tell me that you don't want this," I say. "If you try to tell me that, I won't believe you."

"Of course I want this. I want you. You know I do."

"Then there's no reason we can't be together."

"There are reasons. There are still reasons. I just..." He glances away as his words trail off.

He doesn't look grumpy anymore. He doesn't look hard or obstinate or confident. He doesn't look like he's sure of what he's doing right now.

He looks wounded.

And oddly it gives me comfort. It gives me courage.

He isn't set on this. He's still holding on to all the emotional tangles and roadblocks that have kept us apart in the past, but he won't necessarily be holding on to them forever.

"You can't tell me you don't love me." I reach to take his hand.

He doesn't pull his away. His eyes are full, fierce. "Of course I love you. You know I do."

"Okay then. There's no problem. Because I love you too."

I see the sudden blaze of joy in his eyes. I see it before he turns his face away.

It's beautiful. Shattering. As real as anything I've ever known.

"I love you, Caleb. I said it earlier not because I thought you were going to die. I said it because it's true. I love you, and you love me. It seems pretty stupid for us not to be together."

He turns back to meet my eyes, having contained the flood of feeling. His expression is composed. "You've just been through a real crisis. More than a month's worth of danger. What you're feeling now might not be—"

"Oh, just shut up about that. It's ridiculous. I wanted you a long time before I was ever in danger."

"Even so. Relationships that happen in these kinds of situations don't always have the foundation they need to survive. I'm not just using this as an excuse. It's a real thing. I'm not sure we should trust—"

"Me? You don't think we should trust *me*? My feelings?"

"That's not what I mean." He looks torn again. Aching. "I'm not sure we should trust... us."

Determined not to lose control and shake him the way I'm tempted to, I take a deep breath before I answer. "I get what you're saying, but that's not what's happening here. *Us* has been going on a long time before these past weeks. We've been *us* for years. *Us* didn't happen because we were in danger. I don't think *us* is going to go away anytime soon."

His jaw relaxes, and he gives me a little smile.

For a moment, I think I've gotten through to him.

So I go on. "I know I was not in a good place in the past, and you were right to keep me at arm's length back then. But I'm an adult now, Caleb. I'm not under the influence of drugs or alcohol or a desperate need for attention. I can decide what's best for me. And you're what's best for me."

I see him exhale—an odd, shuddering release of breath. I'm not sure what it means, but it gives me hope.

“Baby—”

“You don't get to call me that unless you're prepared to mean it.”

“I do mean it.”

“Enough to act on it? Because I've got to tell you, this noble resistance of yours is getting kind of old.”

“I know it is. It feels old to me too. But I've spent years—*years*—shaping my life around the fact that I wasn't allowed to have you. So many years living with the knowledge that what I most wanted could never be mine. It's not something I can easily shake off. I think we just need... some more time.”

His face is still composed, but his eyes are open, naked. I can see everything he's feeling. All the way inside.

And I understand.

I understand why he's still clinging to my being forbidden. I understand why he can't just let go, let himself be happy.

I understand everything I need to know about him.

It's fundamental. Human. True of everyone who has ever really loved another person.

He's afraid.

Afraid that if he lets go, if he trusts, if he gives himself to me, that it won't last, that he'll get hurt, that I'll get taken away from him eventually.

He might be strong and brave and always competent. He might act like he's as invulnerable as a granite statue. But he's not. At heart, he isn't any different from me. This is new to him. He's never done it before.

It's as scary to him as it has always been to me.

It's just as much a risk.

And I know now what I need to do.

“Okay,” I murmur, leaning over so I can press a soft kiss on his jaw and then his lips. “So let’s give it some time.”

His hand moves up immediately to tangle in my hair. As I let my mouth rub gently against his, his fingers fist, holding my head more firmly in place as his tongue slips out to explore.

“This doesn’t feel like giving it time,” he says against my lips.

“We can stop anytime you want.” I’m leaning over awkwardly, so I readjust my body, moving onto the bed beside him, bracing myself on the mattress, careful not to put any pressure on his bandaged wound on the opposite side.

His hand is now sliding down my back. He finds the bottom of my nightgown and strokes his palm back up my thigh until he’s rubbing my bottom possessively.

I’m still kissing him. I’ve opened my mouth to his tongue, and we’re now deep, sensual, urgent. Without thinking, I readjust my weight so I can slide one hand under the sheet that covers him and feel my way down to his groin.

He’s hard. All the way. Already. I stroke the length of his erection through his cotton shorts, and he groans into my mouth.

“Baby,” he rasps, his back arching up slightly from the bed. “Baby, this is torture.”

“Why is it torture?”

“Because I’m on my fucking sickbed here and I really want to fuck you.”

