



SHAWN

The Hartwell Brothers

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USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SHAWN



THE HARTWELL BROTHERS BOOK 4

M. S. PARKER

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THE HARTWELL BROTHERS

Thank you for reading *SHAWN*, the final book in my new billionaire series: *The Hartwell Brothers*. Each book is about a different brother and can be read stand-alone, however, I highly recommend reading the books in this order:

[Book 1: KEITH \(Hartwell 1\)](#)

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ONE

MATTHEW

SEPTEMBER 14, 1953

Moonlight fell in through the curtains in silver streams, shining down on Alice's face, highlighting the elegant line of her jaw while softening the shadows under her eyes.

She was nine months pregnant and so beautiful it hurt to look at her sometimes. She also laughed at me every time I told her so, but I could see her eyes glow each time, so I made sure to do it often. It was an easy enough task because I meant every word.

The pregnancy had made her hair thicker, lusher, and her breasts were deliciously full, and so round it was a chore not to touch her at times. And, *damn*, but had those sweet curves become sensitive, so sensitive that one of my favorite past times now was to bring her to climax simply by teasing her nipples and working her to a fever pitch.

But the pregnancy was also wearing her out, making it harder and harder for her to sleep.

"The baby has turned my bladder into a trampoline, Matt," she told me when she'd hit her sixth month. "I wake up, and he's jumping up and down, and I can barely make it to the bathroom. Oh, don't you dare laugh!"

But now, she was so big with the baby, she claimed her bladder was no bigger than a raisin. "I told my mother, and she was *scandalized* that I'd even mention it." She'd thrown up her hands in pure dismay. "It's a bodily organ. What would she do if she even had a glimmer of the way you've convinced me to talk to you in bed?"

That had made me laugh, then cringe. The idea of Alice's very prim and proper mother even thinking about the two of us in bed was enough to make my balls shrivel. For a time.

The relationship between her and her parents had healed over the past two years. I was under no illusion I had much to do with it, other than warning Claude Cormier that he had his priorities out of line and making sure the Van Hornes kept a clear distance—which they had.

Now both of her parents were so excited about the coming baby, they could barely contain themselves. Even her rigid, stiff as a board father was smiling a great deal of the time.

Not that I could blame them. I felt the same.

Next to me, Alice grimaced, then gasped. Easing closer, I slid my arm around her and pressed against the small of her back, rubbing gently. For the past few hours, she'd been having contractions, but they were spaced so far apart, Alice had wanted to stay home.

“The hospital is a ten-minute drive from here,” she'd told me. “Once the contractions are close together, we can go. But I won't be comfortable in a hospital bed, and even though Dr. Kessler has promised you can be in the room with me until it's time for delivery, the hospital still doesn't like it.”

Dr. Kessler, a newer doctor with dual US and British citizenship, had come over from England after completing his training. The son of a midwife, he had what some called “radical viewpoints” on maternal care, but Alice had been impressed with him after several friends had recommended him. “He listened to me, Matt. He didn't just decide for me.”

The idea of leaving my wife alone to suffer through labor terrified me. I'd had no choice when she'd delivered the little girl she'd elected to put up for adoption two years ago. The hospital and physician hadn't allowed me to even be in the room with her as she dealt with the labor pains, and I'd paced in scared silence, feeling helpless.

This would be better, although not by much. It didn't seem right that a man couldn't be in the room when his own child was born. I'd told my father so, and he'd grimaced. “Birthing is women's business, son.”

“How can it be just women's business when I had a hand in making the baby?”

He hadn't had an answer. In fact, he'd gone red and changed the subject.

Alice cuddled in closer, as close as her swollen belly would allow, her body already relaxing back into deeper sleep. Rubbing my chin against her hair, I continued to stroke her back.

Dr. Kessler said she was due any day and had reassured us over the phone earlier that her contractions weren't close enough to worry about coming to

the hospital yet, but he hadn't allayed my concerns.

And that was what I did for the next few hours, worry, wonder, wait.

The moon had traveled across the sky, the angle of its light now falling across Alice's belly, the blankets long since shoved off. Bringing my hand up, I rested it on the hard curve. The baby bumped hard against my touch, almost as if in acknowledgment, and I'd winced in sympathy even as I smiled because I had no doubt that it must have been uncomfortable.

Alice stirred, mumbling under her breath, then sighed.

A moment later, both of us gasped.

The contraction that seized her belly this time was so powerful, *I* felt it.

A startled cry tore from her as she arched her spine, one hand flying out to grab onto me. Her hand connected with the bare flesh of my waist, and her nails sank in.

"Breathe, sweetheart," I said when I realized she had stopped, holding in her air as the pain twisted through her. "Remember what the doctor said. You have to breathe through it."

She went limp a second later and looked at me with wide, stunned eyes. "That's easy for a man to say. How can anybody breathe through that?"

I had no response. Deciding to change the subject, I forced a smile. "Maybe it's time to get to the hospital."

"Indeed."

The sharp, acerbic tone had me biting back a smile, but then she gasped, clutching at her belly.

"Matt...hospital. *Now.*"

I BLASTED through the red lights, my emergency blinkers on while Alice sat next to me, breathing in stops and starts. Another contraction had hit only minutes after I pulled out of the driveway.

Worry twisted inside. I spoke to her in what I hoped was a calm, reassuring voice, but I couldn't fully quell that worry.

It hadn't been like this the last time.

Even as I thought about that, I wanted to hit myself.

Alice had cried as she held the little girl before turning her over to a nurse, and every second that passed as the nurse walked away, I expected to

hear Alice call the woman back. I would have understood, accepted it no matter the choice Alice made, but in the end, she'd said it was best the baby go to the family who wanted to adopt her.

I hadn't asked questions, just held her as she cried.

Now, worries I thought I'd silenced came back in full force. She'd hidden it, but even after returning to Boston, she'd thought of the tiny baby girl. So had I. Van Horne might have fathered the child when he raped Alice, but that genetic contribution was the only tie. Had Alice wanted to keep the baby, she would have been my daughter, and I would have loved her as fiercely as I loved Alice.

The guilt had haunted her for months.

Would this bring it all back?

"That was a bad one," she said, breathing hard, the grip she had on my thigh finally easing. "I'm so sorry. I...it didn't hurt so much last time."

Taking her hand, I kissed her fingers. "Don't apologize to me. That's my baby in there, sweetheart. You can gouge me bloody with your fingernails if it will help you deal with the pain. Scream until you break the windows. I don't give a damn."

She laughed weakly. "It all seems so...undignified."

"Undignified." Amused, I kissed her hand again and slowed down for the corner. The hospital's bright lights gleamed like a beacon up ahead. Finally. Those ten minutes seemed to have taken a lifetime. "You didn't worry about dignity the night we made that little guy, so there's no reason to worry about it now."

"It's terribly rude of you to bring that up," she said in a prim voice that made me want to kiss her.

Whipping my car into an empty parking space that was thankfully close to the front doors, I laughed. "And you get so prissy when I do. Why on earth do you think I do it?"

"Awful," she murmured. "You're just *awful* sometimes, Matthias Hartwell."

I went around to help her out, pulling her close so I could kiss her. "But you love me, anyway."

She went to respond, but before she could, her face contorted, and she grabbed onto my arms, her head falling to bury against my chest.

"Another one...get me inside...please," she said, panting through the pain.

Scooping her up into my arms, I kicked the door shut. “Good plan. I’m ready to meet my child.”

Her eyes glowed up at me, and even through the pain of the contraction, she smiled. “Me too.”

TWO

SHAWN

PRESENT TIME

The old house was quiet.

It was part of the reason I was there working on a Saturday—none of my crew was on schedule this weekend. We tried not to have them come in and work unless we were on a tight deadline, and things with this project were moving along just fine. More than fine, actually.

I'd come in after the cleaning crew we used had finished their task. As the head project manager and I'd expected, we'd finished everything this past week.

That was why I was here. Even though the line I gave the guys on the team and my partner was that I liked to give everything one final look, the fact of the matter was, I wanted a little more time here.

Before too much longer, I'd have to turn this gorgeous old Bostonian home over to somebody else, and part of me hated it.

It wasn't anything new. The construction company I owned, along with my partner, specialized in rehabbing old homes with historical value, like this one in Beacon Hill.

This house had fallen into disrepair when the owner, who had no children or close relatives, had gotten too old to keep up with it. He'd had money at one point in his life, but health problems had eaten away at it, and those problems, along with other issues, had made it harder and harder for him to put in the work needed to fix the ever increasing costly problems affecting the house.

And those problems dated back more than just years or decades.

We'd gotten our hands on this place because the owner had known my partner, Conall McDowd.

Conall had been my mentor before becoming my boss and then offering me a chance to buy into his company. He mostly handled the business side of things now, and he'd known the former owner for years. When he'd been offered the chance to buy the house, he'd jumped on it.

The old man hadn't been looking to do much more than have somebody take the place off his hands after he'd fallen down the steep stairs and broken his leg, but Conall had never been one to cheat anybody.

We'd paid a pretty penny, but when we were done with it, this place would be a hot property. We were already vetting calls from people interested in buying the place, either for residential use or business, or both.

Smoothing a hand down the banister that had been stained just the other day, I took a step back and looked up the stairs. We'd ripped out the old staircase and broadened the narrow passageway, putting in wider, deeper steps that would no longer serve to trip the wary and cautious alike.

Not everything inside had been changed, though. The stained-glass window that hung over the massive front doors was authentic. Although beautiful, the doors had been replaced because the wood had been rotting away at the edges. I'd insisted we get a set custom-made that would be identical to the carved style we'd had to take out, and I was glad we had.

Now, the stained-glass window, carefully cleaned and restored to its former glory, was in beautiful harmony with a set of doors bearing the same Celtic cross motif.

"I swear, if Conall wouldn't tear me a new one, I think I'd buy this place and keep it for myself," I mumbled.

Then I laughed. I said that to myself once a year, at least. That was the thing about having a job like mine—and loving it. You always fell in love with the project and never wanted to leave it.

Until it was time for the next one.

Conall ribbed me about it—a lot—but I knew he felt the same way. "This is hard work, son. Back breaking at times, and it comes with more than a little frustration too. If you don't love what you do, then go build fancy new shit somewhere else. It will be easier and less stressful in the long run."

He told me that when he'd first hired me on full-time, and I'd heard another reiteration of it when he'd asked me if I wanted to take on the role as partner just a year ago.

My answer had been the same both times. "There's nothing else I rather do, Conall."

Blowing out a breath, I checked to make sure I had all my gear and gave the place one last look. “It was nice knowing you, gorgeous,” I told the grand old house, gleaming and beautiful once more.

This wouldn’t be the last time I’d see this old place, but likely, the next time would be with a realtor as we did a walkthrough for the photographs needed for the property’s sale.

Maybe it was sentimentality, but I’d rather make my goodbyes in private. Locking the door behind me, I headed out to my work truck.

I’d grab a cup of coffee from the café, then head home and spend the rest of the day being a lazy bum.

OR...MAYBE not.

Cup of coffee in hand, I came to a stop in the parking lot outside the café and studied the cute redhead leaning against my work truck.

She wore a snug-fitting t-shirt bearing the logo of the café and a pair of jeans that looked to be painted on, showing off curves that might be considered illegal in some counties—perhaps even this one. I didn’t know her real name, but she’d introduced herself as Cherry back when I’d first started hitting this particular café months ago.

Cherry and I had been engaging in a friendly, casual flirtation, but it wouldn’t go beyond that. I wasn’t looking for a relationship. Two of my brothers had recently fallen—and hard—and while I expected I’d eventually want the same, that wasn’t where I was at in my life.

“I heard you guys were about finished with Mr. Etheridge’s house,” she said, her lips plump and slicked raspberry red.

“That’s right.” I took a sip of the coffee, straight and black, strong enough to raise the dead. That wasn’t just my opinion. *Strange Brews*, the coffee shop and café where Cherry worked, advertised it that way, and they were on target. “You on break?”

“No.” She canted her head to the side. “I opened today. Was getting off when I saw you walking in, thought I’d wait and say hi. Or...maybe bye, seeing as how you won’t be coming around so much once you finish up.”

She took a step forward, then another, now so close I could smell the lush, exotic scent of whatever perfume she wore—and coffee. She smelled

like coffee, but I didn't mind that a bit. I loved coffee.

"I'm going to miss seeing you around so much, Shawn." She held my gaze for a moment before her eyes lowered to my mouth, lingering there.

A stir of interest warmed my blood. But...

"It's been nice talking to you, Cherry. But I'm not in the mood for a relationship or anything," I said bluntly.

Her mouth bowed up in a slow, sexy smile. "You know what? I'm not looking for a relationship either. I'm just in the mood for a little fun." She moved even closer, not stopping until the tips of her full breasts brushed against my chest.

Blood started on a slow, meandering journey downward, pooling in my groin as my cock began to take a keen interest in this turn of direction.

"I'm not opposed to a little fun." Reaching up, I traced a finger down the side of her neck.

My calluses rasped over her smooth skin, and she shivered, a startled rush of air escaping her. Her pupils dilated, and her cheeks flushed a delicate pink.

"Want to go to your place?" I asked. "I live pretty far out."

"Sounds good to me." She licked her lips and glanced back over her shoulder at my truck. "Can you drive? I don't live far, so I usually walk. And I don't feel like walking right now."

Cherry's apartment was one of the older homes that had been renovated and fashioned into a series of multiple units—in her case, eight. She lived on the second floor, and we'd no sooner gotten the door shut before she turned and pressed herself against me.

Her mouth opened under mine, and I fisted my hand in her hair as I turned us around and pushed her up against the door.

She moaned as I ran my hands down her sides, cupped her hips, and boosted her up. Legs coming to wrap around my hips, she ground against me, and I groaned at the lush heat I could feel at the vee of her thighs.

Breaking the kiss, I trailed my mouth along her jawline to her ear. "You got condoms?"

"In my room. Nightstand." She made a vague gesture with her hand.

Bracing her weight in place, I turned and scanned the living room, spotted the narrow hall.

The bedroom, as I'd expected, was at the end, and I shouldered the door open while she fumbled to jerk my shirt off. Peeling her away, I put her down by the bed and stripped away my shirt, then reached for the hem of her top,

stripping the snug cotton off.

Under it, a black bra trimmed with red ribbon barely held her large breasts confined. With a groan of appreciation, I cupped her in my hands, plumping the mounds of her tits together. "I've got to tell you, Cherry, I've been admiring your tits for months."

"I'm so glad you approve," she said, a giggle underscoring her words. She arched forward, thrusting herself into my hands.

Freeing the front clasp, I pushed the straps down so I could see her completely.

Her nipples were large, already tight and swollen, and I caught her around the waist again, lifting her up.

She gasped. "Fuck, you're so strong...so damn big." She arched and rocked against me. "I bet you're big all over too. Aren't you, baby?"

Instead of answering, I took one of her nipples in my mouth. She whimpered, shoving her hands into my hair. Turning, I sat, then went to my back, tugging her with me so I could feast on the sweet, sweet banquet before me.

Cherry moved against me, her whispers slowly turning to urgent moans and desperate pleas. Reaching between us, I cupped her in my hand and pushed, forcing the seam of her jeans against the sensitive flesh between her thighs.

She went stiff, a startled cry escaping her. Then, as her orgasm broke, I rolled, tucking her beneath me and thrusting against her, riding her through it.

When she was limp and dazed, I pushed away from her and dealt with her jeans, stripping them away to find a pair of black panties trimmed in red. They matched her bra. Cute. But I wanted her naked.

Curls of a deeper shade of red covered her pussy, the strands damp with the evidence of her arousal. The musk of it rose to tease me as I hooked my fingers in the waistband of her panties and pulled them all the way down.

Straightening, I watched her as I unbuckled my belt, then dealt with my own jeans and underwear. She was just starting to lift her lashes when I found the box of condoms and pulled one off the strip.

"Fuck, you *are* big," she whispered, eyes arrowing in on my cock. She licked her lips.

My cock jerked in approval. "Keep looking at me like that, and I'll start to think you want to suck me off before I fuck you."

"Well...as long as you plan on returning the favor." She sat up in a

sinuous, sleek movement as I shifted back to stand by the bed. She gripped my hips and leaned in, licking a path up my cock, from the balls to the tip. “Oh, yummy. Delicious, big cock.”

Fisting my hand in her hair, I gripped my penis by the base. “The more you talk and tease, the more I will.”

She pouted, but then, with a sly smile, lowered her head and opened her mouth, taking me inside. The head of my cock hit the back of her throat, and she swallowed, taking even more.

“Fuck,” I muttered, sweat breaking out on my brow.

She pulled back, then started the process all over again. Slowly. As she pulled back the second time, she scraped the underside of my cock with her teeth. Sensation ricocheted through me, and I tightened my grip. She moaned, the vibration of it traveling up my dick.

Involuntarily, I moved. She moaned again and dug her nails into my hips. Bringing my other hand up, I cupped her head in both hands. She made a noise of approval and covered my hands with hers.

Taking the hint, I started to move, fucking her mouth with slow, deep strokes. The moment I felt the tingling at the base of my spine, I pulled back, despite her attempts to hold me, and gripped my cock, stroking hard and fast.

She leaned back on her hands, staring at me. “Come on me,” she said, voice ragged.

Since I wasn’t in any mood to be polite, I didn’t argue, and my orgasm hit, hard and fast. White jets of semen exploded out to splash on her chest, and she shivered, collapsing back onto the bed.

She was so fucking sexy. I got hard all over again, just looking at her.

Going to my knees, I shoved her thighs open and hooked them over my shoulders. Her pussy was slick and wet, and when I licked her open, she shrieked and shoved her hands into my hair.

She was every bit as uninhibited in begging me to make her come as she was in everything else, and I rewarded her with two orgasms before pulling away. She was limp on the bed, muscles lax as I stood and picked up the condom I’d dropped at some point.

“You’re fucking insatiable,” she said with a drowsy smile. “You sure you’re not looking for anything long term?”

Instead of answering, I pulled her up and kissed her, tugging her head back to give me better access. “Turn around,” I said when I ended the kiss. “I want to take you from behind.”

“Oh, baby...” She quivered but obeyed, turning and bending forward to brace her hands on the bed. Then she went lower, all the way to her elbows, leaving her ass up for me, her cunt open and vulnerable.

After sheathing myself in the condom, I gripped one hip before steadying myself and pushing inside. She was slick and hot, closing over me in a snug grasp as I drove in, burying myself to the tip.

She bounced up onto her toes at the impact. “Oh, *fuck, yes...* again.”

I did as ordered, slamming into her hard and fast.

A flush broke out over her pale skin, leaving it pink. The muscles of her pussy got tighter, hotter. I hitched her up higher, not stopping until her feet had all but left the floor.

She wailed, clenched around me, and came.

I was right behind her.

Yeah, this was definitely better than slumming around my place like a bum.

THREE

TALIA

“May I help you find anything, Miss Talia?”

The proper, plummy tones of my father’s butler, Havens, had me freezing and inwardly wincing, but I managed to control the wince so the tall, thin man didn’t see it betrayed on my face as he came to a stop in front of me.

I was standing in the library, just a few feet away from a glass-covered bookcase that held first editions of some books I knew to be well over two hundred years old. The books were just some of the treasures in this home, owned by my father, Willard Marlowe. Sometimes, I felt like I was in a museum, although it wasn’t because the house had a *hands-off* vibe, far from it.

It was just so different from everything I’d known growing up.

“Ah, hi, Havens.” I’d finally stopped calling him *Mr. Havens*, but I still wasn’t used to how he was always *there* every time I came to stay with my father for a visit. I didn’t quite know how to tell him that I was used to fending for myself without offending him.

The honest truth was, I didn’t know how to handle this weird new twist my life had taken a few months ago when a DNA test I’d taken from one of those genealogy sites had connected me with a father I’d always assumed had been uninterested in me.

That hadn’t been the case—at all.

“Hello, Miss Talia,” Havens said, his thin, aesthetic face creasing in a smile. “Was there a particular book you wanted to find?”

“Ah, no. I was just...looking around.” Shoving my hands into my back pockets, I summoned up a smile and hoped like hell I didn’t blush. I hadn’t *meant* to come into the library. I’d been looking for the entertainment center,

but gotten lost.

Growing up in a two-bedroom home all my life hadn't equipped me for living in a fifteen thousand square foot house with nine bedrooms, fourteen baths, an entertainment center, *two* libraries, a bowling alley, and...hell. I couldn't remember all the other rooms in the place.

"If there's a certain genre you prefer to read, I can point you in the right direction. Mr. Marlowe is quite the reader, and his mother was much the same. She was addicted to mysteries and romance, while Mr. Marlowe loves historical fiction and thrillers. The bloodier, the better."

That made me smile. "Yes, I know. We've already compared reading lists. Turns out we have a lot of favorites in common."