I giggle against his mouth. “I think we can probably manage on your sickbed. I love you, Caleb, and I want to make love to you right now. If you don’t want that, just tell me to stop.”

He pants as he stares up at my face. I’ve never seen anything like the naked longing, hunger, heat in his eyes right now. There’s a long moment when everything balances on the edge, on the cusp.

Then he uses his hold on my hair to bring my head back down toward his. “Please don’t stop.”

Pleasure, relief, and joy wash over me in waves as I surrender completely to the kiss. I’m still stroking him through his shorts, and he’s still caressing my ass and thighs with his one good hand. And it’s so raw and intimate—genuine—that my heart overflows even as my body responds viscerally to his touch.

I’m wet and aching between my legs when he mumbles, “I’m going to lose it in about two minutes.” His hips lift toward my hand as I squeeze him.

I laugh in breathy huffs. “How should we do this? I don’t want to risk messing up your injury again.”

“You better be on top.” His eyes never leave me as I carefully straddle him on the bed, pushing down his shorts to free his erection, and then align myself over him so I can slowly fit him inside me.

Both of us groan at the penetration. I lean forward to kiss him again, holding my weight on my hands so I won’t put any pressure on his injury.

He doesn’t seem to feel anything that isn’t good. His hips are already rocking up into me in helpless little thrusts, and his face is contorting in deep pleasure.

“Baby. Oh fuck, baby.”

“Caleb.” I’m starting to move over him, trying to restrain my enthusiasm so our motion isn’t too vigorous for his physical condition.

His hands clamp down on my ass, holding me in place, clutching possessively. “I love you, baby.”

My heart bursts open, flooding my body. I’ve never experienced anything like it. This perfect melding of heart and body. Internal and external. Inside and outside. Finally one.

“I love you too,” I gasp, riding him with urgent little pumps of my hips. “God, I love you so much.”

We're shaking the bed, but I'm still trying to be careful. Since I can't risk anything rougher, I move one hand down to rub at my clit.

I let out a low moan as I tighten around him and the pleasure surges forward.

He's grunting softly, still holding me with a grip that never wavers.

Then I come hard and intense and silent, my body shuddering through the contractions. Climax hits him right after me. He jerks and gasps and lets himself go, breathing out again and again that he loves me.

I know it's true.

I know it will last.

And I also know he isn't going to hold on to his lingering fears for very long.

I'm happy. And I'm sure it's safe to let myself be.

We don't hold on to each other for very long after we come. He's still injured, and I don't want to risk any damage.

Caleb is still sprawled on the bed, flushed and panting but relaxed. He looks almost debauched, and I feel a ridiculous little thrill of pride that I'm the one who made him look that way.

"How's your injury?" I ask, settling on the bed beside him.

"I'm feeling no pain."

I chuckle. "I meant we didn't make it bleed again or anything."

He shakes his head, patting the bandages on his arm as if to verify they're still in place. Then he reaches out to take my hand, holding it in his.

It feels significant.

"So how much time do you think you need?" I ask.

"For what?" His eyes have fallen closed. He looks warm, sated, perfectly content.

I giggle. “For *us*.”

“Oh.” He opens his eyes again. “I don’t know.”

“Do you still need time?”

“No. Yes. I don’t know.”

I’m still smiling as I reach out with my other hand to stroke his face. His skin is deliciously rough beneath my palm. “I think that’s a yes. Just tell me how much time you need. I’ll wait for you.”

“Louisa.”

“I mean it. I’ll wait. I don’t want to do this until you know it’s the right thing. For both of us. So if you need time, you take the time.”

“I just need to... be sure that this is what you really want.”

“I understand. How much time?”

He hesitates, glancing away briefly. “A few weeks?”

I manage to hide the surge of relief. I was afraid he would need months, and I was dreading being patient for so long. A few weeks isn’t bad at all. “That’ll be fine. We could say a month?”

He nods. “That would give you time to get over the crisis and get back into your old life. So you can really know whether you want... this. Us. One month.”

“One month.” I pause before I add, “But just so it’s clear, I’m doing this for you. I don’t need a month to know what I want. But I want you to be as sure about it as I am. If it means I can have you forever, I’m happy to wait a month.”

He looks so relaxed he might fall asleep at any moment, but his features tighten briefly as he says, “It’s not that I don’t want you, Louisa. It feels like I’ve spent my entire life wanting you.”

“I know. I understand. We’ll wait a month so you’ll have time to accept that I’ve spent my whole life wanting you too.”



It's three weeks later when I come back from an afternoon art experience to find Caleb working on dinner.

He's chopping vegetables for a stir-fry, arranging them in neat little piles on my big chopping board.

My cousins gave him a month of medical leave, and he took another month of personal leave after that. He's never used any of his vacation days, so he has a huge number collected. We decided that two months together without pressure or danger should be plenty to figure out if our relationship has a chance of working. After that, we can make more long-term decisions before Caleb needs to go back on the job.

So he's been living with me for the past few weeks, and they've been the best weeks of my life.

Every morning he works out at my health club as I swim. Then we shower and dress and go on little outings—hiking or visiting nearby towns or finding out-of-the-way restaurants. I still do my work with the community center at least a couple of afternoons a week, but otherwise we either explore or hang out at home together, relaxing and having a lot of sex.

It's like a dream, and I never want to wake up from it.

Obviously, regular life will eventually intrude, but if I can keep living every day with Caleb, even regular life will be better than I ever hoped it could be.

Caleb seems to be happy too.

His face and body are relaxed as he chops up a red bell pepper. He didn't shave this morning, so he's got a lot of stubble going on. He's wearing jeans and a long-sleeved crewneck. He's got on socks but no shoes.

"Hey," he says, his eyes cutting over to the doorway where I'm standing. "You coming in or what?"

"Yes. I'm coming in. Just wanted to look at you a minute."



That earns me an eye roll. He keeps chopping as I come over and wrap one arm around his waist.

“How was the art thing?”

“Pretty good. Had eight people, so it was bigger than they’ve been so far this winter.”

“No one obnoxious?”

“Well, one older lady wouldn’t stop talking, but that’s a manageable kind of obnoxiousness. She meant well. No one who bothered me.”

I haven’t seen even a hint of Marcus Trent since Caleb scared him off last month.

“Good.”

“Anything going on here?” I ask, reaching over to grab a small piece of pepper and popping it into my mouth.

“Nah. I was supremely lazy all afternoon.”

“Good. You deserve it. You’ve worked way too hard for too many years.”

“The three years between you weren’t that hard. Just working for Arthur most of that time. He barely left home—talk about a cushy gig.”

I giggle at that. “Well, you needed some recovery time after dealing with me.” When I see his expression change, I hurry on. “I’m not talking bad about myself. But you’ve got to admit keeping up with me for those years was exhausting.”

“Yes. It was.” He leans over to press a quick kiss on my lips. “But I wouldn’t have traded it for anything.”

I can’t help but smile at that. I’m reaching for another piece of pepper when Caleb adds, “Oh. Just got the news that Montaigne has a court date scheduled.”

“Really? That’s good. It won’t be for several months, I suppose.”

“Yeah. He’ll have a bail hearing soon. With all the evidence we have from his stalking of Jade and then you, it

will be set high or not at all. His family wouldn't pay bail for him last time, so I doubt he'll be getting out."

"Good." I sigh, relieved that the whole nightmare seems to be behind us. "William and Jade said they were going to come visit us in a couple of weeks. A real visit since the last time was just a trick to foist you on me."

Caleb chuckles, his blue eyes warm and fond. And a little watery since he's in the middle of chopping an onion. "I'd be foisted on you again. Any day, anytime."

"Is that supposed to be romantic?"

He puts down his knife and turns to face me, pulling me tight against his body. "Damn right, it's romantic. I've never been foisted on anyone but you, and that's the way it's going to stay."

I smile up at him sappily. "I kind of like you foisted on me."

He leans down to kiss me, hard and deep but brief. He says as he pulls away, "That's going to have to do for now. I've got a whole system going here for dinner, and I can't let you distract me."

"Fine." I pretend to pout as I lean against the counter. He swats my hand away before I can reach for another piece of pepper. "Did you hear from your mom today?"

"Oh yeah. She called this afternoon. She says next month works great for us to visit if that still sounds good to you."

"It does. I really want to meet her. As long as it's not too fast for you."

He frowns at me, searching my face with his eyes.

"You're the one who wasn't sure about us moving too fast," I remind him. "Meeting parents is a big step."

"Oh." He's picked up his knife again and has moved on to chopping garlic. After a minute, he appears to have worked the problem out in his mind. "Since I already know your dad, it's only fair for you to know my mom too."

I giggle at his matter-of-fact tone. “Makes sense to me.” I grab a handful of his shirt and tug on him until he’s facing me again. “Do you have any thoughts on that topic?”

“Meeting my mom?”

“No, us moving too fast. Have your thoughts on that changed in the past three weeks?” I’m smiling up at him, not as nervous as I would have expected to be in bringing up such an important issue.

Because the truth is, I’m not worried. Nothing about Caleb’s behavior or presence in the past three weeks has made me question our relationship or the future we’re going to have together.

“I’ve got one more week,” he murmurs, stroking my cheek with his knuckles. “You gave me a month.”

I sniff. “Oh. Fine. Maybe I was hoping you wouldn’t need a full month to know you want to be with me forever.”