Havens's face softened even more. "That's lovely." He hesitated a moment, then said, "It does his heart good having you here, Miss Talia. I don't think you know how much."

"I like being here with him too." That was putting it mildly, although I still felt out of place in this big house. Off balance. How weird it was to think I could have grown up here.

A faint buzzing sound filled the silence, and Havens inclined his head. "I'll be on my way if you don't require any assistance."

After I shook my head, he stepped around me, leaving me alone in the library. I moved closer to the books protected from dust and light by a shield of glass and peered at them. Volumes by Shelley, Yeats, Byron...damn, a number of books by Sir Author Conan Doyle—maybe *all* of them. I had no idea how many he'd written.

The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. *The Hobbit*.

The last one made me smile, reminding me of how I'd begged my mom to read it to me when I was younger. She'd indulged me, not telling me until years later that she'd always assumed I'd get bored with the story after a few paragraphs, but I'd been mesmerized. Part of it might have had to do with the way she told the story in her rich, warm voice, but it had been the tale too. The magic of the tale and my own vivid imagination.

My fingers itched to touch the book, but I was too intimidated by its clear age—and likely high dollar value. But the warm atmosphere of the library called to me, and I wasn't in the mood to watch a movie now, so I wandered the shelves until I found the thrillers and picked out a book from a British novelist my dad had recommended. Taking it to the well-padded window seat, I sat down and started to read.

IF I HADN'T THOUGHT to set the alarm on my phone, I might have lost track of time and been late to dinner. As it was, I walked in just as Havens helped my father move from his wheelchair to the chair he preferred to use at the table.

Willard Marlowe was a tall, thin man, still very attractive, but it was obvious his disease was taking a toll on him. He'd been diagnosed with primary progressive multiple sclerosis almost five years ago, before I'd ever met him, so I'd never known the vibrant, athletic man whose life was evidenced in the photographs still on display around the house—the man who enjoyed playing tennis, yachting, horseback riding, and golfing.

In the fall, he'd told me, we'd spend more time in the stables, and he'd teach me what he knew about horses, although he wouldn't be able to ride anymore. The disease's effects on his muscle strength had become too severe.

It would have to wait until fall, too, because of the heat. He hadn't outright told me, but I'd spent a fair amount of time educating myself about MS, and I knew the muggy heat that could grip Boston in its fist every summer had a detrimental effect on people with the disease.

"Talia." My father gave me a warm smile. "Havens tells me you spent some time in the library."

"Yes." Holding up the book I'd brought with me, I gave him a warm, affectionate smile. "I decided to give her a try. She's...brilliant. Twisted, but brilliant."

"I knew you'd like her." Grin taking on a decidedly evil bent, he winked. "Don't go asking me for spoilers. You're going to have to figure out the hard way, like I did."

"I do recall you asking *me* for spoilers, sir," Havens said.

Shooting the proper butler a quick look, I searched for some sign that he was teasing my father and realized that he definitely was. He smiled at me slightly as my father scowled.

"No sharing my secrets, Havens. A dad has to have a few." His cheeks flushed as he said it.

I had the feeling he liked saying that—a *dad*.

I couldn't deny I liked hearing it.

I'd gone twenty-one years thinking that whoever had fathered me wouldn't care if I lived or died, and now that we'd found each other, he was

everything I could have hoped for—more.

And it had nothing to do with his money.

The money, to be honest, was something I didn't quite know how to deal with. But Willard Marlowe was so much more than his checking account—and a house that was worth, well...I couldn't even count that high. He was funny and smart, and he *cared* about things, about *me*.

He and my mom met twenty-two years ago when he'd been in Salem for a business conference, and they'd hit things off right away, ending up in a hotel room. Early the next morning, though, a phone call from his mom had him rushing away without so much as talking to the young woman he'd just met. His father had collapsed, and he'd made it back to Boston just in time to speak to the man before a second heart attack hit. A fatal one.

I often thought, if it hadn't been for how things had gone with his father, my life would have turned out very differently. Just seeing how his face softened when he asked about my mother told me things that made me wonder just *how* different my life could have been.

I'd finally asked him, a few weeks earlier, if he had feelings for my mother still.

He'd gone very quiet, looking out the window for so long I started to wonder if he *would* answer. Then finally, he'd said, "You know how some people talk about the one who got away? I've spent most of the past twenty-two years thinking about your mother, Talia. But it wasn't that she got away. Life got in between us, and by the time I was able to do anything about it, it didn't seem right to try to find her and explain. But if I'd known about you, nothing would have kept me away."

Havens slid out of the room, leaving the two of us sitting at the small retro-styled table tucked into the kitchen nook. There was a large formal dining room, along with a smaller, more intimate one, but both of us preferred to eat in here, looking out over the gardens.

"How did therapy go?" I asked, hoping the hesitancy I felt didn't show in my voice. At first, I'd been afraid to even broach the topic of his disease, but he'd recognized it almost right off the bat.

"I'm not a fragile doll, Talia. If you have questions, ask." Then, he'd been even more direct. "This disease may end my life far sooner than I'd like. We just don't know. I don't want us wasting any time with hesitancy and nervousness."

It had been a blow to my heart to hear him talk about it so directly, but I'd

needed to hear it. Being afraid to ask questions, of any sort, could easily become a barrier, and he'd seen that right off, knocking the barrier down before it could even start to form.

"As far as therapy goes, it was the same as always." He grimaced and reach for the glass of red wine that had been poured by the kitchen staff and left by his plate. It was his one indulgence—that glass of red wine once a week. "A torture session. Nell gets a distinct and unusual pleasure from seeing just how far she can push me without making me sweat too much."

I laughed, unable to help myself. I'd met his personal torturer, as he called his therapist. Nell was four feet ten and so slight, she looked like a stiff wind would blow her over.

And the one time I'd stayed in to watch a session, she'd been like a sweetly smiling drill sergeant.

"I think you secretly enjoy those torture sessions," I teased. "You pine all week, waiting to see Nell."

"Waiting to see the back of her head," he grumbled. But he was smiling.

He had a team of health care professionals that worked with him to keep his health at an optimal level, all referred by the doctor who'd initially diagnosed him with MS five years earlier.

That doctor, oddly enough, was the reason we'd found each other. Dr. Steve Ramsey and my father were friendly outside of the office, and he'd mentioned to my father that he'd recently done one of the genealogy DNA kits that had allowed him to connect with cousins he hadn't known about.

Dad was an only child, and his mother had passed away several years after his father, fading away bit by bit. He'd told me he'd done it in a last ditch effort to find familial ties in the hopes of connecting with somebody so the Marlowe family legacy could carry on.

I'd also done the genealogy kit in a last ditch effort to find out something about my dad. I'd never asked my mother much about him after I'd gotten older and realized it made her sad to talk about it.

It wasn't until I'd met Dad, then talked to him about her, that I understood.

They were both each other's *one that got away*, and they'd been missing each other ever since that one, single night they'd had together.

"Do you have any plans for the night?" Dad asked, drawing my attention back to the conversation.

I grinned. "I thought I'd finish reading my book."

He gave me a mock affronted look. “You’re twenty-one years old, and your exciting plans for Saturday are to stay home with your old man and read.”

“Exactly.” I picked up my glass of wine, tipped it slightly in his direction, and winked.

FOUR

SHAWN

A ringing phone jerked me out of a dead sleep, and I swore as I shoved upright, swatting blindly around in the semi-darkness for the stupid piece of tech and wondering who I'd have to kill for calling so early.

I had to get up at the ass crack of dawn during the week. I didn't appreciate having somebody call at fuck-all thirty on the one day I chose to sleep in.

Spying my brother's number on the screen, I sat up with a groan. The fog of sleep was already clearing from my head. Out of all my friends and family, if there was one person I could trust not to call for no reason, it was Matt.

"Hello," I said, voice gritty and rough.

"Shawn." Matt sounded strained...and worried. "Listen, Gran's in the hospital. I just had a call from Dad. She collapsed at home, and Grandpa called 911."

Dread wrapped a fist around my heart and squeezed tight. "What's wrong?"

"We don't know," he said, frustration punctuating every word. "We don't fucking know." He named the hospital and said, "I'm heading up there now."

"I'm on my way." I ended the call, and for a few seconds, just sat there, mind spinning but nothing really connecting.

My phone vibrated in my hand.

Dazed, I looked down and saw a text from Matt.

Mom said be careful driving or she'll kick your ass. Yes, she said those exact words.

Somehow, that stirred me into action, and I launched myself out of bed. I hit the bathroom, brushed my teeth, and splashed water on my face, grateful

I'd showered after getting home from tangling up the sheets with the barista last night—and doubly grateful I'd bypassed on her offer to stay the night. I had a thirty-minute drive to the hospital already, assuming traffic wasn't any worse than normal. Her place was farther out and would have been close to double that.

“Don't think about it,” I told myself. There wasn't any point in worrying about it anyway, was there?

Roughly five minutes after Matt had hung up, I was out the front door of my bayside condo, jumping into my car. The work truck was parked in the second space I paid for monthly—paid through the nose, might I add—but I ignored it, and the comfortable familiarity of it for the sports car in midnight blue. I'd be careful driving, but I planned on breaking a few speed limits along the way. A few, as in all of them.

“SHAWN.”

Mom spied me first and rose from one of the miserably hard chairs in the emergency room to enfold me in her arms. I hugged her back, tucking my face into her shoulder and hoping like hell she couldn't pick up on how scared I was.

“You didn't drive carefully,” she murmured, rubbing my back with a gentle, reassuring hand.

“I did too.” Carefully enough, at least. I hadn't wrecked, although I'd never tell her just how close I'd come to doing just that. More than once.

She laughed, the sound watery. “Liar.”

Easing back, I rested my hands on her shoulders and looked from her to my dad and brother. Grandpa wasn't out in the waiting room, and I assumed he was back in the treatment area with Grandma. That was a good thing, at least I hoped so. If they were letting him back there, it had to mean things weren't *that* bad.

“Do we know anything?” I asked softly.

“No.” The answer came from my father, and his voice was thick and tight, rougher than I'd ever heard it. “Dad came out maybe five minutes ago to give us an update, but he couldn't tell us anything, really. They're running tests, drew some blood for lab work. That's it.”

“What happened?” I held his gaze. “Matt said Gran collapsed?”

“That’s what your grandfather said.” My dad rubbed the back of his neck, his eyes straying to the closed doors that led to the treatment areas of the emergency room. “He told me she hadn’t been feeling particularly well, that she had been very tired, but he thought it was because she hadn’t been sleeping as well as she normally does. She had a bad headache yesterday. Then she collapsed on her way to the bathroom this morning. He couldn’t get her to respond, and he called the 911.”

His voice broke on the last word.

Mom rushed to his side, wrapping her arms around him. “Come on, honey. Let’s sit down, okay?”

While she guided him to a chair, Matt moved to stand next to me. “Mom told me Grandma hasn’t been acting quite like herself for a few weeks,” he said in a low voice. “More tired, not eating as well. She asked if Gran was feeling okay, and Gran brushed it off, just said she wasn’t sleeping all that well, but Mom said something to Dad, and Dad brought it up to Gran and Grandpa. They were supposed to go see the doctor this next week.”

“Could it be her heart? A stroke?”

Matt spread his hands wide. “I’ve got no idea.” His phone rang, and he pulled it from his pocket. “I need to take this. It’s Gabrielle.”

Nodding, I moved to an empty seat close to where Mom and Dad sat. With a dull headache pulsing at the base of my skull, I leaned back and crossed my arms over my chest. I fucking hated hospitals.

And I hated them even more when it was somebody I cared about on the other side of the emergency room doors, and I was out here, helpless to do anything other than wait.

KEITH SHOWED up with his girlfriend almost two hours after I arrived.

To my surprise, Veronica threw her arms around me and gave me a fast, hard hug. “Your gran is a tough woman, Shawn. She’ll be fine.”

The gentle words of encouragement slayed me, and I found myself hugging her back, taking the comfort she gave so easily.

“That’s my girl you’re clinging to there, kid,” Keith said, bumping me in the shoulder when I finally pulled away.

“Hey.” I managed to smile. “She hugged me first. Maybe she wised up and realized you’re more trouble than you’re worth.”

Veronica grinned at me but moved to lean against Keith as Matt started updating them on what little we knew.

“They’re doing some scans on her now. They’re checking to see if she could have had a stroke.”

Fear gripped me.

One of the best workers Conall and I had working for us, up until six months ago, had been a man in his forties. Big and brash, Jeff Henley had been a pack-a-day smoker who loved to kick back with a couple of beers at the end of the day and ate red meat like it was going out of style. It had been near quitting time when he’d abruptly collapsed. The stroke hadn’t killed him, but he hadn’t been able to come back to work either. Disabled at forty-seven and left with a permanent hitch in his gait and limited use of his right hand, the doctors told him he’d been lucky. Jeff had agreed...eventually.

He’d been young, and once he got his blood pressure under control and dealt with some bad habits that had predisposed him to certain health issues, the doctors told him he could easily live a long, healthy life.

But my grandma *wasn’t* young. And she did have issues with her blood pressure.

“Shawn.” Matt gripped my shoulder and squeezed lightly. “Take a deep breath, buddy. It will be all right.”

I almost knocked his hand away, demanded to know how he could say that. None of us *knew* it would be all right. We couldn’t.

But then I looked at him and saw the same fear and realized the truth. He was speaking from a place of hope, despite his fear. Sometimes, hope was all you had.

“Yeah.” Managing to nod, I forced a smile. “Of course it will.”

“Hey!”

At the sound of Jamie’s voice, we all turned toward the entrance of the emergency room. He came striding up, walking hand in hand with a slim, pretty blonde—a woman I’d never seen in my life. It was enough of a surprise, just seeing him with a woman that, for a few seconds, I forgot all about Gran and my worry as I took in the sight before me.

But then Jamie came to a halt in front of us, breathing raggedly. “Sorry it took me so damn long. I was in Albany with Olivia, had to drive like a maniac to get here. What’s going on? Have we heard anything?”

Glancing at the woman who had to be Olivia, I stayed quiet while Matt updated Jamie, answering questions from both him and Keith.

The woman caught my curious gaze and offered a polite smile, but stayed silent, remaining at Jamie's side even when he tugged his hand free to shove all ten fingers through his hair in a gesture of pure frustration. "And we don't know *anything* else? It's been over three hours since Dad called me."

"These things take time, son," Dad said, moving to join us. He nodded at the woman.

Jamie frowned and glanced over at her, his cheeks going faintly red. "Ah, sorry. I'm being rude. This is Olivia Beale. Olivia..."

Olivia... I tried to place where I'd heard the name, but before I had the chance, a slightly accented voice called out, "Hartwell family?"

Ten minutes later, the lot of us in a smaller, private waiting room, a pretty young doctor with dark brown eyes and smooth, rich brown skin spoke to us in a clear, concise voice as she described Gran's stroke.

"It was a relatively small stroke, affecting the left side of the brain." She indicated a scan that was placed on a light box on the wall. It showed a human brain, and on the left side, an area had been marked with a small, precise line. "This area here. We've given her medications..."

Blood roared in my ears, making it hard for me to follow the technical talk, but I heard the most crucial part.

"We can expect her to make a full recovery, barring any complications. She's strong and healthy, and according to her husband, as stubborn as an ox."

"More than," Keith muttered under his breath.

But the doctor heard, and she chuckled. "That's good. Stubbornness and the will to recover can make all the difference in cases like these."

"Can we see her?" I asked.

"Not all of you, no." She gave me a gentle smile.

"You go, Dad," Keith said after we all exchanged a look. "Tell her we love her."

The doctor offered to escort him back, and once we were alone in the small waiting area again, I closed my eyes and covered my face with my hands. I needed a few minutes. Just a few minutes.

"I'm going to get some coffee," I said abruptly, shoving upright.

"I'll go too."

I bit back a curse at the sound of Jamie's voice, but nodded at him.

Determined not to think about what was going on somewhere past the doors marked *do not enter*, I glanced over at him. “Your friend going to be okay in there by herself?”

Jamie lifted a brow at me. “If she wasn’t, she would have joined me.”

Yeah, that didn’t surprise me. She’d only said a few words, but there was a cool, calm efficiency to her I had to appreciate. “So. Are you two...dating?”

“She’s my editor,” Jamie said, blowing out a breath. “And...hell, I don’t know exactly what we are. It’s...complicated.”

“This sounds like a story I want to hear.”

“Figures. You’re a nosy bastard.” Jamie was smiling as he said it. “But I’m still trying to figure it out myself, so you’ll have to wait.”

FIVE

TALIA

It was coming up on four in the afternoon, and it was miserably hot out. This close to the bay, there was something of a breeze, but all it did was stir the sweltering air. I was ready to head back to the house and put my swimsuit on, then head right back outside, straight to the massive pool in the park-like backyard. I *might* consider climbing out for dinner. If I ever recovered from the heat.

Although I'd lived in Salem my whole life and Boston was relatively close, I'd only been here a couple of times up until I found out about my father. Since I'd started visiting him, then spending weekends and eventually entire weeks at a time with him, I'd been learning more about the big old city by the bay.

Like Salem, Boston had *history*. It was in every inch of the ground, and I could spend the next twenty years walking the streets and never know all the stories about this lovely city.

I *loved* history. It was likely from growing up in Salem and having a mother who read like a fiend as I was growing up. She'd passed that love onto me, and now I felt like I had a whole new treasure trove just waiting for me to explore it.

But...some other day. When it wasn't so miserably hot.

Coming to the end of the block, I stopped at the crosswalk, waiting for the light to change.

I was crossing the street when I saw the house, and it was a good thing all the people around me were busy moving, because they kept me doing the same. Otherwise, I might have just stopped to gawk.

The house was...wow.

Stunning.

The area around me was an eclectic mix of older homes mixed with buildings that had clearly been renovated into a mix of apartment buildings and small shops. I couldn't tell if this place would be the former or the latter from the outside, but it was stunning.

A sign in the postage-stamp-sized front yard bore the logo of a renovation company. As I got closer, I could see the door was open, and my curiosity, one of my downfalls, took over. Small as the yard was, two lovely trees, tall and lush, grew in the landscaped patches of grass. Judging by how perfect and pristine everything looked, I had to assume the work had just been finished.

The shade cast by the trees helped lessen the heat of the sun almost immediately, and I eyed the porch, thought that maybe it would hold a small table set nicely. Not that I could *afford* anything like—

“Oh.” The realization came on me hard. Yes. Actually, I *could* afford something like this. Dad had spent the past few months trying to talk me into taking a monetary gift from him, one that would let me pay off my loans, my car...and hell, probably the debt of a third-world country too.

I'd kept saying no, but he finally pointed out that if things had worked out the way he wished they had, I would have always been part of his life—and his mother's. When she passed away, she would have left me an inheritance, so he only wanted to give me what should have been mine.

Mom told me to accept the money. “It will give him some peace, honey. Do whatever you want with it. But if he's doing it because he loves you and wants to make up for the time he missed out on, then there's no harm in it.”

So, I'd accepted, then turned around and paid off the bills Mom had accumulated, including her house, *her* car...and all my debt. Those costs hadn't even put a dent in the enormous sum.

It was likely I could *buy* a place like this.

Assuming it was a house.

And if it was more set up for business...well, I needed to figure out what I wanted to do with myself. I'd spent most of the time since graduating high school helping my mother with her cleaning business...and that was *not* what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. Now that I had options?

Who knew?

At some point, I might want my own place to live too.

Just go look already, I told myself. Even if it was only because I was

dying to see the inside.

Peering through the door, I called out, "Hello?"

A wonderful wash of cool air flowed over me. With no conscious thought, I moved farther inside, although I didn't close the door behind me. Clutching the small wallet that held my driver's license, money, and my phone, I edged deeper into the entryway and gazed around in pure wonder.

"We're not ready for any potential tenants or buyers, ma'am."

The deep, husky voice had me whipping my head up and to the left. At the top of a staircase, a tall, rangy man stood, one hand on a gleaming newel post, the other gripping a tool belt.

"Um, sorry." Blood rushed to heat my cheeks. "I...the door was open." Unable to help myself, I went back to looking around. It looked like the building had been designed to house either offices or small shops, but there was a homey feel to the place regardless, a comfortable sort of elegance. "It's absolutely gorgeous in here. Are you with the renovating company?"

"Yes."

Looking over as his voice drew nearer, I saw that he'd descended the steps in almost utter silence. Amazing considering how big he was.

He reached the foot of the steps and glanced at the door. "You said it was open? I could have sworn I shut it."

"It was." Wincing, I said, "I'm sorry. I should have knocked, but my curiosity got the better of me. I love old places like this, and your company definitely did it justice."

A slow smile spread across his face.

My heart kicked up in my chest.

"You're speaking my language, ma'am. That's what Heritage Renovation and Restoration specialize in. If the place isn't as old as dirt, we don't touch it."

I laughed, charmed to the marrow. "And just how *old* does a place have to be to be considered *old as dirt*?"

"Well..." He canted his head to the side, giving me a look of his carved jawline—*Chris Evans, who?* Reaching up to scratch at a chin that had a damn *dimple* in it, he finally said, "Roughly a hundred years, at least. We rarely touch anything that was built after 1920, but most of the work we do is on buildings that are much older. Like this beauty. She was built in 1846. When we got a hold of her, she was all but on life support. But we brought her back."

“I can tell.” Oh, yes. I was charmed. “I imagine there were a number of invasive procedures performed.”

“Oh, you wouldn’t believe it.” He leaned forward and whispered in a conspiratorial tone, “I’ve seen things inside this old lady no man or woman should ever see. But I won’t mention it...doctor/patient confidentiality, you know.”

Unable to control the laugh that escaped, I shook my head. Still smiling, I said, “Well, Dr...”

“Shawn.” He shifted his tool belt to his other hand and held his right one out. “I’m the informal type of house doctor.”

“So I see. Shawn, I appreciate your professionalism in not discussing your...patient’s insides.” Accepting his hand, I tipped my head back to hold his gaze as he moved closer.

“I try, Ms...?”

“Talia.” I didn’t give my last name. Charming and attractive he might be, but I wasn’t born yesterday. The internet had made it way too easy for crazies to track people down. All it took was one friend to tag you in a Facebook photo, and a stalker could have a field day.

“Talia.” He said my name as if tasting it, lids drooping slightly as he held my gaze. “I like it. It’s unusual.”

“So I’ve heard.” Nervous habit had me licking my lips, and his gaze dipped lower, lingered. Okay, wow. A punch of heat unlike anything I’d experienced slammed into me. Granted, my...*experience* was decidedly limited, but I’d had guys *kiss* me with less effect than that look.

What the hell.

His pupils flared slightly, and man, his eyes were amazing. They looked like the blue-green from some postcard you’d pick up while vacationing at a tropical beach somewhere. Not that I’d been to one, but I’d seen pictures of that surreal shade, almost jewel-like.

And now that blue-green glitter was focused on me.

His hand still held mine, and blood started to pump through my veins in a molten flow, like lava. The air conditioning that had felt so nice just seconds earlier no longer did the trick to cool my overheated skin.

His thumb rasped over the back of my hand. Handshakes didn’t last this long. And we weren’t even shaking. This should be awkward. And it was...in a way, but mostly because I hadn’t dealt with a sexual attraction *this* intense before. Not ever.

“I hope I don’t come off the wrong way asking this, Talia, but...are you seeing anybody?”

In that moment, all I could see was *him*. Fortunately, I managed to *not* blurt that out. Instead, in a voice more calm and composed than I felt, I said, “No. I’m not.”

Another slow stroke of his thumb over my hand. Imagine that—the hand could be an erogenous zone. “I think I’d like to ask you for your phone number, see if you and I could get dinner sometime. Would I be pushing it if I did?”

“No.” I couldn’t stop the smile from spreading over my face. “As a matter of fact, I’m glad you asked because it saves me from the trouble of trying to figure out how to ask for yours.”

He smiled, and I swore the gesture tugged at my groin. Just as I thought I might explode with a need I didn’t completely understand, he broke contact and pulled out his phone. My hand felt kind of naked now, without his bigger, callused palm wrapped around it. Lifting the device, he gave me a questioning look.

After reciting my number, I bit my lip, then gave him a sheepish smile. “If you can, shoot me a text now. That way, when you call, I’ll know it’s you. I don’t always answer or respond unless I know who is calling, and if I don’t recognize the number of whoever is texting, I tend to delete it without reading.”

“Can’t have that.” Glancing down, he tapped at the phone. Two or three times, he looked at me under his lashes before focusing back on the screen.

It took much longer than the typical *It’s Shawn* would take.

I saw why a few seconds later when my phone buzzed.

I like the look of you, Talia. Please answer when I text. I’d really like to see you.

SIX

SHAWN

The soft, light scent of her lingered in the air after she left, and I breathed it in, eyes closed to focus better. Lavender. She smelled like lavender. I wasn't much for overly fussy flowery perfumes, but this was subtle, just barely there.

I already wanted to run my lips down her neck, seek out the source of it and see if it was slightly stronger there.

"Talía," I murmured. At the sidewalk, she glanced back at me, and I'd almost think she'd heard me, but a blush danced over her cheekbones, and I realized she might be doing the same thing I was, reliving the past few minutes.

The other day, I'd told Cherry I wasn't looking for a relationship, and I'd meant it. But something about Talía hit me sideways. Judging by the look in her eyes, she'd felt the same strong draw.

She averted her eyes, and I sucked in a breath, slumping against the door frame. Well, I'd come here to get my mind off my grandmother. Objective achieved. Although, now, I was thinking about her all over again.

Sighing, I closed the door and walked over to sit on the steps. The tool belt dangling from my hand, I sat there and stared at nothing. After hearing from the doctor, I'd stayed at the hospital another hour before the walls finally threatened to close in around me and drive me crazy.

I'd never done too well being trapped inside for long periods at a time anyway, especially if I didn't have something to keep me occupied. A hospital waiting room was akin to torture in my book. Everybody else had been quietly talking, Matt busily going over all the information he could find about strokes on his phone while Keith and Jamie speculated about whether

or not there had been any signs of this coming on.

None of them involved me in the discussion.

I wasn't surprised. I'd always felt cut off from them, adrift even when I was surrounded by people I knew loved me. No reason to think things would be different now.

Growing up, I'd often been the odd one out. At first, it had been because I was the youngest. But later, as I grew older, I'd realized there was another reason—and that was the reason they didn't bother including me in their conversation now.

They didn't think I'd get it.

I wasn't an idiot. Not that they'd think of it in those terms, but there were some things they just didn't bother talking to me about...even if it was shit that affected me. Like the foundation. Like my grandmother's health. Like ninety-nine percent of the stuff they talked about that wasn't just every day, run-of-the-mill bullshit.

I knew they didn't think I was stupid—and I knew I wasn't. But school hadn't come easily for me like it had for all of them, especially Matt and Jamie. Hell, by second grade, I was getting in trouble on a regular basis, and my parents were at their wits' end. They finally pulled me out of school and hired a private tutor—that worked. He was the one who figured out I had ADHD and was able to build an education plan that worked for me.

But I still felt like the odd one out with my family and sitting there in the waiting room, that feeling of being cut adrift had swelled to massive proportions.

I'd bailed.

Now, I was doubly glad I'd done so.

The thought of missing out on the chance to meet Talia was...not pleasant.

My phone buzzed, and I pulled it out, saw Matt's name. Opening the message app, I gritted my teeth.

Gran woke up, was able to talk to Grandpa and Dad a little. Dad said her speech is a little slurred, but he understood her and she can move the right side of her body. There's some weakness, but the doctors are cautiously optimistic.

A hard burst of air exploded out of my lungs. It was like I'd been holding my breath ever since I'd heard the news about Gran.

"Thank God," I muttered, dragging a hand over my face as relief flooded

me. It was a good thing I was still sitting because it might have made me a little lightheaded.

The phone vibrated again, and I looked down, saw the second text.

This is good news, Shawn.

“Well, no shit, Sherlock,” I grumbled, deleting the message in hopes that it would lessen my irritation.

I shot Matt back a short *thanks* in response and rose, grabbing the tool belt I’d found in one of the rooms upstairs. I hadn’t even realized I’d left it behind the other day.

After locking up, I headed for my car. On the way, I sent Conall a text.

You busy?

Not even a minute passed before he responded.

Depends on your definition of busy. I’m kicking it back with a cold one and watching this sorry excuse of a baseball team pretend to play ball. What’s up?

I couldn’t help but grin. I’d never been much of a sports fan, although I did enjoy running. It let me think in a way few other things did. But Conall was passionate about all things sports related—especially baseball.

Mind if I head over? I could use a beer.

His response was just as fast, and in under three minutes, I was on the road and heading for his place in Charlestown, one of Boston’s neighborhoods and where Conall had lived with his wife and daughter decades ago. They were killed in a drunk driving accident before we met. He still hadn’t gotten over losing them, but I didn’t think that was something you just got over.

I’d known Conall since I was a kid when he did work on a building my parents had bought in Salem. It had taken two years from start to finish, and I’d driven my parents nuts with how often I’d wanted to go up there. Conall had humored me, although I’d come to realize over the years that he’d gotten as much out of the time we spent together as I did.

Now, he was like a second father to me.

And although I’d never tell my dad this, there were things I could tell Conall that I couldn’t tell anybody else.

He had a grouchy old beagle who announced my arrival by serenading the neighborhood with mournful howls the moment I slammed my car door shut. I wasn’t even halfway up the sidewalk when Conall opened the door, his cranky dog at his side and giving me a baleful look.

“Hello to you too, Oscar,” I said.

Conall grinned. “You woke him up.”

For some reason, that dog didn’t like me. Personally, I thought he was jealous because he knew Conall loved me more than him, but I wasn’t going to tell Conall that. “The hell I did. His bed is in the back of the house, and when he’s sleeping, he snores loud enough to wake the dead. No way he heard me shut the car door over the sound of him sawing logs.”

Conall grinned, but it faded within seconds as he looked me over. “What’s wrong, son?”

Shrugging restlessly, I mounted the steps. “I don’t want to talk about it without a beer in hand, Con.”

“Well, let’s make that happen then.”

IT WASN’T until Conall and I had been sitting in front of the large flat-screen TV for a good twenty minutes that I told him about my grandmother. Immediately, he muted the television, and leaned forward, eyes dark with concern. “Guess it’s too early to know much.”

I hitched up a shoulder. “Seems that way. She’s talked, I know that. Dad told me she could move both her arms, which is good news.”

“Yes.” He rolled the brown bottle of beer back and forth between his hands, eyes taking on a far-off look. “Strokes are scary things. Thought we’d lose Jeff.” Immediately, he winced and shot me a look. “Shit, kid. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“You think I haven’t been thinking about how Jeff looked that day?” I gave him a sour grin and shook my head. “I’m telling you, I’m all screwed up here.” I tapped my temple. “Thinking about it...I had to get out of the hospital. She’s too worn out to handle all of us back in her room visiting right now, and Grandpa needs to be with her, anyway. I couldn’t just sit around there. Headed out to the site, did a walkthrough...”

Talia’s face came to mind, and I found myself smiling.

Looking over at Conall, I said, “I met a girl.”

“When did you have time to do that?” he asked, amused.

“I...” Feeling sheepish, I rubbed the back of my neck. “I mentioned I’m feeling a little screwed up, right? I must not have closed the front door all the

way because it was open, and she walked inside. She saw the renovation sign on the street and got curious when she saw the open door.”

“Judging by the look on your face, you’re not a bit sorry, either.”

The grooves bracketing Conall’s mouth deepened, and he tipped his drink in my direction. “Fast moving, but you always had a way with the ladies. What’s her name?”

“Talia.” I liked the feel of her name, imagined whispering it as I stripped her naked—and I most definitely wanted to strip her naked.

“Boy, wipe that goofy grin off your face,” Conall said, but when I looked at him, he was smirking.

“Soon as you do the same, old man.”

I flipped him off and took a drink before settling more comfortably into the well broken-in couch. “I got her phone number, told her I’d like to take her out to dinner.”

“You called her yet?”

Sliding him a side look, I hitched up a shoulder. “No. Not yet. I will. Soon.”

He snorted. “When? In a month when she thinks you’ve forgotten? Or when *you* have forgotten her?”

“Not likely that will happen.”

I don’t know who was more surprised by my words. Conall...or me. Frowning, I studied the bottle in my hands, and I turned the idea over in my head.

“Sounds like you might want more than just a night with this girl.”

I started to brush his words off, but I couldn’t deny that something about Talia had hit me from the second she’d lifted her face, and I’d seen her big brown eyes staring up at me. Such beautiful dark eyes.

“...to Shawn, come in, Shawn.”

Scowling, I batted away the hand Conall was moving back and forth in front of my eyes. “Stop that.”

“Just trying to get your attention there, son. You kinda blanked out on me a bit.” He slumped back on the couch, remote in hand. “I think you should give this Talia a call. Soon. Maybe even today. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you so lost over a girl before. You need to see what it is about this one that has you so mesmerized.”

“I’ll call her,” I muttered, even if I did feel a little uneasy over the idea of being *mesmerized*. “That’s why I got her number, after all.”

“Yeah, well, don’t put it off. You don’t want to risk letting her slip away because you were too busy playing it cool.”

“You act like it’s a regular occurrence with me.” I glared at him over the bottle of beer in my hand.

“A regular occurrence?” He hitched up a shoulder. “I wouldn’t say that. But there have been a few times when you waited too long, and some pretty thing slipped by. You never really regretted it much, but then again, I don’t think I’ve seen you look like somebody had already hooked you, reeled you in, and landed you like you do now.”

I snorted, annoyed but also amused. “Fuck off.”

SEVEN

TALIA

“How is Kaylee working out?” I asked my mother as I looked out the window at my father as he worked with his physical therapist, my phone pressed tight against my ear.

It was just after nine, and the heatwave had abated somewhat after an abrupt downpour the night before. With the weather cooler, he’d elected to do his PT session outside. He’d confided to me the other day that he was going stir-crazy, being trapped inside the same walls. Considering how bad the heat had been, he hadn’t gone out much except for appointments and a quick lunch meeting with a CEO of a charitable foundation he helped chair.

On the other end of the phone, my mother said, “Very well. There aren’t that many young people who can commit to this sort of job for the pay I’m able to offer, but she’s been a godsend. And...well...” She laughed self-consciously. “Thanks to you paying off the company’s debts *when I told you not to*, I was able to give her a small raise. She’s going to school during the day and just needs something to help her with what tuition and her scholarships won’t cover of the six-year program she’s enrolled in.” She laughed, the sound a little nervous. “She’s already told me that she sort of hopes you find a job in Boston so she can stay on. She likes the quiet of all the offices while we clean after hours. Says it lets her listen to books or process the study notes she made during class.”

“I listen to all kinds of books while cleaning.” Grinning, I leaned back against the wall. It wasn’t until that moment that I remembered a book I’d been waiting on had released—last week. Damn. I couldn’t believe I’d missed it.

“Yes, I know,” Mom said in a dry voice. “How often did I have to say

your name five times over because you were too busy dreaming about the vampire of the month?”

“It wasn’t always vampires.”

She laughed, but there was something about the sound that made me think she was distracted.

A few seconds later, she proved me right. “You know, Kaylee got me to thinking. You’ve been in Boston for a couple of months now. I know you’ve been catching up with your father and getting familiar with the area, but have you started looking for a job?”

There was too much strain in her voice for it to be a casual question, and I knew she’d tried to cover the worry too. My heart clenched, and I sank down on the fat, overstuffed armchair in the library, turning away from the view of my father as he laughed with one of the people on his therapy team—his *torture* team, he insisted on calling them.

“Mom,” I said quietly. I’d known this conversation was coming, and while part of me knew I could put it off, I didn’t want to. Just knowing she was worrying about certain things was like acid on my heart, and I hated it. “You know you’re not going to lose me, right?”

“What on earth?” She laughed, but again, it was strained. “Of course I know that.”

“Mom.”

Taut silence stretched out, and finally, she sucked in a breath, one that caught in her chest. “Baby, just...ignore me, okay? I’m being silly, and I know that.”

“I don’t *want* to ignore you. I want to talk about this so it might help you feel better.”

“There’s nothing—”

“Mom, don’t brush this off like it doesn’t matter.” Interruptions in her book was a cardinal sin, but her attempts to minimize her own pain pissed me off. “You mean more to me than anybody else in the world, and I won’t be quiet while you sit up there in Salem and worry about this.”

She took another breath, this one even shakier. “All right, Tally,” she said finally. “Since you’re putting your foot down. I wonder where you learned *that* from.”

“Ha, ha. Now, Mom...talk to me.”

“It sounds like you’ve already worked everything out.” She sighed, and I could picture her pushing her tousled hair back from her face as she sipped

from her cup of coffee at the table in our kitchen. We'd only managed to get our own place about five years ago. Before then, we'd rented both apartments and homes. Once we'd lived in a trailer for about seven months...one that *leaked* every time it rained. And it rained a lot in New England. "It's always just been you and me against the world. Now suddenly, you find out you've got this amazing father who actually wants to have you in his life. He's rich, and you like him, and you're having fun with him...and it's not you and me anymore."

"It will always be you and me." I had to clamp back the urge to tell her just why Dad had disappeared from her life all those years ago, fight the need to tell her that he still thought about her, that he got this weird, misty look in his eyes when he talked about her or when I mentioned her name. That wasn't my place. But I *wanted* to tell her. "No matter what happens, it's always you and me."

"And when you get married and have a passel of kids to deal with?"

"Then it's you and me while you spoil your grandbabies," I teased.

She laughed, and for the first time since I called, the sound wasn't strained. "Grandbabies. I don't know if I'm even ready for that. Although I suppose I've got time. It's not like *you* to go out of your way to make time for yourself."

Biting my lip, I thought about the guy I'd met the other day.

Shawn.

With his big blue eyes and warm smile and the way he'd looked at me...

I said nothing, but I must have made a sound because suddenly, Mom demanded, "What is it?"

"What?" Even though she wasn't there, blood rushed to my cheeks in a telltale sign. Pressing one hand to my face, I squeezed my eyes shut. How did moms *always* know?

"Don't give me that," she retorted. "You met somebody, didn't you?"

"Ah..."

"Stop right there." The maternal order was clear.

And I couldn't do anything but obey. Snapping my jaw shut, I waited.

"Alright, now...let's back this up a bit for just a few seconds, but I want an answer to that question, one that doesn't start with *ah* and sound like you're fumbling for an answer. Did you meet somebody?"

I winced. "Yes. I mean, nothing has happened. He asked for my phone number, but he hasn't called yet or anything. For all I know, nothing will

happen.”

“I love your optimism, baby. Okay, what’s his name?”

Smiling, I told her, then proceeded to fill her in on how I’d met Shawn.

DAD HAD FINISHED his therapy by the time Mom and I ended our call, but I wasn’t surprised when he did little more than offer a tired greeting before retreating to his room for a nap. Therapy wore him out most of the time, and I tried not to worry too much about the wan look I’d seen on his face as he left the room.

It wasn’t as easy as I’d like, and I almost wished I’d kept Mom on the phone longer just so I’d have a distraction.

The thought had no sooner gone through my head than my phone buzzed, signifying an incoming text. Grateful for the distraction, even if it probably was my mother texting something she’d forgotten to tell me, I grabbed the phone.

My heart lurched when I saw the name on the display, though. It *wasn’t* my mother.

Shawn.

Just the sight of his name made my hands tremble, and memories of our brief meeting flashed through my mind. His smile, his eyes, that intoxicating scent of his...

For a few seconds, I was so overcome with it that I couldn’t even focus well enough to read the text.

Then I did, and my heart did a lot more than lurch.

Hope you remember me. We met at the house the other day. Was hoping you might have dinner with me. Maybe tomorrow?

“Remember you?” Laughing softly, I squeezed the phone and pressed it to my chest while waiting for my heart to stop trying to jump out of my ribs. After a lot longer than I would have expected, my heartbeat *did* slow, but it still wasn’t normal when I texted Shawn back.

Reading the teasing words on my screen, I bit my lip, then deleted them and texted back something more innocuous. And *boring*, an inner demon whispered. I ignored it and hit send.

Yes, I remember you. And yes, I’d love to have dinner.

Nice, normal, and simple. It wasn't like we really knew each other well enough for teasing or games at this point.

I thought of the teasing glint in Shawn's eyes and told myself I was being silly. *He* certainly wasn't worried about a little teasing. Or even being outright bold, if it came down to it. Still nibbling on my lower lip, I scrolled up until I could read the first text he'd sent me.

I like the look of you, Talia. Please answer when I text you. I'd really like to see you.

No, he had no problem being outright bold. Granted, there was nothing outright audacious, really, in his words, and he'd phrased it...nicely. And maybe some of it was the way he'd looked at me as he'd written the text, then sent it.

Like he'd already been touching me.

And if I was honest, I couldn't wait for him to do just that.

The text he sent back had me grinning.

Good. I've been brooding all day about what I'd say to convince you to change your mind if you said no. Do you like Italian?

Changing my mind was the last thing he needed to worry about, but I didn't tell him that. Instead, I kept my response light.

There are people who don't? I thought they were a myth, like Santa Claus and effective government services.

The laughing emoji he sent brought more pleasure than it probably should have. I tried not to dwell on it as he followed up with the name of a restaurant and location.