“Hey.” He puts his knife down again and takes my face in both his hands. They smell like garlic, but I don’t care.

“I was teasing,” I tell him since he seems to have taken it seriously.

“I know you were.” He holds my gaze soberly. “But you should already know that I want to be with you forever.”

“I do know,” I whisper, strangely touched by his earnestness. “You were worried that I didn’t really want to be with you.”

“I was worried.”

My eyes widen. “Was that past tense?”

He drops his hands and gives me a teasing smile. “I’ve got another week left.”

“Oh, you’re being a jerk.” I give him a light push, and he retaliates by trying to tickle me. We have a little scuffle until I fall into his arms, gasping with laughter.

He squeezes me and then kisses me and then lets me go. “Stop trying to distract me from making our dinner.”

“Fine. You get back to work, and I’ll go wash up. Then we can eat, and then we’ll find something to amuse ourselves for the rest of the evening.”

I hear him chuckling in response as I walk down the hall.



The stir-fry Caleb made is delicious. As we’re cleaning up after we eat, Caleb starts to get handsy. We end up having sex up against the wall in the kitchen and then again on the living room couch.

Afterward, I go to the bathroom to clean up and then change into cozy pajamas. I come back out to the living room to find Caleb changed into his pajama pants and sprawled out on the couch.

He gives me a smile that’s tender and sated and sleepy and loving all at the same time.

It makes me gulp with a surge of emotion. I really can’t believe I get to have him in my life like this. I get to love him and have him love me.

I never believed the universe would offer me such a gift.

“You feeling sappy?” he asks in a husky voice.

“A little. Nothing too cringe-worthy though.”

“Good.”

I walk over and move his head out of the way so I can sit on the couch. Then I draw him back down so his head is in my lap.

He gives me a quick look like he’s checking my expression, but he doesn’t object to the arrangement.

I stroke his hair. Massage his scalp. Rub his neck. Love how his breathing slows and deepens, his big body relaxes.

I love him so much. I never knew my heart was big enough to hold this amount of feeling.

“This feels really good, baby,” he murmurs thickly as I return to kneading his head. “But I’ve had a good day and didn’t really need extra attention this evening.”

“I know. I just wanted to do it.”

His eyes have been closed, but they open slightly again. He peers at me through the slits. “Why did you want to?”

I understand the question and his tone. Moving my hand, I stroke his face gently. “I’m not trying to make up for anything. I’m not trying to earn your forgiveness anymore. I know you love me, Caleb. I finally understand what that means. I just... I love you too. And sometimes that comes out by taking care of you.”

His expression tightens briefly. His body tenses and then relaxes. He lets out a long, textured exhale.

He heard me. Believed me.

“Okay, baby. You’ll never hear me complain. I’ve never had anyone want to take care of me before.”

“You do now.” I return to massaging his head. “So you try to restrain your bossy nature and just lie there and enjoy it.”

His body shakes with silent laughter. “I might go to sleep if you keep it up.”

“Well, that’s okay too. I’ll wake you up when it’s time to go to bed.”

“Okay.” He sighs again. I can feel his body relaxing even more.

I’m starting to think he’s doing exactly as he said and falling asleep when he mumbles groggily, “I don’t need another week.”

“What?” My hands grow still.

“I don’t need another week. I know you love me as much as I love you. I know it’s going to last.”

I shake for a minute with a shudder of intense emotion. A tear slips out.

He opens his eyes to look up at me. “Just wanted you to know.”

I give a little sob and try to hug his head. It’s kind of awkward, but he doesn’t appear to care.

When I’ve recovered, I manage to say in a lilting voice, “I should have given you a head massage a long time ago.”

# EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR LATER

WHEN I SEE CALEB'S MOM'S NAME ON THE SCREEN OF MY vibrating phone, I know exactly why she's calling.

She's tried to reach Caleb a few times today, and he hasn't answered.

I connect the call with a little smile. "Hey there, he's fine. He's been working all day." He talks to his mother regularly—at least four or five times a week—but he doesn't always tell her when he's traveling because she gets anxious.

"Oh no. I shouldn't have kept calling then. Poor Caleb will think I've lost my mind."

"No, he won't. He knows you worry, so he'll understand. He's wrapping up a big job today, so he hasn't had time to call back. But he's supposed to be flying home this afternoon, so I'm sure he'll call you as soon as he's free."

"Okay. Where is his job this time? Is it still that California boy?"

The "California boy" is not a boy at all. Edmund Worthing—known to most of the world as Worth—is a fully-grown man and another of my cousins. He's the only one in the family who has ever come close to rivaling my wildness, and his lifestyle is ongoing. He's never had my issues with substance abuse, but he's spent his thirty years playing around and never taking anything seriously.