I told him I wasn't overly familiar with the area, but I'd find it, letting him know I'd take care of my own transportation. As much as I'd liked him on first impression, I'd experienced a string of first dates and knew to be cautious. I wasn't exactly a social butterfly, but I wasn't a hermit either. It was never a good idea to let somebody you just met know where you lived.

After asking if seven was okay, he sent one last text. And it left me with my toes all curled.

I can't wait to see you, Talia. I've been thinking about that pretty mouth of yours ever since we talked.

"Wow."

EIGHT

SHAWN

“You look awful handsome today.”

Grandma’s eyes were clearer than they’d been when I’d seen her on Monday. That sharp, incisive glint wasn’t there, but I’d take any small sign of improvement.

I’d take any improvement over how she’d looked the first time I’d seen her, so pale and weak and wan.

She still didn’t look like she was ready to go on one of her infamous shopping sprees, but she was sitting up in bed, and her hair was brushed neatly away from her face, while her glasses were firmly in place.

“Are you going to tell your grandfather and me why you look so sharp, or do we have to play twenty questions?” she asked when I didn’t respond to her comment.

My face heated. I might be able to hide things from most of my family, but not from her and my mother.

I fiddled with a button on my shirt. “I’ve got a date.”

Interest sparked in her eyes. “As in a real date? Somebody you’re interested in? Or just somebody you plan on spending the night with?”

Already blushing, my face went even redder, red enough that it felt like I had a bad sunburn now. “Geez, Gran.”

“Don’t you give me that,” she said, the words slightly slurred. The left side of her mouth tugged down a fraction, but it was hardly noticeable, and although it could have been wishful thinking on my part, it didn’t seem as pronounced as it had been when I last visited her. “I know how you are with the ladies, Shawn. Now answer the question.”

“Geez, Gran,” I muttered a second time. Then, because she continued to

give me that chiding look, I added, “I can’t help that I’m picky. You and Grandpa set a hard example to follow, and I’m not planning on settling down until I find somebody as amazing as you.”

“You charmer.” She sighed. Her lids drifted down, and for almost a minute, they didn’t come back up. I thought she must have fallen asleep.

Then she looked back at me, her lips curved in a smile. “Don’t think I didn’t notice that you haven’t answered my question. And that makes me think there’s a reason.” Shrewd intelligence gleamed in her eyes, despite the obvious exhaustion and the lingering fog that I attributed to the stroke. “So either you don’t want me to know you’re still out there...sowing your wild oats as my mother would have called it, or you *have* met somebody. You’ve never refused to address a question like this before.” She stopped and made a face. “I need some water.”

I looked at Grandpa, uncertain. Yesterday, they’d told me she couldn’t have liquids until after some sort of test was done to gauge her ability to swallow.

Grandma swatted at my arm. “I passed that stupid swallow test, Shawn.”

“Alice,” Grandpa said, his voice patient. “He’s just cautious. Neither of us even mentioned the test to him, so how was he to know?”

As he spoke, he came around to the other side of the bed and took the glass of water sitting on the table. Grandma huffed out a sigh as he brought the straw to her lips.

“I always thought *I* would be the one taking care of *you*,” she said, her voice truculent in a way I’d never heard before—not from her. Then she slid a look at me. “I’m sorry, Shawn. I’m still not feeling quite like myself. I’ve always hated being sick and this...” She closed her eyes. “It’s so much worse.”

Panic and frustration welled up in me, but I held them down.

“You’ll beat this, Gran,” I said softly. Taking her hand, I squeezed gently. “You’re right, you know. I met somebody. I don’t really want to talk about it, because we haven’t even had our first date yet. I’m actually taking her out to dinner tonight. But trying to sneak something past you is impossible.”

She laughed, but the sound was rife with exhaustion. “If you’re taking her out to dinner tonight, why are you here with me?”

I stroked my thumb across the back of her hand. “Because you will always be number one.”

I don’t know if she heard me, though. She was already asleep.

Thirty minutes later, out in the hall with my grandfather, I leaned against the wall and listened to the update from the nurse about the tests and bloodwork. Matt had been there earlier when the doctor went over everything, and I suspected my oldest brother had demanded the man go into great detail, but all I'd gotten was a text that told me she was doing well, all things considered, and the doctors were hopeful.

It hadn't told me shit, all things considered.

Now, the nurse was telling me what my family hadn't, and I listened as Grandpa asked about rehab and possible discharge and medications.

Once he stopped asking questions, I started. "Do they know what caused the stroke?"

"Your grandmother has a history of high blood pressure," the nurse said with a gentle smile. She continued to talk, discussing stress and other factors.

And my mind began to churn.

Stress.

I couldn't help but think of the way Grandma had been the last few times I'd seen her.

Quieter.

More reserved.

Like something had been bothering her.

After asking a few more questions, I thanked the pretty young brunette and turned to look inside the partially open door, waiting for my grandfather to finish speaking with the nurse.

Once he was done, he turned to me. He didn't speak, but I could feel the weight of his attention.

"She's been upset about something lately," I said softly.

"She hasn't been sleeping well."

Slanting a look at him, I waited for him to elaborate.

He didn't.

At my pointed look, he simply arched an eyebrow. "Don't you have a date?"

YEAH.

I had a date, and I'd left the hospital in plenty of time too.

Except I hadn't planned on the worst traffic I'd seen in Boston in...well, maybe ever.

I sent Talia a text to let her know I was stuck in traffic. Man, I hoped she didn't give up waiting for me to show. The cars in front of me inched forward another few feet while I brooded and tapped out an absent rhythm on the steering wheel.

It took fifteen minutes to make it to the end of the block where police were routing people around an accident. Traffic didn't immediately lighten up, but at least I was moving by the time I turned right.

Almost thirty minutes late, I walked into the restaurant, checking my phone for messages from Talia, but other than her response after I'd texted earlier to let her know I was going to be late, she hadn't contacted me again.

She'd told me she'd wait for me in the bar, and a giant weight lifted from my chest when I caught sight of her just where she'd promised to be. The muted light caught the red highlights in her auburn hair, tousled curls falling to shield her face as she read something on her phone.

Even though we'd only met once, I had no doubt it was her, and I gave myself a few seconds to enjoy the sight of her. She wore a skinny-strapped dress that revealed pale shoulders, the elegant curves making me want to stroke, touch...taste.

The vivid green of her dress glowed like a jewel against her skin, yet one more temptation.

I wanted to put my hands on her.

Slow down, man, I told myself.

But I also needed to get moving. I'd already kept her waiting too long.

Crossing the gleaming hardwood floors, I came to a stop next to her. "Is this seat taken?"

"Shawn!" She swung her head up and grinned at me. After putting her phone down, she turned to face me more fully.

I kind of wished she hadn't. The change in position revealed the front of the dress, one of those fucking sexy necklines that dipped low in a point between her breasts, the entire bodice fitted so that the material skimmed her sweet curves to perfection.

We were in a public place, and we'd just met. It would be way out of line to bury my face in the soft valley between her tits.

But fuck if I didn't want to.

Clearing my throat, I slid into the seat and flagged down the bartender.

After ordering one of the local craft beers, I faced her. “Sorry I’m so late. Traffic and everything else conspired against me.”

“It’s okay.” She gave me a small smile that was equal parts amusement and shyness. “Up until a few months ago, I lived my whole life in Salem. If you’ve ever been there, you know the traffic can be horrid even on a good day.”

“I love Salem.” Tightening my hands into fist so I wouldn’t reach for her, I leaned closer, catching the hint of scent she’d worn when we first met. “Would it sound terrible if I say I love the tourist trap aspects every bit as much as I love the history?”

She laughed. “No. Some locals hate it, but it doesn’t bother me. You’re a history buff, so I guess you’ve read up on the local lore and everything?”

“A fair amount.”

She sipped the martini sitting in front of her, laughter glinting in her eyes. “Do you know about the lightning tree?”

Frowning, I thought back through the walks I’d done through Salem during my trips up there and came up blank. “No.”

“It’s at the Olde Burying Pointe Cemetery.” She leaned in a little closer. “The tree, as you might have guessed already, was struck by lightning several times over the years, but that’s not really the creepy part. The tree grew directly out of the grave of this guy who was *killed* after being struck by lightning hundreds of years ago.”

A chill raced up my spine as I stared into her devilishly amused dark eyes. “You’re shitting me.”

“No, I’m not.” With a serene smile, she picked up her phone and tapped something into it, then turned it over.

She’d googled *the lightning tree, Salem, MA*, and the screen was now filled with search results, including images of a headstone.

“Now, that’s creepy as fuck,” I muttered without thinking. Cringing inwardly, I darted a look at her. “Sorry.”

She laughed. “No, I think *creepy as fuck* covers it, and that’s just one of the creepy things about the town.”

“Tell me.” I could listen to her talk all night.

She arched a brow. “You could get in trouble, Shawn. There’s very little I love more than talking about the history of a place I love. Especially one as wild and weird as Salem.”

“I’m serious. I need the distraction.” The bartender appeared, putting a

tall pilsner in front of me and offering to bring us menus. Talia gave a shrug, and I nodded at the young man. No point getting up since we were both comfortable here, I figured. After he turned them over, I looked back at Talia. “Seriously, talk away. If you had any idea how rough the past few days have been...”

If I could have yanked the last few words back, I would have.

Talia’s eyes softened with concern. “Is everything all right?”

“Ah...” A lie leapt to my lips. Talking about personal stuff was never easy for me, even with the few close friends I had. But even I tried to figure out the right way to change the subject, another part of me took over—and took control of my mouth. “My grandmother had a stroke early Sunday morning. I’d just left the hospital when we first met, actually. I had to get away for a bit, clear my head.”

“Oh, no.” She reached out a hand, cover mine with her own. Soft, cool fingers closed around my wrist and squeezed gently. “I’m so sorry, Shawn. Is she going to be okay?”

“The doctors think so.” I’d heard *I’m sorry* in a dozen forms over the past few days, but for some reason, hearing it from Talia actually brought some level of comfort. Covering her hand with my free one, I twined our fingers. “I was visiting her today, actually. Left the hospital in plenty of time to get here and then...traffic.”

“It’s no big deal.” A reassuring smile curved her lips. “I used the time to read a little.”

“Like books?”

“There are people who don’t?” She gave me a look that bordered on shock, although the teasing light in her eyes was obvious.

With a grimace, I said, “I’m not much into them. I can’t focus long enough.”

“Try audiobooks,” she suggested. “My mom never could focus long enough to read a book, but she does like audio.”

“It seems like cheating,” I said, feeling a little sheepish.

“Why?” Cocking her head, she studied me. “You’re not being quizzed on anything. It’s for fun and escapes and whatever else you want to get out of the books you choose. There are no requirements other than the ones you put on yourself.”

Frowning, I shifted my attention back to my beer and took a sip, wondering how she made it seem so...simple.

No requirements. What a concept.

“Those look like deep thoughts.”

They were...and the last thing I wanted in my head right now was deep thoughts. Telling her as much, I lifted my glass and tipped it in her direction. “I’d rather not spend tonight brooding over deep thoughts. So...tell me more weird stories about Salem.”

The concern lingered in her eyes, but she gave me that sweet smile again. It held an edge of sly humor, I realized.

And I figured out why fast.

“Do you know who Giles Corey is?”

“I might not be from Salem, but I am from Massachusetts, and I’ve mentioned I like history,” I said dryly, trying to recall what I’d learned about one of the men who’d been executed during the infamous Salem witch trials. Most had been women, but not all. “He was the one who was pressed to death, right?”

“Yes.” She leaned in closer. “Have you ever read the accounts of his torture?”

“Okay, I’m a little worried about where this conversation is going.” In reality, I was mesmerized, but not by the topic. The trials were one of the stains on American history, particularly for Salem, and still served as a cautionary tale for the evils that could happen as a result of mass hysteria. But there was something about the way she looked, the way her voice rose up and down as she spoke.

“You should be. He haunts Salem, you know.”

I laughed. “I’ve heard all the ghost stories. Boston is lousy with them too.”

“You sound like you don’t believe in them.”

Cocking a brow at her, I asked, “Are you saying you do?”

“I keep my mind open,” she said, hitching her shoulder up. She sipped from her martini, eyeing me over the rim of the glass. “The world is a big, strange place, so I don’t believe in closing doors without having strong facts to say there’s no other option. Anyway...you know how he was tortured. Have you heard any of the detailed accounts?”

“Considering he was crushed to death, I don’t *want* to know.”

She made a face. “Point. But I don’t mean *those* details. Giles Corey was a tough old bastard, and a mean one. Beat one of his indentured servants so severely, the servant ended up dying. But back then, indentured servants

weren't afforded the same rights as a typical citizen, so Corey wasn't charged with murder. He was only fined. He got so caught up in the witch hysteria that he bought into the accusations against his wife when she was charged with being a witch. Then, *he* gets accused."

I chuckled. "Karma."

She sipped her martini, expression going solemn. "Indeed. The law at that time was that a person couldn't be tried without rendering a plea, guilty or not guilty. Corey wouldn't offer one. So the sheriff decided to force it out of him, which was why he was tortured with the pressing. It took *three days*. And during it, Corey would demand they put more weight on him. The sheriff is demanding a plea from him, and this stubborn old goat demanded they put more weight on him."

"Damn." The brutality of it was staggering, and although Corey clearly hadn't been a good man, being tortured for three days, and all over made up accusations of witchcraft was enough to leave me shaking my head. "You know, whether I believe in ghosts or not, considering what was done to the victims of the trials, if anybody had reason to come back and haunt a place, I'd say they've got solid ground."

"Local lore says at least a few of them hang around, including Giles Corey." She lapsed into silence as the bartender came to a stop in front of us.

"Another round?"

NINE

TALIA

After the bartender took our order for dinner and promised to return with another martini, I looked back at Shawn. Talking to him was so easy, and he watched me as if I was the only person in the room. No, the world.

“Do tell,” he said, edging closer. His knee brushed my thigh, and although his khaki trousers and the bright green material of my dress separated us, I felt that light contact all the way down to my toes.

Inside my strapless bra, my nipples tightened while lower, heat pooled in my belly.

Awareness darkened Shawn’s eyes, and I grabbed my martini, tossing back the dregs of the drink. It was solely as a distraction, something to buy me a few seconds to get myself back on more level footing.

“They say Corey appears before a mass disaster,” I said, still not looking at him. I put the glass down and took the speared olives out of the glass before meeting his eyes again. As I popped the fat, juicy olive into my mouth, his gaze dropped to my lips, and that heat swelled again, flaring to an even higher level. Nerves jittered in my belly, and I could hear the slight echo of them in my voice as I said, “The Salem fire? It happened back in 1914. Corey was supposedly seen the night before the fire. And then there’s his curse.”

Shawn must have picked up on my nervousness. The intensity that had hovered between us only moments ago eased back to a more manageable level, and he made a casual shift in position that broke the light contact between us.

“The sheriff thing?” He laughed a little.

“Laugh all you want,” I said, surprised my voice sounded so normal. “But legend has it that Corey’s last words, said to the sheriff, were ‘Damn you! I

curse you and Salem.’ The sheriff, George Corwin, died four years later...of a heart attack. He was only thirty. And the office of sheriff has had *numerous* deaths or resignations since then that were all related to heart attacks or other heart ailments. It stopped after the office of sheriff was moved out of Salem. And really, dying of a heart attack when you’re thirty years old?”

“Well, if Corey is hanging around haunting Salem, he’s a ghost I don’t want pissed off at me.” Shawn tipped his glass in my direction before flagging down the bartender for another.

“Will your grandmother be all right?” I asked, feeling like I’d been talking his head off.

The smile on his face faded some as he glanced at me. “I think so. I hope so. She’s strong and stubborn. Until this, I thought she was healthy.”

“You love her very much,” I murmured.

“Yeah, I do.”

Covering his hand with mine, despite the danger touching him posed to my heart rate, I said, “If she’s strong and stubborn, then chances are, she’ll be fine.”

He turned his hand over and twined our fingers together.

My heart lurched at the tenderness of it.

“That’s pretty much what my dad says. It’s his mom. My mom’s parents died some time ago, but Dad’s parents...Gran and Grandpa, they’ve always been there.”

“That must be nice,” I said wistfully. Even after Dad came into my life, I hadn’t suddenly found myself with grandparents. I had only vague memories of my mom’s mother, who had died in a car crash when I was five. She’d lived in South Carolina, so we’d only seen each other maybe once a year.

“No grandparents?” His voice was gentle.

“No.” The bartender came by with our second round of drinks, and I was grateful for the distraction. “For most of my life, it’s just been my mother and me. What about you? You sound like you’re pretty close with your family.”

“When I’m not wanting to knock their heads in.” Dark humor glinted in his eyes. “And I say that with all the love in my heart.”

I laughed, because I could tell he meant every last word. “I’m betting you’ve got brothers or sisters.”

“Three of them,” he said with a heavy sigh. “Brothers, all of them. And soon, I’ll probably have three sisters-in-law. They all went and fell hard this summer. It’s like there’s something in the water.” As he said it, he picked up

his glass and eyed it suspiciously before slanting a wicked grin at me.

“I haven’t touched your water,” I said airily.

“Are you sure?”

I made the familiar *cross-my-heart* gesture with my finger, watching as his eyes dipped to linger for the briefest moment before returning to mine.

“Hmmm.” He took a slow sip of the water, never breaking the connection between us. “I can’t decide if I believe you or not.”

“And you drank the water, anyway.” My cheeks heated. “You’re terrible, Shawn. You know that?”

“Maybe I’m just smitten.”

The old-fashioned phrase left me even more charmed.

“Okay, you’re terrible *and* adorable.”

He grinned, flashing his dimples at me.

My heart did another one of those crazy jigs in my chest.

Man. I was in *so much trouble*.

WE WALKED BACK out into the coming twilight, the hot, sticky heat still so intense that I immediately wanted to dash back inside the restaurant. “I thought the weather guy said the heatwave was supposed to break.”

“Oh, it will.” Shawn gave the sky a jaundiced look. “In October, right before we get a foot of snow dumped on us.”

“I’m ready for it.”

He laughed. “You’re saying that now, but will you be saying it in October as you wade through a foot of snow?”

“Yes.” I gave him a serene smile. “I like winter, but I love fall the most.”

“I’ve gotta admit, fall in this part of the country is something else.” He took my hand, rubbing his thumb over the back of it. “How are you getting home?”

“I called a Lyft.” Checking my phone, I saw I had a few minutes left before the car arrived.

“Okay.” He angled his chin to the right. “I’m parked down that way. I’ll wait until you’re in the car before I head off.”

He tugged lightly on my hand and led me over to a small shaded area with an unoccupied bench. I sat, arranging my skirt around me before smiling

up at him. “I had fun. Thanks for asking me.”

He straddled the bench until he faced me, eyes roaming over me with such exquisite care. It felt like a caress.

“Good,” he said, voice lower. “Then maybe you’ll let me take you out again Friday.”

Pleasure like I’d never known curled my toes. “I’d like that.”

I didn’t know which one of us moved first. It didn’t matter.

Not much of anything mattered as his lips moved over mine, one hand cradling my face before slipping backward to cup my neck and angle my head. The kiss deepened, his tongue breaching the entrance of my mouth.

Gripping his arm, I swayed closer. He made a rough sound low in his throat, then broke away, his breaths coming faster.

My entire body ached—all from *one* kiss.

But when he leaned toward me again, I pressed my fingers to his lips.

He immediately backed off.

My phone chose that moment to vibrate, and I swallowed, dropping my hand to pick the phone up. The familiar app icon appeared on the screen. “My ride is here.”

“Talk about timing,” he murmured.

“Yeah.” I rose, and he followed suit, reaching up to brush my hair back. “Can I call you about Friday?”

“Please do.” I glanced at the car that idled at the curb, holding a hand up to let the driver know I was coming. Then, leaning in, I pressed a quick, fast kiss to Shawn’s mouth. “Thanks again.”

TEN

SHAWN

The only good thing about spending my lunch hour at the hospital, aside from seeing my grandmother, was the fact that the hospital's cafeteria had somewhat decent food.

I made a pit stop there before heading up to the floor to see her. Dad had texted me earlier and let me know they had moved her to a different floor. *It's good news*, he'd said. *It means she's stable and they don't foresee any more complications.*

Reaching the room, I slowed, hearing my brothers talking.

Matt and Keith.

I almost started inside, but something held me back, and within a few seconds, I was scowling.

"Investors. I think it's the best option." Matt sounded serious.

"Well, at least you're not talking about marrying for money anymore," Keith replied, "or trying to marry one of us off. Not that there are many options left. I can guarantee you that Shawn wouldn't go for it."

"Go fuck yourself," Matt said dryly. "Anyway, we talked about this before, but if we want to keep the foundation going, finding investors is probably our only option. Fundraisers alone won't do it, considering the shape we're in."

"I'm fine with whatever you think is the best option. You've got a better head for money and managing the books than any of us ever will."