He's recently come into the public eye because of his relationship with a reality TV star, so his security needs have quadrupled. Caleb has been flying to L.A. regularly for the past three months to deal with the situation.

As soon as Caleb and I got together, my family changed his position to security consultant so there wouldn't be any conflict of interest. He doesn't do any work for me or my father anymore. He gets assigned intensive projects whenever the Worthings have specific, short-term needs, and he travels to manage them.

It's worked out well for us since I haven't had to move, and it gives him a lot of downtime in between projects. He still gets to focus on what he's good at it. He also doesn't do dangerous close protection work anymore, which makes both me and his mother happy.

"Yes. It's still Worth. Now he's bought a new yacht, and he's planning to set off and cruise for a few months. He's broken up with that reality star, so we're hoping things will calm down with him. He's apparently leaving for his trip today, so Caleb should be heading home any time."

"Oh that's good. Caleb never sounds impatient, but he must be getting tired of dealing with the mess. Do you think your cousin will ever grow up?"

I laugh at her earnest question. "I honestly don't know. It's definitely time, but he lost both his parents early, so he had a lot of money and absolutely no responsibilities from a very young age. I can hardly judge him. Look at the mess I made of my life."

"Now, don't you talk bad about yourself, Louisa. You were very, very young, and you pulled yourself out of it."

"I had a lot of help." I'm hit with a little swell of emotion as I continue, "I'm not sure I could have done it without Caleb."

"Well, you did do it. And I'm so proud of how far you've come."



She sounds so motherly and sincere that my throat tightens. I have to clear it before I reply. “Thank you. I’ve been doing pretty good lately at not feeling so guilty and not focusing on regrets. Honestly, I’ve been so happy this past year that I haven’t had much time to feel bad. But every once in a while it still hits me. I’ll never like how much I put Caleb through before we got to where we are now.”

When I first got together with Caleb, I was afraid his mother wouldn’t approve of me because she knew how bad I used to be, but she’s never made me feel like she’s anything but thrilled that I’m in a relationship with her son. “I can understand that, but you need to put it out of your mind. He’s not still holding onto it. I promise he’s not.”

“I know he’s not.” I smile as I glance down at the pretty diamond ring on my left hand. Caleb gave it to me three months ago with a simple, heartfelt proposal of marriage.

I said yes, of course.

“He’s amazing,” I add.

“Yes, he is. But you are too, and he’s always seen it. I knew you were going to be special to him the very first time he met you.”

“What?” I’ve been wandering through our cottage as we talk, but now I plop down into a chair in the sunroom. “What do you mean?”

“You were in Paris. He’d just started working for your father, and I knew he was excited about the job. He called me one evening, and I asked him what he did that day. He said you just got into town, so he went with you to paint a bridge or something, and all these tourists stopped by to get their portraits painted.”

I chuckle at the memory. Even with all the amazing days I’ve had with Caleb in the past year, that day in Paris is still one of the best days of my life. “Yes. That’s exactly what happened.”

“He was being real casual about it—like it wasn’t a big deal. But I heard something in his voice, and I knew. I *knew*.”

He kept trying to keep a professional distance, and back then I'm not sure he would have even admitted it to himself, but you were the only one for him from that day forward. No matter what happened, nothing ever changed that."

I can't speak immediately. Caleb has told me something similar more than once, but it hits differently coming from his mother. I swallow a couple of times and sniff, and I'm smiling into the phone when I finally say, "Thanks for saying that. He's been important to me from the very beginning too. It just took me longer to figure things out."

"But you did. That's what matters. And I can't begin to tell you how happy he's been this past year. You've given him that, and I'll always love you for it."

"I love you too. And I've been happier than I knew I was capable of being, so I think it's a pretty equal deal."

"Well, that's how it's supposed to be."

"Exactly."

We chat for a few more minutes. She asks me about wedding plans and how my work with the community center has been going. I get a text mid-conversation from Caleb that says, *All done. He's on the boat. Heading for airport.*

It's followed up a few seconds later with, *Love you.*

I reply that I love him back while trying to stay focused on my phone conversation.

A couple of minutes later, his mother tells me that Caleb is calling her, so we end the call.

I'm smiling to myself as I get back to the painting I was working on before the phone rang.

Caleb has been gone for five days, which is longer than his trips usually last, but he's finally coming home.

Today is going to be a very good day.



I make a pot of chili in the slow cooker so it will be ready whatever time Caleb arrives this evening. After working on my painting for a few hours, I decide to shower and wash my hair. Washing and drying my long hair is a process, so it keeps me busy for a while. But after I finish and change into a soft, clingy lounge outfit in dark red, I'm ready for Caleb to arrive.

And his flight hasn't even landed yet.