I rolled my eyes at that, wondering how they'd react if I were to walk in there and tell them just how good *I* was at handling money and...managing the books. Conall was a stock market genius and had given me a few pointers when I'd first started investing. I'd already earned back more than enough

money to pay back every penny I'd received from my trust fund, and then some.

"We should talk to Jamie," Keith continued, both of them still unaware I was out there in the hall, listening to every word they said. "Maybe between the three of us, we can pool our resources and figure out a way to buy more time until we find some investors."

Between the three of us. Seriously?

They weren't even going to bother talking to me.

I couldn't even say I was surprised.

I was used to them overlooking me. They'd been doing it all my life. Still, even though I wasn't surprised, it grated at me. I had a stake in this too. And they weren't even going to fucking *talk* to me.

Another thought occurred to me, and it left me wanting to punch a wall.

Was Gran in there?

Unless the hospital staff had taken her for tests, then, yeah. She was. And wasn't that just awesome, having my brothers in there talking about the future of the *family* foundation without even bothering to mention me—and doing it right in front of my grandma.

Assholes.

Shit, I loved them, yeah, but they could be so dismissive of me at times—like every time they discussed anything important.

"Here's what I don't get," Keith said. "How did it get so bad, Matt? I mean, the foundation didn't end up like this overnight. It's not possible. Weren't there warning flags or something?"

Yeah, there would have been warning flags.

I'd actually gone to my dad and ask about the quarterly updates I was supposed to receive from the foundation, something I wasn't even aware of until Keith had mentioned it offhand at a family dinner a few years ago.

Dad had been surprised I wasn't receiving them and promised to take care of it. I'd wanted to know why I never *did* receive them but didn't push for answers. I suspected I wouldn't like those answers, anyway.

I got the reports within a few weeks of making the request and started going through them immediately. But there were years' worth of data, and it had taken time.

There were signs, though. Red flags I'd mentioned to Dad, knowing he'd bring it up to Matt. If I'd tried, Matt might not have paid any attention.

"I've hired somebody to look at the books," Matt said. "Dad pointed out a

few things a while back, but with everything going on, it took me a while to realize just how serious the problem was and what it could mean.”

I grimaced, wondering if it was the information I’d given Dad that Matt was talking about.

“I’ve been going blind, combing through things at night, and I can’t pinpoint where the bleeding is,” Matt said, frustration underscoring every word. “We’re steadily losing money, even more than we did during the recession.”

Keith muttered something in a voice too low for me to hear, but then, louder, he said, “You think somebody is skimming from us.” It wasn’t a question.

It wasn’t a question for me either.

“I don’t know what else to think, and fuck, let me tell you, the more I think it over, the more I realize that it’s likely the only real possibility and the angrier I get.”

On that, we were of the same mind.

It was a low-level anger I hadn’t let myself dwell on too much.

I’d had that realization after I made the decision to pass the information onto Dad. I hadn’t wanted to do anything more hands on because, for the most part, I was happy to stay out of the foundation’s day-to-day business aspects. But that wasn’t an option anymore. The foundation would collapse if something didn’t change, and fast.

“If you’re right…” Keith’s voice took on a hard edge.

“Easy there, slugger. Gran will be back from those tests any minute.”

One of the bands around my chest eased at those words. At least they weren’t having this discussion, totally excluding me, with my grandmother in the room.

It hit me like a brick. I was done with this shit. Done with them cutting me out of important conversations. I stepped into the room, and both Matt and Keith went quiet at the sight of me.

“Hey.” Glancing between the two of them, I then looked at the bed pointedly. “Where’s Gran?”

“Off getting some sort of scan,” Keith said, giving me a reassuring smile. “It’s not a big deal. Just some follow-up work.”

I resisted the urge to tell them both I wasn’t a little kid, and they didn’t need to coddle me. Neither of them would listen, anyway. If I wanted them to see me as an adult—at twenty-six fucking years old—then I would have to

show them.

They were too used to seeing me as the baby of the family, the kid who'd been born when Matt was ten and Jamie was six, the gap in our ages so different, I'd forever been trailing after them, all but begging for their attention until I finally figured out it would never happen.

I stayed quiet since there wasn't any response I could give that wouldn't make me sound like a dick or like I wanted to start a fight. Personally, I wasn't opposed to either at the moment, but it wouldn't help my case, and I didn't want to stress my grandmother out either. She'd be back soon, and I refused to have her come in and find us going for each other's throats.

Cutting around them, I went to the small table set up near the window. Grandpa had arranged for Grandma to have a private room that was set up more like a hotel suite than a hospital room, complete with a small table for the family to sit at if we wanted to have a meal.

Flipping open the Styrofoam box, I focused on the food and pretended my brothers weren't there. What the hell did it matter if I was in the room, anyway?

Matt started talking, updating me on Grandma's status, although I didn't need it. I talked to her yesterday, and Dad had texted me that morning. I made a noncommittal grunt, and he kept prattling on for several minutes. He acted like I'd asked for more information, although he segued into utterly banal shit, like what she'd eaten for breakfast.

I tuned him out. I did such a thorough job of it that it took me a couple of seconds to realize he'd actually *stopped* talking at some point and that Keith had settled in the chair across from me.

Flicking a glance at him as I tore open some ketchup for my fries, I lifted a brow.

"You're being pretty quiet," he said softly.

"Don't see much point in saying anything. The two of you are taking care of all the talking, anyway." *Fuck*, I thought sourly, even as the words left my mouth. So much for not trying to start a fight or sound like a dick.

But the commotion at the door had all three of us looking over to see Grandpa wheeling Grandma in. She was dressed in a nightgown and robe instead of one of those awful hospital gowns, a pretty blue floral thing that buttoned up the middle.

Saved by the grandparents. Rising, I went over to them as a nurse and aide bustled in behind.

“Hey, beautiful,” I said, bending over to kiss her cheek before greeting my grandfather.

She beamed at me. “Shawn.” Then she scowled. “You’re not leaving Conall in the lurch coming here in the middle of the day, are you?”

“Nah. We’ve got inspections on the project we finished this week. Those are boring as hell, anyway. I figure, why not let him handle that part since he’s always got me doing the grunt work and sweating myself to death in ninety-five-degree heat these days?” I winked at her.

“Well, you told him you wanted to buy the remainder of the company from him once he retired,” she reminded me primly. “Help me get back into bed, will you? I’m exhausted.”

I nodded at Grandpa and wheeled her over while he spoke with the nurse and aide.

“Ah, Shawn...” Matt said, a warning in his voice.

I ignored him as I locked the wheelchair.

The nurse was watching, but with a smile on her face. She’d been in here with Dad, Grandpa and me the day before when I asked if they could walk me through helping her transfer from the bed to the chair, if she was at the stage yet. I’d told them I’d helped out with a friend after he’d had a stroke recently, and after the staff checked in with the doctor, they’d agreed to start working on the basics of transfers.

If everything went well, we’d start working on walking—*ambulation*, the therapist had told me—within the next day or two.

Once I had her in bed, I helped her settle in more comfortably and winked at her. “So, think I should have gone to school for nursing?”

“You’ll do, you cheeky boy.” She patted my shoulder before looking at Matt and Keith. “As for you two...well, Keith, you might be okay, but Matt, I’m not sure you’ve got the patience to learn all of this, especially since you’ll be traveling back and forth to the ranch all the time.”

I swallowed a laugh when I caught sight of Matt’s face from the corner of my eye.

“I’ve got more patience in one finger than Shawn has in his entire body,” Matt said, clearly taken aback.

“When it comes to some things, absolutely.” Grandma looked over at the table. “Shawn, would you get me some water?”

After holding the cup out for her and steadying it as she gripped it with two hands that shook only a little, I wheeled the chair out of the way, then

washed my hands and sat down to finish my meal.

Both my brothers watched me like I'd sprouted two heads. Again, I didn't pay them any attention, but this time, I felt more than a little smug.

The nurse approached Grandma as Grandpa took the chair across from me and stole a French fry.

"I think that one *should* consider a career in nursing. Or physical therapy. He's got the right touch, doesn't he?" the pretty, plump brunette said in a cheerful voice as she checked Grandma's wristband, then asked her to confirm her name and date of birth.

"He's always been excellent with people," Grandma said. "In his own way, of course, but he's got the kindest heart."

My cheeks heated, and I kept my eyes on my food.

Grandpa noticed and chuckled. "You're embarrassing him, Alice. You better stop. Matt, Keith, you two should stop looking like you don't recognize your own brother. By the way, the therapist will be in again at four if you'd like her to teach you how to do the transfers with your grandmother. Otherwise, you can check at the nurse's station for the schedule for the rest of the week and work out a time in your schedules."

I glanced at him as he sighed.

"I plan on handling as much of her care at home as I can on my own until Alice is back on her feet, but I'm an old man, and I know I'll need some help at times. I'll be hiring a private nurse," he said, shifting his attention pointedly between Matt and Keith. "I don't expect either of you to give up your lives, but you also need to know how to assist so you're able if the need arises."

"Of course they'll learn," Grandma said even as both of my brothers developed an odd, panicked *deer in headlights* expression. "We've got good boys, Matt."

She talked with the nurse a little as I finished my food, my thoughts wandering. No surprise, they went straight to the conversation I'd overheard between Matt and Keith about the foundation.

With help from Conall, I'd been funneling money back into the foundation for several years. My trust stipulated that I wasn't supposed to return that money back to the foundation—and *technically*, we could say I hadn't. Much of that trust was still sitting in a bank, growing fatter with interest and the returns from stock investments I'd made. But I *had* paid money into the foundation, through some sly maneuvering on Conall's part

so my family couldn't trace the funds back to me without digging, and it was more than equal to the sum I'd initially received.

I would talk to Conall, I decided.

All his years working historical rehabs in the New England area had netted him any number of contacts, and I already had more than a few myself.

Maybe between the two of us, we could come up with the names of some investors I could approach.

I was damn well going to show my brothers I wasn't just dead weight when it came to the foundation.

ELEVEN

TALIA

“Is everything okay?”

Looking up from the soup and sandwich that was my lunch, I met my dad’s gaze. “What do you mean?”

“You’re just rather quiet.” My father smiled at me.

His gaze seemed to cut clear through me, and I had to fight the urge to squirm. With a self-conscious laugh, I said, “Now you’re making me wonder what it would have been like to sit across from you *and* Mom the few times I got in trouble or did something wrong as a teen.”

“Did that happen a lot?” Instead of looking appalled, Dad only looked curious.

I could only grin at him. “No. But I think I would have been a little more nervous the few times I *did* do something wrong, as opposed to dealing only with Mom. You’ve got a much more intense *parent* stare.”

To my surprise, he chuckled.

“Apparently, you like that idea,” I said with a scowl, although I wasn’t really irritated.

How could I be? After so many years of wondering what my dad was like, I finally knew—and he was wonderful.

“I just like knowing that I probably would have been a good dad,” he said, smiling a little.

“I don’t think there’s a *probably* to it.” Face heating and nerves rising, I looked down. Nerves jumped around inside me, and I focused on my sandwich for a few seconds as I struggled to figure out the right way to say the things that had been on my mind for several days. “Dad, there is something I want to talk to you about.”

“I thought so.” His smile took on a pleased slant. “You’ve got that look in your eyes.”

“Do I?” This time, my scowl was real. Mom always pointed it out when I had a certain look in my eyes, too. I must have been easier to read than the typical open book. Taking a drink of water to wash down the last of my lunch, I folded my hands in my lap. “It’s nothing major, really. I just...Dad, you know how much I appreciate you having me here and everything you’ve done, everything you’ve offered to do, don’t you?”

The money he’d given me, arguing that it would have been what I’d gotten from my inheritance, had taken such a weight off my shoulders—and my mother’s—that I couldn’t begin to thank him enough. But I knew he didn’t *want* gratitude, and he hadn’t done it for any reason other than *because* he loved me.

It seemed like he’d loved me within minutes of meeting me.

I would have scoffed at such an idea, except I’d felt a deep connection to him as well.

He was quiet for so long that I grew nervous.

Twisting my hands together, I tried not to let my nerves show. “Dad?”

“I’m fine, Talia,” he said, his voice slightly gruff. “I...well, I was wondering if you were going to want to move back to Salem anytime soon.”

“I...” I shook my head as I realized where his mind had gone. “Dad, that’s not what this is about.”

“It’s not?”

“No.” A nervous laugh broke free, and I didn’t bother trying to hide the urge to shift around in my chair as a bad case of the fidgets overtook me. “I’ll just spill it, okay? I was trying to be subtle here because I didn’t want to upset you or anything. But...well, I guess I’m giving you the wrong idea and—”

“Talia,” he interrupted, voice gentle. “You’re babbling. Why don’t you just spill it, as you said you’d do?”

Another nervous laugh. “Um. Yes, right. Dad.” Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes for a few seconds, then looked back at him. “I’m bored.”

“Bored?” he echoed.

“Yes.” Biting my lip, I hesitated as I studied his face. I couldn’t see any sign that I’d upset or hurt him, but I’d already come to the conclusion that my dad didn’t wear his heart on his sleeve like I did. “It’s not that I don’t like being here or spending time with you, but I’ve been working since I was old enough to help Mom out with the business. Well, that *and* going to school.

Whether it was high school or the college courses I picked up after I graduated. I'm not used to just..." Even after several seconds of fumbling for words, I couldn't find anything that fit, so I just waved my hands around me in an abstract manner. "*This.*"

"I'm assuming you don't mean this kitchen in particular," he said in a dry tone.

Face heating, I looked down. "No. Of course not."

"Talia."

His voice was so...*fatherly* in that moment, I could do nothing but look at him. And I saw that he had an understanding smile on his face.

"You're telling me that you're not cut out for lounging by the pool or sitting around the house reading. Is that it?"

"Um. Well." I shrugged. "If you put it like that...no."

To my surprise, he laughed. "Since we're being honest with each other, I wondered if you were going to bring it up any time soon, but I didn't want to push you."

It took a few seconds for his words to register.

"You already noticed I was getting bored."

"Not *getting*. You've been bored for weeks now." He blew out a sigh and looked out the window. "It's hard not to recognize it when the same thing plagues me too often. I can't do what I used to, honey. The mind and the soul are willing, and some days, it even feels like the body is. But this damn disease..."

The frustration in his voice made me angry. Not at *him*, of course. Never him.

But at the disease that was eating away at him. Rising, I went around the table and knelt by his chair. "I'm so sorry, Dad."

"Don't be." He stroked a hand over my hair as he blew out a sigh. "I'm being maudlin. I've had a good life, and I've still got plenty of good years left in me. I'm luckier than many, you know. I've got the means and access to treatment that many with MS don't. I've been funneling a fair amount of money in research in the hopes that they'll find a cure. I doubt it will happen in my lifetime, but maybe in yours..."

His words trailed off, and I leaned my head against his arm, closing my eyes against the burn of tears.

"That's as good a segue as any, I think. Get up, Talia. Now that you've put this on the table, there's something I want to talk to you about." Although

he was still smiling, his eyes had taken on a serious cast, and there was a weight in his voice that hadn't been there before.

"Uh-oh," I said, nerves kicking in and my typical sarcastic humor rising to deflect whatever might be coming. "I promise I didn't wreck the car, Dad."

He laughed. "Now, don't go making me nostalgic for the things I missed. And relax. It's not bad news. It's an...opportunity."

Now, I was curious.

"An opportunity for what?" I asked, settling into the seat closest to him.

"Taking over." He ran a hand through his thinning hair, the neatly trimmed silvered ends falling back into place. "I can't do as much with the family's monetary interests as I used to. When I found out about my disease, I started making plans for when I'd no longer be able to work, and I've already got people in place at the businesses the family owns." He paused then, smiled a little. "The family. I still say that, even though for the longest time, it was only my mother and me. But now I have you, and maybe one day, you'll marry, and you can pass on this legacy."

He looked around the house with sadness in his eyes. "This place was never meant for one or two people. It was built with a family in mind. A large one."

I started to say something, but he cleared his throat and went on.

"But there are some things I've continued to handle, frankly because I didn't want those decisions out of family hands, and I had no idea what I was going to do...well, that's neither here nor there now." He met my eyes. "You took classes in business and history."

"Ah...yes," I said slowly. "Why?"

"As it so happens, those are the same areas I majored in when I went to college." He smiled a little at my surprise. "It served me well when I took over handling the philanthropic arm of the family business, which I still control. But I can't be as involved as I used to be. The stress of it, and the demands required? Frankly, it's just more than I can handle some days when I'm feeling my best, and on the days when I'm not?"

He made a face and looked away.

Before I could figure out where he was going with this, he leaned forward and covered my hand with his.

"I'd like you to take over. At some point, everything will be yours, and this would be a good way for you to familiarize yourself with the family interests, and I'll still be here to help with any questions you might have." He

gave me a rueful smile and added, “I would have given anything to have somebody there to guide me after my father passed.”

He caught sight of my face and grimaced. At the gesture, I forced a smile, but it was far too watery to be helpful. “I’m not sure what to say.”

Dad nodded. “I think I should stop talking now and let you process what I’ve told you.”

“Ah, well...it’s a lot.” I rubbed my temple as I tried to puzzle my way through what he’d told me. “So is this...like a job?”

He chuckled. “Talia, if you so desired, you wouldn’t need to work another day in your life, and I think you know that. This is an opportunity to use the knowledge you gained in school and take part in your family legacy.”

“Well.” I gave him a weak smile. “When you put it that way...” Taking a deep breath, I focused my thoughts. “You realize I know nothing about charities or anything like that.”

“You can learn. You’re smart and driven. I have advisers and lawyers I trust who can advise you, and I have no plans to go anywhere. I’m still here, and I can answer questions, help you find your feet. The only thing you would need to do is figure out where you’d want to diversify our interests when the time comes and handle the meetings I’d normally attend.”

“What kind of meetings?” I wrinkled my nose, already imagining stuff board functions where I’d have to listen to numbers and recitations of information that I barely understood.

He chuckled. “For now, the only meetings you’d need to worry about are the ones I already have on the schedule. As time goes by and you get more comfortable, we’ll introduce you to more contacts. Eventually, you’ll start to find your own.”

“Contacts for...?”

“The charities you’d like to support.”

“So, basically, I’d be spending the family money on *any* charity I thought could use it?”

At the incredulous note in my voice, Dad laughed. “I wouldn’t go *that* far. I don’t want you tossing twenty percent of the year’s allotted dollars to some fly-by-night so the CEO can disappear with every penny and show up on some island with no extradition laws. But I don’t see you doing anything like that. You’ve got a good head on your shoulders, and you’ve already shown me that you take your time before making decisions. You’re also not careless or reckless with money. Yours or anybody else’s.”

I squirmed under his watchful gaze. “I’m too used to having to watch what little money I have.”

“That’s no longer an issue with you, and you’re still careful with your money.” Approval warmed his eyes. “Trust me, I’ve thought this through, and I believe you’d be a great fit. But I don’t want to push you into anything you’re not ready for.”

I could tell he meant it.

And I also knew that if I didn’t take over, he’d keep doing it, exhausting himself.

That wasn’t the *entire* reason I said yes.

There was a combination of factors, but I definitely didn’t want to think about him exhausting himself when I could do something to help. It wasn’t like I had anything to fill my time anyway, right?

“Well. If we’re going to do this, what do I need to do to get started?”

He beamed at me. “So, you’re interested?”

“I think mildly petrified is a better word,” I said honestly. “But you’re right. I need to have a better understanding of...all of this.” I looked around the kitchen but was seeing past the four walls, thinking of the elaborate estate, all the business my father said we owned.

I was supposed to go to a meeting with him at some point to meet his head people so I could get a better understanding of the business aspects as well, but he’d told me he’d give me time to adjust to everything before we took that step.

But I had a chance to get involved now, so I might as well bite the bullet.

“Mildly petrified,” Dad murmured. “I think that sums up how I felt when I realized I was suddenly in charge over twenty years ago.” He shook his head then, as if throwing off the memory, and looked back at me. “Taylor, one of my top advisers for our philanthropic interests will be here for dinner.”

“Tonight?” The word was more like a breath of air.

He chuckled. “I wasn’t planning on springing this on you at the last minute. We have dinner once a month to go over pertinent details. We can use that time to give you a crash course. But I think the best thing to do would be for you to talk to a friend of mine. Matt and his family have been involved in charitable causes in Massachusetts and the New England area since before Moses was around. Or it seems that way.” He winked at me. “I’ve already reached out to him, and he said he and the family would be happy to talk to you. I’ll make a phone call and get a meeting set up. Does

that work?”

TWO DAYS LATER, my head was still spinning from everything I’d learned from Dad. I was so ready for my night out with Shawn.

“You’re sure you don’t mind me using the condo?”

Dad gave me a gimlet stare. “Stop asking. Just promise me you’ll take care—”

“Stop.” I covered my face with my hands, because we’d already had this talk. It had been awkward as hell. Dad had fumbled his way through explaining that he certainly understood and respected a woman’s right to explore her sexuality, but he wanted to make sure I knew to take precautions while I stood there blushing and wishing it would all just be *over*. “Dad, I told you, the main reason I’m using it is so that he doesn’t see all of...this.”

Dropping my hands, I held his gaze, although not without some difficulty. “I just met the guy, and I really like him. But I’m still not used to all of...this. I don’t know how to handle it just yet, and I need to figure out if he and I have anything before I even think about opening this particular can of worms.”

“Nice to know your family fortune and your father are a can of worms.”

I scowled at him, trying not to laugh when I saw the glint of humor in his eyes.

“Am I being paranoid?” I asked softly.

“No.” He held out a hand, and I went to him, leaning against his custom motorized wheelchair and resting my arm on his shoulders. “You’re being cautious. I met more than a few people who had no interest in me beyond my money. Usually, I could see their sort a mile away, and I grew up in this world. You haven’t. It’s...not a good feeling to learn you’ve been used, so I’m glad to see you’re taking care. Make sure this man matters to you before...opening this can of worms.”

Hours later, though, *caution* was the last thing on my mind.

Shawn had picked me up in front of the sleek, gleaming glass tower that housed my father’s condo in downtown Boston, and we’d gone out to see a movie, then get dinner and walk along the harbor before he brought me back. He’d asked if he should drop me off in front, and I’d been distracted, having

such a good time with him, I didn't think about the implications of that question until after the fact.

Now, half straddling him in the big SUV parked in an isolated corner, I shuddered as he kissed his way down my neck, one big hand molding my breast while the other gripped my hip and rocked me against the hard ridge of his cock.

The skirt I wore was shoved up well past my hips, and his khaki trousers and my panties were both too little of a barrier—and too much. Through the material, I felt his cock pulse, and I whimpered, my spine arching as a climax built in me.

“Are you going to come, Tally?” Shawn whispered in my ear, the hand on my hip tightening until it almost hurt. At the same time, that hand gripping me felt like the only thing keeping me grounded.

Breathless and unable to speak, I moved against him, seeking more of that delicious friction.

He bit my earlobe. “Answer me. Are you getting ready to come?”

“Yes.” It was a moan, a gasp, a plea, a prayer. “Please...”

“Please what?” He released my breast and smoothed his hand down my hip. “Stop? Please make you come? Tell me what you want.”

Embarrassment flamed my cheeks red, and I thrust against him harder, hoping he'd get the point...and not make me *say* it.

He chuckled and eased back, cupping my face.

The light was dim in this part of the garage, and we were parked in between the wall and what looked like a utility van, the illusion of privacy almost complete. But even with the lights dim, I could see the harsh, hungry glitter of his eyes, and I had little doubt he could see the vibrant red color that had to be on my face.

His smile softened as he smoothed my hair back. “Are we moving too fast? Should we stop?”

“Yes...and yes...” I licked my lips. “But we're not going to. Not yet at least.”

Leaning in, I flicked my tongue across his mouth.

This time, *he* was the one who groaned. But he didn't deepen the kiss. Hand sliding to my neck, he held me. “Are you sure?”

“Sure enough for now.” It was so damn hard to think with the ridge of his erection rubbing against me. Rolling against him awkwardly, I tried to deepen the connection between us.

“Hold on,” Shawn murmured. He shifted around and reached down, then the seat was reclining and moving away from the steering wheel that had been digging into my back. “Come here, Tally. Fuck, you’re sexy as hell.”

He swallowed my moan with his mouth as he kissed the life out of me, both hands now on my butt, splayed wide over my flesh, the skimpy material of my panties no barrier.

When he slid one hand inside, I froze. The shock of it had me straightening until I was once more sitting astride him.

Shawn paused. “Tally?”

I sucked in a breath, but when he asked me if he should stop, I only shook my head.

Not yet...

That was all I could think.

If he stopped, then these wonderful, intense sensations would also stop.

And I didn’t want that happening.

Eyes still on mine, he eased farther back, putting more distance between us before smoothing his hand along my thigh, then pushing inside my panties, fingers sliding through my wet curls.

I whimpered.

He swore.

“Fuck, Tally. You’re already so hot and wet...tell me I can make you come. Just nod, for fuck’s sake. Or say yes...something, anything.”

“Yes,” I whispered, sagging back against the steering wheel as all the strength drained out of me.

Harsh flags of color stained his cheeks red. “Don’t close your eyes, baby. I want to watch you climax, feel you squeezing my fingers with this hot, wet pussy.”

Then, with that bald statement, he pushed one finger inside me.

“Fuck...you’re so damn tight.”

He twisted his wrist as he added another finger, screwing them inside me on the second stroke.

Waves of intense pleasure slammed into me, and I flung out my hands, desperate for something to hold on to. Hard, muscled thighs met my touch, and I squeezed, shuddering as he stroked me again, this time, circling his thumb around my clit.

“Shawn!”

He growled and abruptly leaned back until the driver’s seat was fully

reclined. He dragged me with him until I was sprawled on his face, and he was...oh. Oh, hell. He'd already pulled my panties aside, and as I grabbed onto the back of the passenger seat for balance, he buried his face between my thighs and began to lick my flesh, stabbing at me with his tongue, then whirling that same devilish tongue around my clit until I was shuddering, the climax inside me building to something akin to a tidal wave.

Then he bit me. Lightly, his teeth scored my engorged clit, and I exploded, coming harder than I ever had in my life.

The world narrowed down to pinpricks while darkness gathered at the edges.

When my vision cleared, Shawn had me back in his lap and was holding me, my clothes more or less in place. My muscles felt loose and lax, my limbs heavy with replete satisfaction.

And Shawn's cock was hard as a rock, jabbing at my hip.

His lips brushed over my ear as I turned toward him.

Our mouths met, and I blushed when I tasted myself on him, but I didn't pull back. At least not until he went to pull me into his lap again.

This time, I wiggled away, shifting until I found a somewhat manageable position before I reached down and cupped him through his trousers.

I'd had one boyfriend that I'd gotten pretty serious with. I'd been considering having sex with him, but that was before I discovered the main reason he was probably okay with being patient was because he was getting it on with his married next-door neighbor.

So I wasn't totally inexperienced when it came to touching a man like this. But the thickness and length of Shawn's cock had my mouth going dry, and there was more than a little trepidation tripping through my veins.

But looking into his gaze as I stroked him, watching as his pupils spiked, flaring until the surreal blue-green of his eyes was little more than a sliver around the black, everything else faded away. I stroked him again, then before my nerves could take hold, I unbuttoned his pants and slid my hand inside.

He groaned as my fingers brushed over his naked cock, and a bitten-off curse escaped when I wrapped my hand around him. He arched upward. At the same time, he wrapped his hand around mine, urging me to tighten my grip.

I did, watching his face, mesmerized by the raw erotic beauty of him.

His lashes lifted a fraction, and his breath tripped in his chest. "If you

keep watching me like that, I'm going to lose it."

The words came out like he was trying to warn me.

Memories of the way his mouth felt between my legs urged me on, and instead of backing off, I wiggled and twisted even more, then bent over and took him in my mouth.

Shawn's body went taut, and he bucked. One hand brushed the back of my head lightly as he moaned my name.

What little I knew about doing this had been gleaned from books, then practiced on with the former cheating, douchebag boyfriend. The intensity of Shawn's reaction made me want to push him for more, see if I could make him feel even a fraction of what he'd made me feel.

Scraping my teeth along the underside of his penis, I pulled up, sucking on him as I moved.

Shawn shuddered, his hand moving to rest on the back of my head. "Fuck, baby...that's...oh, hell..."

I did it again, and he swore, thrusting up only to freeze.

I lifted away from him just a fraction and whispered, "Don't stop."

"Fuck me," he muttered, and then he cupped the back of my head in his hands.

This time, when I moved down, he thrust up. The jagged bolts of lust tore through me, lighting up places inside me I hadn't even known existed.

Above me, Shawn panted and talked, muttering dirty promises and making urgent demands, even as he praised me.

"That mouth, Tally...fuck, your mouth is amazing, I think I'm going to come...baby...if you don't stop..."

But I didn't want to stop.

With every dirty word from him, every move of his hips, every tug of his hand in my hair, I felt more and more aroused. More and more powerful. My clit pulsed, and I squeezed my thighs together against the incessant ache there. At the same time, Shawn pushed my head down roughly with his left hand, while with his right, he stroked my back, along my butt, then pushed inside my panties and thrust his fingers inside me.

He started to come even as he finger-fucked me, thrusting in rapid succession.

"Don't stop," he begged, his cock jerking as he ejaculated in my mouth. "Please...Tally...oh, fuck, yes...that, just like that..."

He screwed his fingers deeper inside me, and I had to pull up, take a

breath.

Shawn reacted by hauling me closer until I was all but kneeling on all fours on his lap as he quickly brought me to another orgasm. I collapsed on him with a sob as it wracked me.

Still shaking, I was only vaguely aware as he smoothed my dress down and pulled me into his lap. His heart thundered in my ear as he nuzzled my hair.

“Are you going to ask me up?” he murmured after several moments.

So dazed with pleasure, I almost said yes. Only at the last second did I stop myself. Almost loath to do or say anything that might change what seemed to be happening between us, I eased away from him and peered into his eyes.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” I told him softly. “At least not yet.”

He quirked a brow at me, gaze communicating understanding and amusement all at once.

“We are moving kind of fast,” he said. “I sure as hell didn’t expect to find myself eating your pussy out tonight...or having you go down on me. But I enjoyed every damn second of both. And if you invite me up, I’ll make sure you enjoy every second of what happens for the rest of the night too.”

Oh, I had no doubt about that.

Heart hammering against my ribs, I tried to control the nervous laugh that wanted to escape—and managed, barely.

“It’s not just that. I’m...” Sucking in a breath, I dropped my head on his shoulder as shyness overtook me. Stupid, how stupid was this to be shy *now* when I could still scent the musk of our bodies in the air.

Shawn smoothed his hand down my spine, then back, cupping the back of my neck. “You’re what? Fuck, don’t tell me you’re married.”

“No.” Without thinking, I jabbed him in the side.

He flinched and grabbed my hand. “No tickling.”

“Serves you right.” My heart tripped as he brought my hand to his mouth and kissed the inside of my wrist.

“I’m just trying to fill in the blank. You’re...well, not married. So, you’re...not certain about me yet? Okay. Or maybe you were going to tell me some big secret...like you’re an alien from outer space.”

The silliness of the comment had me giggling, and I felt his smile against my cheek before his lips softly brushed the skin there. “Whatever has you so nervous, just tell me. If you’re not ready, I’ll understand.”

The teasing humor, followed by the tenderness, melted me.

So, taking him at his word, I eased back and met his eyes. “I’m a virgin, Shawn.”

He blinked.

Other than that, no response.

Blood rushed to my face, and I started feeling self-conscious. So, yeah, I might be a *little* old to be a virgin, considering some girls were having sex by the time they hit high school, but I’d never wanted to rush *anything*, much less something like this.

Shawn closed his eyes and shook his head. A few seconds passed before he finally spoke. “Did you just say you’re a virgin?”

“Yes.” Resisting the urge to squirm, I forced myself to hold his gaze. “So...I’m not ready. Not tonight.”

He ran his tongue across his teeth. “Is this one of those things were you’re waiting for marriage, or is it more of a case where you just haven’t met the right guy, or is it a case of it’s not of my business, and I need to shut the hell up?”

To my surprise, laughter came spilling out. “Considering the circumstances and what’s just happened, I think you’re entitled to ask. And no, I’m not waiting for marriage. I just...” Hesitating a moment, I shrugged. “I guess I just haven’t found anybody I liked enough that I wanted to be with. Not like that. I’ve had a couple of *almost* serious relationships and one fairly serious one, but...well, he was an ass, something I discovered almost too late, and since then, I’ve been...picky.”

He skimmed his hand through my hair. “He hurt you.”

“He hurt my pride more than anything, looking back.” Shrugging, I shifted my attention away from the intensity of his gaze. He saw too deeply. “I...well, we just met. This is only our second date. I think I could like you enough. But...I’m not ready. Not tonight.”

TWELVE

SHAWN

“It’s like stepping back in time,” Talia murmured as she peered around us.

We were walking down Acorn Street in the Beacon Hill area, and her eyes moved endlessly over the old, stately homes, the cobblestone street that was still paved with the original stones that had been laid in place hundreds of years earlier.

“Do you know why they’re called cobblestone?” I asked, nodding at the small stones that made up the hard surface beneath us.

She glanced at me, her fingers twined with mine. “This isn’t another dirty innuendo, is it?”

“Hey, who told the last one?” I asked with false affront.

“Who told all the ones before that?”

“There’s no reason to bring logic into this, you know.” I sighed and shook my head. Lifting her hand to my lips, I kissed the back of it. “But just so you know, smart-ass, no, it’s not a dirty innuendo. Back when they were building in this area, before there was a city, the earth was full of these little rocks. They were called cobs, for some reason. They had to clear them out to build. I don’t know who or where the idea of using the stones for pavement first became a thing, but since they had to clear them to build and they were a readily available resource, they were used to make the road. Thus, *cobblestone*.”

“Huh.” She studied the slightly uneven surface beneath us, the surface of the rocks mostly smooth after hundreds of years of foot traffic. “Geez, can you imagine the labor that went into such a job? Digging rocks out of the dirt?”

“Doesn’t much sound like a fun one to me.”

She shuddered. “Me, either. My back hurts just thinking about it. Maybe that’s where the term *backbreaking labor* comes from.”

We left Acorn Street behind a few minutes later. I pointed out a few other areas I thought might interest her and answered when she had questions—and she always did. I appreciated that. I’d been a kid with a million questions growing up, and not everybody had always had the time—or patience—to answer. Curiosity was a valuable virtue as far as I was concerned.

Spying an alcove up ahead, I tugged her into it.

She gave me an expectant look, but before she could say anything, I tipped her head back and covered her mouth with mine, tangling one hand in her hair.

Damn, but I was starving for her.

She reached up to grip my waist, her hands sliding under my t-shirt. When I felt the bite of her nails, it was all I could do not to hitch her up right there and grind against her. She raked those short, neatly trimmed nails the color of a cherry popsicle over my side, and I groaned, breaking the kiss to trail my lips over to her ear.

“I’ve been dying to get my mouth and hands on you since I picked you up. If you keep that up, I’m going to start looking for someplace private enough that I can pull this skirt up and make you come.”

Her cheeks were red when I lifted my head to peer down at her.

Clearing her throat, she said, “I’m not the one who started it.”

“Logic has nothing to do with the situation, Tally.” I nuzzled her neck and tugged her away from the wall. “Come on. Before I lose my mind.”

She was smiling a little as we started down the sidewalk, and I eyed her curiously. “What’s got you so amused?”

“Nothing specific,” she said, hitching up a shoulder. Her cheeks flushed that nervous pink as she darted a look at me. “It’s probably silly. But I love how you call me *Tally*.”

My heart clutched in my chest, and I had the urge to pull her back into my arms and kiss her senseless—again.

My cock was still aching, though, and I hadn’t been lying about what I’d said. It was a damn good thing I had on baggy shorts and a t-shirt. Otherwise, the evidence of my arousal would be on full display.

Voice gruff, I said, “Come on. Before I end up throwing you over my shoulder like a Neanderthal.”

She giggled, and the sound made that fist around my heart tighten even

more.

Was this it?

Was this what it felt like when you found somebody who could be the one?

If so, it was a little terrifying.

And it was also the best damn feeling.

Kind of like a roller coaster.

THIS TIME, I didn't ask as I pulled into the parking garage.

I wasn't expecting to be invited up, but if I didn't get my hands on her, even for just a hot and heavy make-out session, I thought I'd go crazy. Since I didn't want her to think I was presuming anything, once I parked, I looked over at her. "I'm not expecting you to invite me up or anything. But I need to touch you."

"Actually, I was going to see if you wanted to come up...for a little while." She bit her lip and added, "Maybe we could watch some TV, have a drink."

"Is the making out part on the table?"

"Oh, absolutely." Her cheeks colored, and she licked her lips. "I've been thinking about touching you all day."

I wouldn't have thought it possible, but it seemed like the need I had for her, the craving, got even stronger.

Parking the SUV, I turned the engine off and climbed out.

She was sliding from the seat when I met her on the other side, and it took teeth-gritting control not to push her up against the vehicle and touch her then and there. Taking her hand, I led her toward the elevators I'd glimpsed when I pulled into the parking structure.

She twined her fingers with mine as we walked. Rubbing my thumb over the soft skin along the back of her hand, I mused at how easy it was, just being with her. We could talk about almost anything, but she didn't seem to feel the need to fill the air with empty chatter, either. Even with the sexual tension humming in the air between us like it was now, neither of us had the urge to fill it with idle talk.

Inside the elevator, she punched the button for the top floor, then leaned

against me. I clenched my teeth at the feel of her soft curves, so delightfully warm and full.

“Just how much TV did you want to watch?” I asked, my voice far gruffer than it had been even a couple of minutes earlier.

“Um...” She tilted her head back and met my eyes, her cheeks going a lovely shade of pink. “Well, to be honest, I don’t really care if we watch TV or not. I just wanted you to come up.”

“To have a drink?” The light in her eyes had my blood pumping even hotter than it already was, but I wasn’t about to make any assumptions here.

“We can. But...that’s not why I asked you up, either.” She turned to face me more fully and rose up on her toes to press her mouth to mine.

The elevator chimed, and the doors opened.

“Out,” I said, nudging her into motion. “Before I push you up against a wall and we end up doing something that could get us arrested for indecent exposure.”

She laughed and took my hand, gesturing to one of only three doors on the floor.

Vaguely, I wondered what she did for a living. Having a condo in a space like this in downtown Boston wasn’t cheap. We hadn’t really talked about our jobs, other than how mine connected to my love for history.

I went to ask her, and she dropped her keys. We both bent to get them, and that was when I noticed her hands were shaking.

Closing my fingers around hers, I lifted them to my lips. “What’s wrong, Tally?”

“Nothing.” She didn’t meet my eyes as she darted a look at me, the glance so fleeting, it barely counted as one.

Taking the keys from her, I unlocked the door to the condo and stepped aside so she could enter. Once inside, I locked the door and turned the keys back over, then watched her as she put her purse down.

Closing the distance between us, I wrapped my arms around her from behind and kissed her neck.

“Trying this again...what’s wrong?”

She covered my hands with hers. “It’s nothing, really. I’m just...I’m nervous.”

“About what?” Nuzzling the sweetly scented flesh, I cuddled her closer, until not even air separated us.

“I...um...well, you mentioned making out, and I definitely want to do

that. But...”

Understanding dawned. Turning her to face me, I said, “We can stop whenever you want. I’m not going to push you into something you’re not ready for, Talia. Okay?”

“I sort of figured after the other night. I just...it doesn’t seem fair to you.”

“Come here,” I said, cupping her face and angling her head back.

A whimper left her as I rubbed my lips over hers. “If you think you’re putting me out by letting me put my hands, my mouth on you...or by having you do the same to me, then we need to have a talk.”

“I...well, even if we don’t end up in bed?”

“Well, let me think...the other night, you were bent over, sucking my cock while I finger-fucked you right into orgasm. Hmmm...you’re right, Tally. You’re putting me in a terrible situation.” I wagged my brows at her. “Do it again sometime soon, okay?”

A laugh bubbled out of her, and some of the tension eased from her body.

“Okay. I guess...I just...I know we just met, but I don’t want to take this step and then not hear from you again.” Curling her fingers in the front of my shirt, she added hesitantly, “I like you. A lot. I know we just met, but...”

My heart all but flipped over in my chest. “I know. I feel the same way.”

Twenty minutes later, I had a beer, and she was sipping from a glass of wine while we pretended to watch an action flick on the massive TV. She leaned forward to put the glass of wine on the table, and when she settled back on the couch, she put her hand on my thigh.

Closing my eyes, I reminded myself that I’d promised to take it slow.

I was going to do that.

I was not going to grab her hand and drag it higher—

She stroked her fingers along the inside of my thigh, down to my knee, just below where the shorts ended. Back up. Higher. And higher. She did it again. And again.

When she did it a third time, I grabbed her hand and pinned it flat to my thigh. “Unless you want to end up flat on your back, you need to stop.”

She twisted around to face me. “I thought we were going to make out.”

With a groan, I pulled her into my lap.

She came eagerly, her hands pushing into my hair as I angled her head back.

Covering her mouth, I kissed her, barely managing to temper the hunger that had been growing inside me all fucking day. It was a fist in my gut,

something violent, almost overpowering, and the touch of her hands on me, the feel of her mouth moving against mine was the only cure.