I give myself a manicure and pedicure. I chat with Brandy and then Davida. By then, he's finally landed, but the airport is almost an hour away.

I check on my chili, tasting a spoonful and concluding it's delicious. I vacuum the kitchen and living room. I resist the urge to call Caleb merely to find out where he is and how long it will be before he arrives.

I've been reduced to combing the fringes on one of my area rugs when I finally hear a car in the driveway.

I open the front door and step outside as he parks and gets out of the driver's seat. He makes a face at me as he grabs his stuff from the backseat. "It's cold out here. Where's your coat?"

"You think I give a damn about the cold?" I grin at him as he starts up the front walk.

Then I can resist no longer. I start running toward him, and he has to drop his bags to catch me when I hurl myself at him in a hug.

He holds me tightly, lifting me off my feet in his enthusiasm.

"I missed you," I say when he finally sets me down and picks back up his bags.

He smiles down at me. "I missed you too."

When we walk in, he immediately perks up at the smell of chili. He goes to take a quick shower and unpack—mostly dumping all his dirty clothes in the laundry basket—while I get the toppings ready for the chili.

We eat at the kitchen bar and then move to the living room. Caleb finishes his beer while I eat some ice cream. He tells me about his job and about how he suspects Worth is mostly relieved after the breakup. He evidently wants a few months of downtime on the yacht with no one to bother him except the crew, the domestic staff, and his long-time assistant.

When we've finally talked ourselves out, we stretch out on the couch together. I kiss him on the shoulder, then the jaw, then the mouth.

He responds—soft and unfocused. He feels tired to me. He usually is when he gets back from an intensive work project.

I'm about to pull back since he might want to sleep before we make love, but he deepens the kiss. The embrace lasts a long time, and after a minute, he's grown hard against me in the old sweatpants he's wearing.

I've missed him so much and have felt deeply affectionate all day, so I'm ready for sex without much foreplay. We have some urgent, emotional missionary right there on the couch. It doesn't last very long, but it doesn't have to.

We're both sated and smiling at the end of it, tangled together under a throw blanket.

After a few minutes, I kiss his shoulder again. "Your mom told me today that she knew I was the girl for you on the very first day you met me."

He chuckles at this. "That doesn't surprise me. I was trying to be all cool and collected about it, but I was pretty far gone even then."

I snuggle closer. "I didn't know. You always acted so detached and professional."

"You weren't supposed to know. How creepy would you have found me if you knew all that time I was secretly yearning for you."

"Not creepy at all. It makes me..."

"It makes you what?" He pulls back just enough to tilt my chin up so he can see my expression.

“It makes me feel special. Protected.”

“Baby, you are special. And you’ll always be protected. For as long as I’m alive.”

It’s almost too much. An overflow of love and faith and deep connection that has no end. “I want you to feel the same way.”

He finds my lips and murmurs against them, “I promise I do.”



**Author’s note:** If you haven’t yet read them, the first two books in The Worthings series are [Recollection](#) (an amnesia romance) and [Replacement](#) (a twin-swap romance). The final book is [Restoration](#) (a shipwreck romance about Edmund Worthing and his assistant), and it will be coming out in August.

My next release will be [Counted](#), a standalone marriage-of-convenience romance. You can find an excerpt from it on the following pages.

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## EXCERPT FROM COUNTED

Jude Gregory proposed to Eve Carlyle for the first time when she was twenty-one.

At twenty-six, Jude had already graduated from college and published his first three novels—all of them fictionalized accounts of a historical mysteries that hadn't become bestsellers but had gotten some traction with book clubs. He'd begun falling into his reclusive habits, rarely going to social events and sometimes not showing his face in public for weeks at a time.

Then his mother died from a brain tumor, and a month later he asked Eve to marry him.

They'd known each other most of their lives since her father was the Gregory family attorney, but because of the age difference they'd never been friends. They'd never dated. Never held hands. Never kissed. Certainly never had sex.

But he'd asked her to marry him anyway.

At first, she'd thought he was joking. She'd laughed and told him to stop teasing.

When she'd realized he was serious, she'd told him to stop being weird.

Of course she wasn't going to marry him. Sure, he was born into an incredibly wealthy family, and he was good-looking in a coffee-house philosopher way. But she had plans—both for her personal life and her career. She was halfway through a master's degree in sociology. She was planning to

complete her PhD after that and get a job as a college professor.

She wanted to fall in love for real. She wasn't sure yet about kids, but she definitely wanted to get married.

But not to Jude.

He might be brilliant and oddly compelling, but he was also anti-social and overly intense.

After all, who proposed out of the blue to a woman he'd never even dated?

Jude had accepted her rejection with a detached resignation that proved his heart wasn't involved in the offer. He hadn't fully explained himself, but eventually she figured it out.