Her tongue stroked over mine as she wiggled in an attempt to get closer. I solved that problem by shifting her so she straddled me, and both of us groaned as our lower bodies came in contact.

Her dress had ridden up, and now only her panties and my shorts and boxers separated us. It was fan-fucking-tastic and torturous all at once.

Holding her hips, I dragged her up and down, rocking up to meet her each time, and she whimpered. The need to peel her out of her clothes was almost overwhelming. Easing back, I looked into her eyes.

She made a frustrated sound low in her throat when I broke contact. It made me smile, because the frustration was one thing I could totally understand.

Holding her gaze, I stroked my fingers along the neckline of her dress. “I want to see you. Can I take this off?”

THIRTEEN

TALIA

Staring into his blue-green eyes, I hesitated only a second before nodding.

He leaned in and kissed the corner of my mouth while his fingers worked the small black buttons that ran down the front of my poppy red sundress.

He kissed a path along my jawline until he reached my ear.

“I’m dying for a deeper taste of you, Tally. I want to strip you out of this dress and bra, look at your breasts and suck your nipples until they’re tight and hard.”

They already *were*, but I didn’t tell him that.

All this blunt, dirty talk was easy for him—and arousing as hell on my end—but I couldn’t imagine saying anything like it in return.

Moments later, my dress lay crumpled around my waist, and my bra was somewhere on the other side of the room. And Shawn was doing exactly as he’d said—looking at me.

Flushing under his frank, hungry gaze, I squirmed. The movement had me rubbing against his erection, and the sensation was so intense, I shuddered. My panties were wet and slid over my flesh—sheer torment.

“Your tits are perfect,” he muttered.

“Not too small?” The second I said it, I wished I could yank the comment back, but it was already out there, and I blushed even harder.

He palmed my breasts in his hands and plumped them together before freeing one, so he could pull me up until my smallish—perfect, according to him—breasts were on level with his mouth. “Hush,” he muttered, taking the right nipple between his teeth.

Flicks of his tongue, careful nips with his teeth, every touch seemed to arrow straight down, echoing in my core. Soon, I was working myself against

him almost frantically, desperate for relief.

“Shawn!”

He moved abruptly, and in a blink, I was flat on my back, the wide, cushy couch cradling me as he came down between my legs. Kissing a pathway down, he shoved my skirt up.

“I need another taste of you,” he said in a guttural voice. Stripping my panties off, he pressed his mouth to me.

The orgasm grabbed me in the next instant as he closed his mouth around my clitoris and sucked. Arching up, I shoved my hands into his hair, all but mindless with pleasure. And he didn’t stop, not until he brought me to another blistering climax.

My entire being was so sensitized by the time he began to move back up my body, just the brush of his lips over my hipbone sent jolts of pleasure through me. I whimpered, my hands sliding limply from his hair to rest on his shoulders.

He settled between my thighs, weight braced on his elbows.

The solid ridge of his cock pulsed against my sensitive, wet flesh, and although he’d just slayed me with all the pleasure he’d given me, need pulsed inside me again. Man, for somebody who’d gone twenty-two years without much sexual activity, he’d gone and made me into a total junkie in a span of days—*hours*, really. It had just been two days since he’d first kissed me, and now I was ready to beg for more.

Then do it, a sly voice in my mind whispered.

He nuzzled my neck, the gesture soothing this time more than erotic. Still, he was touching me. I was so hungry for him, he could have rubbed elbows with me, and I’d probably clamor for more.

Sliding my hands down his chest, I caught his hips and arched up.

Shawn groaned. “Baby, stop...”

“No.” Turning my face into his neck, I licked him, tasting salty sweat and man.

More...

“You have to behave,” he said, gripping my hip and holding me in place. “I’m hanging onto my control by a thread. I don’t really want to come in my shorts and if you keep moving like that—”

“What if I don’t want to behave? What if I don’t want *you* to behave?”

Shawn went still, then slowly, he lifted his head and looked down at me. “Why don’t you explain that?”

Blushing, I had to fight to hold his gaze. “Isn’t it obvious?”

He dipped his head and nipped my lower lip. “In this instance, you need to be obvious...and clear. I want to make certain we both know what you’re getting at.”

His cock pulsed against me once more, and I had to swallow a moan. His eyes were still glittering, face stark and intense as he watched me.

“I don’t want to stop,” I said, forcing the words out through a throat gone tight with lust. “At all. I don’t want *you* to stop.”

His lids drooped until all I could see was a thin sliver of that surreal blue-green, and he drew in a rough breath. “You’re certain?”

Instead of answering with words, I tugged his head down, bringing his mouth closer to mine. Then I kissed him, flicking my tongue against his lips until he opened for me, then sliding my tongue inside to rub against his.

He groaned.

After a couple of rough movements, we were sitting up. Straddling him again, I curled my arms around his neck and pressed my breasts to his chest.

Abruptly, he rose and put me down. My dress started to sag, and he caught it, guiding it back up and sliding it back up until it was in place. He didn’t button it, though. “I’m going to end up coming right here if you keep wiggling against me like that, and your first time shouldn’t start with me coming in my shorts.”

Cheeks going hot, I didn’t argue as he eased back and shoved his hands through his hair.

“You blush every time I say something even a little dirty,” he murmured, stroking my cheek. “Am I embarrassing you?”

“No,” I said after considering his question a moment. Darting him a quick look, I almost let it go at that, but decided to be honest. “It...um...it turns me on. A lot.”

His pupils spiked, flaring until only a thin rim of blue-green showed. “Does it now?”

“Yes.” Swallowing to ease the tightness in my throat, I added, “But don’t go expecting me to repay it or anything. I blush even *thinking* about saying anything remotely dirty.”

He chuckled and tugged me closer as he dipped his head. Lips to my ear, he murmured, “So you’re not going to tell me how much you liked having me lick your pussy?”

“Ah...I did like it,” I said, voice shaky.

“Good. Because I fucking loved eating you up. I plan on doing it again, and sometime soon.”

He tugged me closer, his big body warm against mine.

“You certain about this?” he asked again.

“Yes.” Taking a deep breath, I said, “But from here on out, things are kind of in your control, Shawn. Because I have no idea what to do, and if I think about it too much, I’m going to get panicky.”

He cupped my cheek and eased my face up so he could look at me.

The tenderness in his gaze melted me.

Then a wicked grin lit his eyes.

“Geez, Tally.” His hands slipped inside my dress, cupping my waist inside the material. “Are you telling me that you’re putting me in control of everything?”

We hadn’t known each other long, but I’d already figured out he had a wicked sense of humor. “Isn’t that what I just told you?”

“I just want to make sure I understand.” He pulled his hands free of my dress and cupped my butt in his hands. “I’m in charge...of this perfect butt, then. If I want to go to my knees and kiss it, bite it, I can do that, right? Since I’m in charge.”

My breath hitched. “Yes. I guess you can.”

He nudged his cock against my belly. “And if I want to boost you up onto the big table over there and look at your pretty pussy before I taste you again, I can do that?”

“Um...considering how you made me moaning and begging a few minutes ago, do you really think I’d argue? But yes...you’re in control.”

“It’s good of you to put yourself out there like this for me.” Eyes gleaming, he let me go and backed up a few steps. “Since you’re being so accommodating, Tally...take your dress off. I want you naked.”

Since he’d already seen me with just the dress around my waist, I only hesitated a moment before complying, stripping the poppy red garment away and letting it fall to the floor.

The urge to cover myself was strong...right up until I saw the hot, avid gleam in his eyes.

“Fuck, you’re gorgeous,” he whispered before swinging me up into his arms. “Where’s your bedroom?”

“Down there.” I made a vague gesture, pointing to the hall. “You’re really determined to make my head spin, aren’t you?”

“No. I’m really determined to have you naked and open under me. Making your head spin is just a bonus.” He found the bedroom and put me on the bed, but instead of joining me, he straightened and shoved his hands into his pockets. “We haven’t talked about protection. I’ve got condoms in my wallet. Hope springs eternal and all that.”

Protection. Oh. Yes. That would be important, wouldn’t it? “Um, yes. I never even thought about it. Thank you.”

“So polite.” A faint smile tugged at his lips as he pulled his wallet out and withdrew something.

Condoms, I realized. More than one.

“Can I say, I’m glad hope springs eternal. I don’t have anything here. I’d be awfully disappointed if we had to stop.”

“Trust me, if I hadn’t had them, I’d get some damn quick.” He winked at me as he braced one knee on the bed next to me.

Eyes roaming over me, he stayed like that for several seconds, not moving. Nerves gathered in me. “You’re staring.”

“I can’t help it.” He shifted his gaze upward, meeting mine. “You’re so damn pretty. And...hell, this sounds corny, but I’ve got this weird desire in my head to capture this entire night in my mind so I never forget a second of it. It’s...”

He stopped and shook his head, bending low to kiss me. One hand braced on the bed next to me, he rubbed his lips over mine.

“It’s what?”

“I just want to remember every last detail.”

“Okay.” Catching my fingers in his shirt, I tugged. “Well, maybe you can do me a favor and take this off so I can get a few more details to capture too.”

Mouth curving against mine, he kissed me once more, hard and fast, then straightened up and peeled his shirt off.

As he tossed it on the foot of the bed, I curled my fingers into the bedclothes under me. My mouth was dry. Just looking at him, at that broad chest as it tapered down to a narrow waist, at the muscled arms and sculpted shoulders, it made my mouth go dry.

“Somebody else is doing some staring now,” Shawn murmured as he came down on the bed next to me.

“I can’t help it.” Stroking a hand down his shoulder, I scanned each inch of his face. “You’re so damn beautiful.”

Dull color suffused his cheeks for a moment before it faded. “Hush.”

“You do all that dirty talking, knowing it makes me blush, but I can’t tell you you’re beautiful?” Laughing softly at his discomfort, I continued my path down his shoulder to his arm. His bicep was rock hard, bunching under my touch when I squeezed him. “That’s hardly fair.”

“If you want to talk dirty to me, I won’t argue.” A wolfish glint appeared in his eyes. “Matter of fact, I’ll love it. Tell me you want to suck my cock again. Or that you can’t wait to feel my cock stretching you as I fuck you.”

My core clenched. Deep inside, everything went tight and hot and liquid at his words.

“Shawn...” The word came out a whimper.

“Is that a yes? You want both of those things?” he whispered against my ear.

I nodded.

“Then tell me.” He slid his hand down my belly, fingers circling my navel.

Squirming self-consciously, even as lust ripped at me, I squeezed my eyes closed. He moved lower, fingers brushing the curls between my thighs.

“Tell me, Tally,” he urged. He dipped lower, one calloused fingertip brushing my clit. With a moan, I arched up. He threw his thigh over mine, pinning me in place. “Say it.”

I caved. “I want to suck your cock again, Shawn. But not right now.”

He laughed softly, circling my clit with firmer strokes now that he’d gotten what he wanted. “Why not? Is it because you want my cock here?”

He pushed one thick, long finger inside, and I moaned.

“Was that a yes...or a no?” He withdrew, hovering so close, I felt him when I managed to inch my hips up just a fraction before his thigh stopped my movement.

“It’s a yes. Please...Shawn, please. I want your cock in me.” I was so ready for him, I would have begged if he asked me.

A pained laugh escaped him. “Good girl...”

He added a second finger, pushing both of them inside me.

Pleasure twisted through my entire core, but it wasn’t enough. Tugging at his arm, I demanded, “Shawn!”

“Greedy, aren’t you?”

“Yes!”

He rolled on top of me and kissed me, deep and wet, not stopping until I was gasping for air. By that time, I’d wrapped my legs around his hips and

was working myself against his cock, desperate for the satisfaction still lurking outside my reach.

He unhooked my legs and pushed up onto his elbows, eyes burning with intensity as he looked at me. “You’re sure about this?”

“Shawn!” I glared, so hungry and ready, I thought I’d self-combust. “Do I look unsure?”

He shuddered, a hard breath escaping him. Shoving up onto his knees, he climbed from the bed and stripped out of his shorts. Eyes never leaving my face as he discarded the rest of his clothes, he grabbed the rubber.

As the foil tore, my gaze dropped.

Face hot and mouth dry, I stared at the thick, heavy length of his penis as he unrolled the condom down over his length.

“Fuck, Tally. You keep looking at me like that, and I’m going to lose it.”

His penis jerked. *Cock*, I thought, disconcerted by how very much I wanted to keep on looking at him. He didn’t use such banal words as *penis*. He used *cock* or *dick*, and that seemed a lot more fitting.

“Should I stop looking?” I managed to ask, the question coming out in a husky murmur. I was surprised I even managed to get it out. Oxygen, rational thought, anything that didn’t include looking at him, touching him, him touching me, *all* of that seemed to have gone by the wayside.

A strained smile curved his mouth as he came down to kneel on the bed next to me.

“Seeing as how I’m doing my fill of looking at you, I guess it’s not fair to ask you to stop.” He stretched out over me, and I groaned at the feel of his weight on top of me. “Tell me if I hurt you.”

I twined my arms around his neck. “I don’t care if it hurts.”

“I do.” His gaze locked on mine as he settled closer.

I gasped at the first real contact, his cock brushing against my swollen, wet folds where I ached so badly for him. My clit pulsed, and the emptiness inside me grew until it *hurt*.

“Shawn, *please...*”

He swore under his breath, and a shudder broke out over his frame.

We both groaned as he pushed inside. But it wasn’t enough. He gave me perhaps an inch.

The friction was delicious, and I whimpered. “More...Shawn, please.”

“Baby...don’t tempt me. I don’t want to hurt you.” He nuzzled my neck as he started to withdraw.

Instinctively, I lifted up to follow, but the hand on my hip pinned me in place. And then it didn't matter because he was sinking back into me again, deeper this time, but not *enough*—

“Shawn!” I clutched at his shoulders, my nails biting in his flesh so hard it had to hurt.

He made a pained, strangled sound that could have been a laugh, a curse, a groan...all three.

“You're impatient...greedy...” He kissed me then, hard and fast, catching my lower lip in his teeth to bite gently before thrusting his tongue into my mouth.

His kisses were drugging, so I gave myself up to that as he continued the slow, teasing penetration. By the fourth stroke, he was moving deeper...and it was starting to hurt.

I tried to hide it, but with the lights on, his body pressed to mine, and the way he keyed into my every breath, every move, it was impossible.

He retreated immediately.

I reacted without thoughts and wrapped my legs around his. “Don't you dare stop.”

“This building would have to be burning down around us for that to happen,” he murmured against my mouth. Shifting his position, he reached down between us and stroked me, fingers circling my pulsating clit. Then he moved again, sinking inside me, and although I felt that flare of pain, the pleasure from what else he was doing was so consuming...well, even if the building *was* on fire, I wasn't sure I would have noticed.

“That's it,” he muttered against my mouth, his body taut against mine. “Open for me...relax...fuck, you feel like heaven...give it to me, angel.”

Give him what...? I had no idea.

I thought to ask, but then he started to withdraw, and I could only think about how I didn't want that. Moaning in protest, I gripped his arms and squeezed. “Don't stop.”

“Shhhh...I'm not...take more of me, baby...aw, hell.” He took my mouth again, nipping my lower lip, then dipping his tongue inside. At the same time, the hand gripping my hip shifted, tilting me upward. With that subtle shift, he sank more fully inside me.

There was a deeper, sharper sense of pain, but also a pleasure so blinding I thought I'd lose my mind.

“Aw, fuck...Tally, you're like a fucking fist. That's...” He stopped,

hovering above me as his entire body shuddered.

“Shawn...” I arched upward, trying to draw him back to me.

“Tally. Just...wait a second,” he said, voice strained.

“No! I need you.” It came out broken and ragged, more than a little desperate.

And that was exactly how I felt. Following those instincts that had been driving me for the past several moments, I twisted my hips and lifted up, pushing myself onto his erection. A cry that was both pained and satisfied escaped me.

In response, Shawn let out a sound that was almost animalistic, it was so primal.

His hips spasmed, then jerked forward, sinking forward in a thrust so deep, his pelvis met mine.

When I cried out again, he froze. “Tally...?”

“Don’t stop!”

The bed shuddered as he slammed a hand onto the headboard before thrusting with deep, hard, slow strokes that filled me all the way up. The sharp, burning bite of pain was there, but over it, under it, laced through it, was pleasure.

Shawn rolled abruptly, pulling me on top of him, his hands going to my hips to guide me. It didn’t take long to figure it out, and then he let my hips go and lifted his hands to my breasts.

Every tug on my nipples arrowed straight down to my core and made me clench tighter around him, which had the effect of making his penis jerk and pulse inside me, another caress, another sensation in a sea of them.

Before I even knew it was happening, I was coming.

The orgasm struck me so hard and fast, I was left breathless by the time it ended and only barely had the presence of mind to notice when Shawn moved us so I lay on my side, his bigger form curved around mine.

He tangled his hand in my hair and brushed his lips over my brow.

That was the last thing I remembered before drifting off.

FOURTEEN

SHAWN

Sometimes, my job was a bitch. After so many years of getting up before the sun to hit this job site or that, my body was all but programmed to wake early, even if I'd been up late the night before.

And I'd been up pretty damn late.

Granted, Talia and I had fallen asleep, crashing for maybe an hour before she woke up. I woke up at the presence of somebody else in the bed with me, even as I realized I wasn't in *my* bed, but Talia's. I rarely fell asleep in a lover's bed. It was easier to just leave after enough time had passed that it wouldn't be awkward or insulting to the woman I'd just fucked.

I wasn't opposed to the *c* word that so many guys hated—*cuddling*—but I didn't want anybody getting the wrong impression, and I'd learned from experience that cuddling sometimes led to a woman thinking things might go beyond a night or two. Not always, but it was easier to just avoid all the mess.

Talia, though...with her, I *wanted* more than a night or two. A lot more.

It had been damn hard to get out of bed and come home, but I hadn't wanted to rush things.

After a few minutes of reliving the past night and smiling like an idiot, I dragged my tired ass out of bed. A look at the clock showed it to be barely eight. I hadn't gotten in until after midnight, and it taken a while to shut my brain down. It almost always did, and last night had been twice as bad as normal, thanks to how pumped I'd been over how things were going with Talia.

Although caffeine didn't have much of a wake-up effect on me, thanks to my ADHD-addled brain, I started the coffeepot and wondered when it would be safe to call Talia. I wanted to hear her voice, but there was a good chance

she'd still be sleeping. Not everybody woke up early on the weekends, whether they had to or not.

I'd give it another couple of hours, I told myself.

Okay, maybe one.

I could wait that long to talk to her.

Catching sight of my face in the reflective surface of the microwave, I paused. "Shit, son," I muttered. "You've got it bad all ready."

It was a good thing I hadn't given my brothers grief when they'd gone and fallen hard, since it looked like I was doing the same damn thing.

My phone sounded, and I grabbed it. Maybe Talia *wasn't* big on sleeping in—

Jamie's picture flashed across the screen.

Sighing, I answered. I had no real desire to talk to anybody but Talia right now, even the one brother I was closer to than the rest, but Jamie wouldn't be calling this early unless there was something going on.

Unlike me, Keith and Jamie *did* sleep in—a lot. Whenever possible, in fact. Matt never did, but Matt was so straight-laced and stiff, I wouldn't be surprised to hear he had surgically implanted a steel rod where his spine should be.

"Hey, Jamie."

"You sound delighted to talk to me," he said, amusement threading through his voice.

"Late night." I left it at that.

"Trouble sleeping again?" he asked.

"Same old, same old," I said in lieu of a real response. My sleep issues went back to childhood, something the pediatrician who'd informed my parents of my ADHD said was related to the diagnosis. I didn't need the medical lingo to understand how they were linked—my brain just didn't want to stop running. Ever. But even if it wasn't for the ADHD, I probably wouldn't have slept easily after getting home last night, not with the taste of Talia haunting me, and the scent of her still lingering on my skin. "What's up?"

"You got anything going on this morning? I need to talk to all of you. Matt and Keith will be here at ten. I'm making breakfast."

On cue, my stomach rumbled.

Jamie could cook. And I do mean *cook*. When he was in the mood.

"When you say breakfast, do you mean the whole spread? Or are we

talking biscuits and jam?”

“There will be biscuits. And gravy. Sausage. Eggs. Just get your ass here.”

“What if I’ve got something going on?”

Jamie snorted. “If you did, you wouldn’t be asking about breakfast. You would have told me you’re busy.”

I RAN LATE.

When it came to work, I was punctual.

With just about everything else, I had a hard time getting my shit together. It was a trait that drove my brothers, particularly Matt, crazy.

But I was only twenty minutes late this time, and when Matt gave me a look, I pointed a finger at him. “Don’t start. I’m tired and didn’t sleep worth shit, so you’re walking on thin ice.”

He held up his hands. “I won’t say a word.”