His mother had wanted him to get married before she died, and the proposal was an ill-advised reaction to his grief.

She didn't hold it against him, although she avoided him for a couple of years after that because seeing him embarrassed her.

It wasn't difficult to avoid Jude. He became more and more reclusive until he could genuinely be described as a hermit. He used to date on and off, but he eventually stopped completely. He made an appearance maybe once or twice a year. He kept writing, publishing a book a year. All of them well-written and thoroughly researched. Most of them receiving critical acclaim but only moderate sales.

Eve completed her master's and two years of coursework toward her PhD. At twenty-four, she was already at the point of starting to write her dissertation.

Three years after the first proposal, she came home to spend the summer at home with her father, needing a break before she started working on her dissertation full-time in the fall. She'd only talked to Jude once since he'd asked her to marry him, and that was at his father's Christmas party last year. They'd traded polite civilities. He'd asked her about her graduate work, and she'd asked him about his latest book.

That was it.

Until she received a text message from Jude in early May a couple of days after she'd gotten back to Green Valley. He asked if she could stop by at her convenience that week. He had something to talk to her about.

Eve had absolutely no idea what he could possibly want from her. She didn't really want to make the effort of driving out to the Gregory estate. She was tired after the academic year, and she still felt kind of awkward around Jude.

The Gregory family had always been good to her, however, and she couldn't bring herself to say no to a harmless request.

So she put on a somewhat decent outfit—a long summer skirt and a simple v-neck top—and drove the twenty minutes from her childhood home to the mansion on the sprawling property where the Gregorlys had lived for the past sixty years.

Nancy, the housekeeper, answered the door. She greeted Eve warmly and explained that Mr. Gregory was out of the country, but Jude was in the library waiting for her.

Eve had never been a social butterfly. She liked old houses and ideas and art and deep conversation and a mostly quiet life, and she was often a bit shy around strangers. But she'd known Nancy for twenty years, so she chatted with the older woman about her four grandkids and six grand-dogs as they walked through the marble-floored entry hall and down the wide hallway that led through the west wing of the house where the library was located.

When they reached the closed door, Nancy extended a hand and pressed her palm against Eve's cheek, her lined face tightening with emotion. "Bless you, dear. Bless both your hearts."

Eve blinked. Her eyes widened. She had absolutely no idea what prompted the emotional gesture, and she couldn't ask because Nancy was already tapping on the library door and then opening it at Jude's muffled response from inside the room.



The library was a book lover's dream with tall walls lined with bookshelves, big antique furniture, and cozy reading nooks in unexpected places. Eve had always loved it, and she felt a familiar pleasure waft through her as she stepped in.

Jude was seated at a desk that faced a big window. There was a laptop opened in front of him and messy piles of books and papers surrounding him.

He was typing as she walked in, but he withdrew his hands and spun his chair around before she reached him.

He looked older than she remembered from five months ago. Different. More mature. She always pictured him in her mind as an artsy grad-student type, but he wasn't that anymore.

He was a grownup. A twenty-nine-year-old man with broad shoulders, intelligent gray eyes, and an innate authority he exuded even when silent.

"Eve," he said, his eyes running up and down her body from her long, loose blond hair to her comfortable sandals. "Thanks for coming out here."

He had shoulder-length brown hair and a full, trimmed beard. A deep, slightly gravelly voice, one she'd never once heard him raise. In anger or anything else.

"Hi, Jude. You're welcome." She took the side chair next to the desk, pulling it into a better position so she could face him directly. "What's going on?"

His mouth tilted up slightly at the corners. "I can always count on you to skip the small talk and get right to the point."

"I figured you wouldn't want to waste time with small talk. You're the one who doesn't like other people, and you must have a reason for asking me here out of the blue."

"I do." He was wearing gray trousers and an untucked button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled to his elbows. His body was long and lean, although his shoulders were broader than she remembered.

Overall, he just seemed bigger. More *man*.

It was a strange and unsettling perception.

He cleared his throat and opened the top drawer of his desk, pulling out a thick piece of paper folded into thirds. He opened it slowly. Stared down at it for a minute.

She could see it was some sort of letter. There was a letterhead at the top of the page.

Her heart started beating faster, although she didn't understand why.

He silently handed her the letter.

With a hard swallow, she smoothed out the paper so she could read the words printed there.

It was only three paragraphs.

After the first two sentences, her eyes shot back up to Jude's face with a gasp.

He didn't smile. Didn't gesture. Didn't blink.

She started reading again from the beginning, sure she'd misunderstood.

Eve hadn't misunderstood anything.

The letterhead indicated a doctor at a reputable local practice. A neurologist.

Because Jude had failed to respond to their numerous calls and messages, the doctor was sending this letter by certified mail.

Jude had a brain tumor. Because of its position, the tumor was inoperable. There were other treatments that could be tried that might extend his life by a few months, but they needed to be started immediately.

Otherwise, by their best estimation, he had three months to live.

The exact same thing had happened to his mother.

Eve's hands started to tremble, shaking the paper she still held. "Is this... is this real?"

"Yes." Jude's voice didn't break or waver. "It's real."

“Why didn’t you respond to the doctor’s calls? When do you start treatment?”

“I don’t.”

Her face went cold, like all the blood was draining out. Her hands shook so helplessly she had to set the letter down on the desk. “W-what do you mean?”

“I’m not bothering with treatment. My mother did that, and she made it only a few weeks longer than three months but was sick the entire time. Miserable. I won’t do that.”

“But—”

“I won’t.” As always, his voice was soft and deep. Completely composed. Almost gentle. “If this is happening, then it’s going to be on my terms. I have three months left, and I’m going to live them the way I want. I won’t spend them sick in a hospital room from treatment that’s not going to fix anything.”

“How do you—”

“Eve, I’ve made my decision.”

His quiet declaration hit her hard. Like a sledgehammer. Her throat closed up, choking her. Her vision went blurry. She swayed in her chair, suddenly afraid she was going to fall over.

She’d never even liked Jude all that much, but he was a decent guy. A twenty-nine-year-old man who should have had his whole life ahead of him. He had any number of things left to do. He could get married and have kids. He had so many books left to write.

The reality of it rose in her throat and higher until it was filling her head. The pressure of shock expanded against her skull until she was afraid her head might literally explode.

Then her stomach suddenly heaved.

She choked on the sudden nausea. Jumped to her feet in a panic and ran toward the door, but it was too late to make it to a bathroom.

She bent over and vomited into a trash can near the door.

As she heaved and gasped, she was vaguely aware of a murmured voice near the desk. Since it wasn't directed at her, she assumed it was Jude talking on the phone.

She wasn't in fit condition to focus on what he said.

When she'd emptied her stomach, she collapsed in a nearby wingback chair. Tears streamed down her face, and her nose was running, so she gratefully yanked several tissues out of the box Jude came over to offer her.

She mopped her face, and he dragged another chair over and positioned it across from her.

"I'm so sorry," she said, desperately trying to pull herself back together with help from her wad of damp tissues. "I don't know what happened to me."

"Probably just the shock."

When there was a tap on the door, Jude went over to answer it, receiving a mug from Nancy with murmured thanks and nodding toward the garbage can she'd thrown up into. Nancy tied off the bag and took it with her as she left.

He sat back down and gave the mug to Eve, who held it in both hands and took a sip without thinking.

Hot tea. Very strong and very sweet tea. She took a few more sips until her stomach and her spirit settled.

"I'm really sorry about the collapse," she said at last, setting the mug on the small table beside her. "It's the last thing you need to be worrying about right now. I'm so, so sorry this is happening to you, Jude."

He nodded, glancing away and swallowing visibly before he replied, "I started having headaches. Not the normal sinus headaches I've gotten all my life. These were different. A lot worse. They knocked me out, and they came more and more frequently. Every few days. So I went to my doctor who sent me to a neurologist who wanted to do an MRI. I met with the doctor afterwards to get the results in person."

"The letter says you weren't answering their calls and messages."

“They wanted a follow-up appointment to plan treatment, and I’d already decided I didn’t want that. So he sent that letter to cover his liability.”

It all made sense. A bleak, terrible kind of sense.

“So three months?” she asked, only a slight rasp in her voice now. She was feeling better since the shock was dissipating. Heavy. Sadder than she would have expected, given she’d never been close to Jude. But mostly just heavy.

“Three months.” He met her eyes with a deep, thoughtful attention that had always characterized the man, as if his whole mind was focused only on her.

It occurred to her then to wonder why he’d told her in person like this. She had to be very far down the short list of people he was close to. “What can I do to help, Jude?”

He opened his mouth. Closed it again. Then glanced away and said, “You can marry me.”



Counted is a standalone set in Green Valley (which is the setting of a number of my other books), and it is a real romance with a traditional ending. You can find out more about it [here](#).

## ABOUT NOELLE ADAMS

Noelle handwrote her first romance novel in a spiral-bound notebook when she was twelve, and she hasn't stopped writing since. She has lived in eight different states and currently resides in Virginia, where she writes full time, reads any book she can get her hands on, and offers tribute to a very spoiled cocker spaniel.

She loves travel, art, history, and ice cream. After spending far too many years of her life in graduate school, she has decided to reorient her priorities and focus on writing contemporary romances. For more information, please check out her website: [noelle-adams.com](http://noelle-adams.com).