After giving him a suspicious look, I edged around him and headed into the kitchen where Jamie and Keith were arguing about baseball.

Jamie saw me first and jerked his head at the fridge. “Timed it just about perfectly. Grab the orange juice, will you?”

Without speaking, I did as asked and put it on the table before going to wash my hands.

“Only twenty minutes late this time, kid,” Keith said good-naturedly. “I’m impressed.”

Flipping him off, I went to the table and sat, putting my phone down next to me. I hadn’t given into the urge to call Talia yet, mainly because if I did, I’d get distracted and forget about my brothers—on purpose.

“So, what’s this about, Jamie?” Matt asked after helping carry the dishes to the table.

“Gimme a minute,” Jamie said, frowning. “Everybody dig in.”

Recognizing the look on his face, I picked up the platter full of biscuits and took a few before passing it on to Keith.

Next to me, Matt, the oldest of us, eyed Jamie with a scowl. His irritation was both amusing and an irritant in its own right. If he couldn’t read Jamie better than this by now, he probably wouldn’t ever do any better. But then

again, none of them could really read me, either.

Jamie had his *I'm getting my thoughts in order* look on his face, something I understood all too well. He wouldn't say a damn thing about why he wanted to talk to us until he was ready.

Keith sensed the same thing and said, "Matt, heads up."

Matt glanced toward Keith just in time to catch the biscuit thrown his way. "Aren't you a little old to be trying to start food fights?"

"Nah. Besides, if I was going to start a food fight, I wouldn't bother lobbing biscuits at you. You're too stuffy to enjoy the fun. I'd throw the biscuits at Shawn or Jamie."

Matt's eyes narrowed slightly.

Then, to my surprise—and Keith's—he fired the biscuit across the table.

At me.

With a startled laugh, I grabbed it out of the air, then tore it into chunks. "If you all want a food fight, you do it yourselves. I'm too hungry."

"If you all get into a food fight in my house, I'm beating your asses," Jamie said, grabbing the biscuit platter and removing several of the missiles. As he added them to his plate, he glanced at Matt with a thoughtful look on his face. "I'm starting to wonder if Gabrielle is a witch or something. You don't even act like yourself half the time."

"Nah, he does," Keith said. "He just acts like himself before he went and shoved a stick up his ass. That happened sometime during the first or second year of high school, if I recall correctly. So, you ready to talk yet, Jamie?"

Matt's mouth twisted in a scowl at Keith's offhand comment, but he said nothing, shifting his attention to Jamie instead.

"Yeah. Well, no, not really. But I won't ever be ready, so I might as well get it over with," he muttered under his breath.

It wasn't just the grimness of his words, but the rigid set to his shoulders that had me bracing.

Slowly, Matt put his fork down while Keith lowered his cup of coffee.

"What's going on?" Matt asked, his soft voice somehow still too loud for how quiet the room had gone.

Instead of saying anything right away, he got up and went over to the kitchen island, where he opened a drawer and pulled out a file. When he came back, he sat down. "Remember how I told you guys that I was sending in one of those DNA kits advertised on TV?"

Matt frowned, shaking his head while Keith shrugged.

“I do. The weekend we had dinner with Gabrielle, I think.” Canting my head to the side, I narrowed my eyes and pulled up a few more details. “You were telling us about your new book idea...I think Keith mentioned you’d recently switched to a new editor because Webster had retired.”

Jamie crooked a grin at me. “Yeah, that sounds about right. You met her, by the way. It’s Olivia.”

We all gaped at him.

He hitched a shoulder in a shrug. “We can talk about that later. This...this takes precedent.”

He put the file folder down after taking out several sheets of paper and passing them around.

“I got the results in the weekend Gran had her stroke, but I didn’t even look at them until a few days ago. It’s...” He blew out a breath and lapsed into silence. With a wave of his hand, he gestured for us to read what he’d given us.

I’d already done so, and now, mind racing, I tried to put the pieces together in a manner that fit. It wasn’t working too well, mostly because I kept looking at the puzzle that was already formed, so to speak.

But if I was putting together a new one...

“We’re only related on one side of the family,” I said softly.

Matt scoffed. “That’s how the maternal and paternal thing works.”

Rolling my eyes, I said, “That’s not how I mean.” Checking my pockets, because I almost always carried a pen and notepad on me as a matter of habit thanks to my job, I flipped the little spiral notebook open and sketched out a rough bracket which I then used to make a family tree.

Adding in a few names, I pointed out, “This would be Mom’s side. The maternal line. We don’t need that. Here is the paternal side.”

As I spoke, I glanced at the report, skimmed it, processed, then added a few more brackets. “This is us, Dad, Gran, and Grandpa...”

Several seconds passed in silence as I filled in more detail, but I knew when they all saw it. Of course, Jamie had already put this together.

“Shit,” Keith muttered, his voice dazed. “It looks like there was another kid in the mix.”

“Any chance this could be an error?”

Jamie grimaced at Matt’s methodical question. “Not much of one. I did some digging around that too, then called the customer service to ask a few questions.”

All of us looked back at the reports he'd passed out. There were identical. He'd made copies so we'd all have one.

"You going to call her?" The *her* referred to a mysterious cousin we were connected to. Her name was Joelle Wielter. There were other relations listed, distant cousins that we had a vague knowledge of, but the connection to them went back generations.

According to the report, Joelle was a cousin on our father's side. But Dad didn't have siblings.

Neither had my paternal grandparents, at least none we'd been made aware of.

"You should contact her," I said softly, still studying the report.

"What about Gran and Grandpa?" Jamie asked quietly after Matt and Keith echoed their agreements.

"Don't say anything right now." With a shrug, I glanced up at him. "There's really no point, anyway."

.

"WHEN ARE you heading back to the ranch?" Jamie asked a little while later as he walked us to the door. He'd unceremoniously told us he was kicking us out after we helped clean up. He had a book to write, he'd informed us with a faint smile.

"In a few days."

He grimaced, and there was a look in his eyes that told me he'd rather be on the next plane out. "I've got a meeting I'm handling on Tuesday. Dad had planned to handle it, but with everything going on with Gran, I'd told him I'd step in. It's with Willard Marlowe's daughter."

"I didn't know he had a daughter," Keith said, pausing on the steps to look at us.

Willard Marlowe was an old friend of my parents. I thought back to the last time I'd seen him. The company picnic last year. He'd been laughing with my parents and had asked me if I still enjoyed renovating old buildings.

Matt shrugged. "Well, he does. I'm supposed to talk to her about some of the philanthropy causes here in Boston and the general New England area."

Willard won't be so hands-on with things in the future. I guess she's taking over for him."

"Has his disease gotten worse?"

"I don't know." Matt glanced at me as he answered. "But it's not going to get any better, so he probably figures the sooner he has things in capable hands, the better."

My phone buzzed, indicating an incoming text. I looked at it as Matt and the others continued to talk.

Seeing Talia's name had me smiling.

All right. The day was finally looking up.

FIFTEEN

TALIA

I had to be the world's biggest sap, I decided, sitting there waiting in the posh sitting area of the Hartwell Foundation while waiting for my father's friend... and I was staring at the text Shawn had sent me last night before I went to bed.

I've got to head to bed. Haven't slept all that great the past few nights because I've been awake thinking of you. Love the thoughts, but I'm hoping maybe I can sleep and dream about you.

Not poetry or anything, but I loved knowing he was thinking about me... and maybe it was terrible, but I hadn't slept all that great either the past couple nights, and that was largely due to him, so I was glad I wasn't the only one suffering from insomnia.

"Ms. Nicholson?"

The sound of the receptionist's voice had me looking up from my phone. I managed to smooth away the goofy grin on my face—barely. "Yes?"

"I just wanted to let you know that Mr. Hartwell is running a few minutes late, but he should be here within the next ten minutes."

"That's fine." I gave her a reassuring smile. I'd arrived early, my nerves jumping around so much I hadn't been able to linger around the house any longer. I'd already been here close to twenty minutes, but I didn't mind waiting.

"Could I get you some coffee? Perhaps a bagel from the lounge?"

"No, thank you." If I drank any more coffee, I'd end up having to excuse myself about five times once Mr. Hartwell showed up, and my bladder decided to translate my nerves into *must pee now*. Actually, now that I thought of it... "Would you mind pointing me to the restroom?"

“Of course.”

She gestured for me to follow her out into the hall, then, instead of *pointing* the way, she led me to the restroom.

Ducking inside, I leaned against the door and took a deep breath. As if on cue, my bladder panged. Well, I’d expected to get nervous.

By the time I emerged and returned to the office, I almost had myself convinced there was nothing to be worried about. Dad and I had spent several days going over the charities he was currently involved in. All of them were ones I could get behind personally, and I’d done a little research on the Hartwell Foundation once he’d told me more about it.

I knew of the Hartwells, of course. Pretty much anybody who paid attention to the news in the region had at least *heard* of the Hartwell name. But I’d never paid too much attention to what they were involved in. We lived in very different worlds. Or rather, we *had*. It was bizarre to think I now belonged to the same world as the Hartwells, one of Boston’s founding families.

Or, well, I *could*. I’d be about as comfortable as a square peg in a round hole.

“Ms. Marlowe?”

I managed not to grimace at the name. Dad’s administrative assistant had set the meeting up, and the receptionist had gotten my name right, but apparently, Dad had also made a call or two himself, because there was no doubt they knew who I was.

Rising, I met the blue eyes of the tall man striding toward me. “It’s Nicholson...I have my mother’s last name.” I gave him a polite smile that hopefully sent the message that I wouldn’t say anything more on the subject.

“I apologize.” He glanced past me, and I glimpsed the receptionist approaching from the corner of my eye. “Mica, good morning.”

She gave him a polite nod. “Sir. Would you like coffee?”

He gave me a questioning look, and I shook my head.

“No, thanks, Mica. I’ve already had so much, I’ll be awake clear into next week.” With that, he gestured for me to walk with him, and he led me to the office just beyond the reception area.

I eyed him curiously as he went to take a seat behind the table. He was a lot younger than I’d anticipated. “You’re friends with my father?”

“We’re acquaintances.” He grimaced as he leaned back in his chair. “My father is actually rather close friends with Willard, but he’s not spending

much time at the foundation lately, and hardly at all currently. My grandmother, his mother, recently had a stroke, and he's spending a great deal of time with her and his father at the hospital."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said softly, thinking about Shawn and the grief I'd seen in his eyes as he talked about his grandmother. "I hope she's recovering."

"She's doing remarkably well, thank you." He flashed me a smile that softened his stern features. There was something rather familiar about that smile, although I couldn't place where I might have seen it before.

"How is your father doing? Dad tells me he's holding his own against the diagnosis he was given. Multiple sclerosis, right?"

"Yes." I gave a faint smile. "He calls his therapist a drill sergeant or a specialist in torture, depending on the day. But he wouldn't think of asking her to ease up on him. He wants to stay as strong as he can for as long as he can."

"That sounds like your father." There was a curiosity in his gaze as he studied me, and I suspected he was wondering about me, perhaps even wondering why we hadn't met before as it was becoming obvious my father had a close relationship with the Hartwells. However, it was clear he wasn't going to ask, and I wasn't about to discuss it.

As if he'd read my thoughts, a faint smile came and went on his face. "So what can I do for you, Ms. Nicholson?" he asked.

"You know about my father's disease," I started. I'd walked myself through my explanation about a thousand times, until I had memorized what I wanted to say, but now, all of it sort of fell apart, and I hesitated a moment before continuing.

Okay, so I wasn't going to go into detail about how my parents had just had the one night together, and Dad hadn't even realized he was a father until recently, but maybe it would be easier if Matt Hartwell knew *some* of my background.

"Yes." He inclined his head.

"He wants me to take over handling the day to day affairs of his...I mean, the family's, charitable interests." Managing a wry smile, I said, "And I'll be blunt, Mr. Hartwell. Short of the crash course I've gotten over the past few days, I'm going to be operating in the dark. I could use some guidance."

He nodded. "Certainly."

I gave myself a moment to order my thoughts before continuing. "I

mentioned that I use my mother's last name and...well, without going into any detail, my father and I only recently found out about each other."

His blue eyes widened a fraction before that faint sign of surprise disappeared.

"Six months ago, I was swimming in debt from college loans and working for my mom in her cleaning business in Salem, and now..." I huffed out a breath and looked around the elegant office. "Now, I'm sitting in a room with somebody who is from a family that's been in Boston since the Stone Age because my dad thinks you—or rather, your father—could get me started in the right direction as I start taking on this...responsibility. I'm hoping you can help me get my bearings because I'm lost."

Lapsing into silence, I waited for a response.

Matt studied me for a moment before offering one. "First, you should probably call me Matt. The Marlowes might not have been around Boston since the Stone Age, but I'm pretty sure they showed up around the Bronze Age and have been friendly with my family since that time, so no reason for calling me *Mr. Hartwell*."

He gave another faint smile, and again, a feeling of familiarity struck me, but for the life of me, I couldn't figure out why.

"Second..." He tapped a pen on his desk as he gave me another thorough study. "Considering you've gone from college debt to heiress of billions in the span of a few months, while you may feel lost now, I doubt that will last. You strike me as a little too down-to-earth for it."

With a weak laugh, I said, "A few months ago? I would have agreed with you about me being down to earth. Now, I'm still trying to get a grip on this new direction my life has taken."

"You'll get there." He pushed back from his desk. "Come on. I want to show you around. And I'll be upfront. If you're looking for a place to start investing your family's money, I'll point out now that the Hartwell Foundation is looking for investors to help it keep growing."

As I rose, I arched a brow. "Really."

"Yes." He held my gaze levelly. "I can provide all the information needed. I assume your father has a team on standby to look everything over."

"Yes." I thought of the hours I'd spent talking with my father and Taylor since last week. "Taylor Bernstein has been giving me my crash courses."

Matt smiled. "Then you'll probably be more informed than I am the next time we talk. I know Taylor. He's brilliant."

Following him out into the hall, I fell into step next to him.

He started into a brief history of how the foundation got started and some of the ways they gave back to the community, and he was upfront about the fact that the foundation might have to cut back on its philanthropy and outreach without investors. I appreciated the honesty and asked more about the various groups he'd mentioned they were involved with, and what it took to get their interest.

"We focus on local and regional needs mainly, although we are always willing to step up and make donations where there are large-scale natural disasters," he said, leading me into a room that was set up like an exhibit hall.

We stopped in front of a case that displayed antiques. A naval sword and Flintlock pistol took up much of one shelf in the case in front of us. Above it, on another shelf, held various knives, including one that was almost modern-looking in design, although the age of it was clear.

I was listening to Matt, but the knife captured my interest, so when he paused, I took advantage and pointed to the item. "I'm listening, I promise, but I have to ask...is that a *folding* knife?"

"It is." Matt flashed a smile at me. "A lot of these items have been passed down through the family, but my mother saw that on auction years ago and bought it for my father."

"That's amazing. The design looks so...modern."

"I guess if a design works..." He let the sentence trail off, then, to my surprise, he moved to the side of the case and did something that made a click. He opened the case and reached in, pulling the knife out. "Just don't try to close it. And I wouldn't recommend touching the blade. It's not particularly sharp, but let's be safe rather than sorry."

Hesitantly, I accepted the knife and marveled at the intricate work of the piece. "These almost look like legs."

"They are." Grooves appeared in Matt's cheeks as he flashed a smile at me, moving closer to brush his finger along the knife's hilt. "It's a Hessian soldier. Look."

Amazed, I watched as he pointed out what I'd missed. Those *legs* were indeed legs, while the majority of the hilt was carved to resemble a Hessian soldier's body, and the top, where the blade came out of the knife's body, was the infamous headwear worn by the Hessians.

"Wow. This is...wonderful." Laughing, I turned the knife back over. "It's a good thing I've never had the urge to go and play cat thief because this

would tempt me.”

He laughed. “You’ve got an open invite to come and see it whenever you want. I’ve seen similar pieces over the years. Never exactly like it, but if I ever see another, maybe I’ll pick it up for you.”

“Um, thank you,” I said, uncertain how to take the offer for what had to be very expensive.

But then I remembered who I was talking to—a *Hartwell*.

If he noticed my momentary discomfort, he didn’t show it. After the blade was stowed, we moved to another case while he went back to discussing the foundation.

We made a circuit of the room, each case displaying antiques, and eventually photographs from various generations of the Hartwell family.

“The foundation, like a lot of places, lost money during the recession we went through a while back. We’re streamlining and looking for ways to address the money problem, but frankly, without investors, I’m not sure how we’ll be able to move forward.”

He stopped in front of the final case and met my eyes. He didn’t ask, but I knew the question was there, nonetheless. I thought of everything my father had told me about the Hartwell Foundation, and of all the things I’d learned on my own. I was just about to tell him my decision when a picture from the final display caught my eye.

It was four men, all of them clearly related—likely brothers—stood with their arms thrown around each other. One of them was Matt, although he’d definitely been younger when the image had been taken.

But he wasn’t the one who’d caught my eye.

Mouth dry, I gestured to the picture, and in a voice that sounded stunningly normal considering how *not* normal I felt, I asked, “Family, I assume?”

“Yes,” Matt said. “My brothers. That’s Keith, Jamie, and Shawn.”

Shawn.

No wonder Matt’s smile seemed so damned familiar.

SIXTEEN

SHAWN

The new job was going to be a bitch, and that wasn't just because the woman who'd hired us kept flirting with me. Renovating the old house in Plymouth so it could be turned into a hotel was exactly the kind of work Conall and I enjoyed, as long as we could keep the home's historical significance, feel, and value in place.

Fortunately, the flirtatious *Ms. Beverly Hale* wanted to do just that.

But the house she'd won in a divorce settlement had already been the scene of three loud arguments between her and her ex. Conall, the staff, and I were already placing bets on how many times we'd receive temporary injunctions to stop working, how long they'd last, whether or not we'd actually be able to *finish* the job, and basically anything else that could be wagered on.

It was also hotter than Hades—again.

Those facts, coupled with the text I'd just received from Conall that *Ms. Hale*—"not Mrs., I'm divorced" as she'd told me several times—was on her way to see me should have had me in a bitch of a mood.

But I wasn't.

The text I'd sent Talia last night and her response had left me so primed and ready, I'd ended up having the kind of wet dreams I hadn't had since I was a teenager.

I'd texted her earlier, but she'd told me she had an appointment and probably wouldn't be able to talk until later.

That was fine.

I was keeping myself occupied thinking about the way she'd blush when she read what I'd sent her.

I loved that blush.

Truth be told, there wasn't much about Talia that didn't appeal to me.

The physical attraction was great, but that was just the beginning. I didn't feel...out of place with her, like I did with almost everybody and everything else in my life.

Almost from the first, I'd felt comfortable with her, but I hadn't let myself wonder about it. Now, though, it was getting harder *not* to.

I wanted to know how she felt, but it was too soon for that.

We had time, though. I could tell she felt something. Patience wasn't one of my virtues, but when it counted, I could wait.

This counted, maybe more than anything else ever had.

Whistling to myself, I went over the plans and checked the dates and times for the various work that had to be contracted out. We still needed to hammer out some details, but that was up Conall's alley, for now.

Speaking of which, I sent myself an email—*remember to talk to Conall about hiring an assistant.*

He was making more noise about retiring, and once he did that, I'd need the help.

He had that organization and paperwork aspects of this business down to a fine art, but that was one area where I'd never be able to match him. I could handle paperwork when forced, but organization was a skill I lacked. Considering I'd tried all the tricks in the book, I figured I wouldn't be able to change that at any point soon.

I was about to put in a call to the plumbing company we worked with when I heard somebody shout, "Anybody seen the boss?"

Since Conall was no longer spending much time on-site, that meant me.

I hopped out of the trailer and looked in the direction of the voice. It was too loud in general to pinpoint at first, but then I caught sight of Ben, one of our longtime employees. He'd been around back when Conall was first showing me the ropes. I caught his eye and inclined my head.

He looked over his shoulder and spoke to somebody, then came my way. "There's a woman here who wants to speak with you."

"She's here already?" I blew out a breath, not quite ready to speak with Ms. Hale, but it didn't seem I had much choice.

He frowned at me. "Were you expecting somebody?"

"The owner."

"Hell, we gotta deal with her again?" Ben grumbled. Then he shook his

head and swiped a forearm over his sweat-dampened brow. “It’s not that Hale chick. Cute little thing with reddish brown hair. Younger than Hale. Didn’t give me her name—”

Movement over his shoulder had me glancing up, and I spotted Talia.

Pleasure splintered through me, even as a bit of frustration hit. She wasn’t wearing a hard hat. This was an active construction site, and hard hats were required.

“I’ll handle it,” I told him, cutting around him and snagging a spare hat from the table by the trailer.

Talia didn’t return my smile, watching me as I approached, although confusion flitted through her eyes as I plunked the hard hat in place. “If you’re on the worksite, you have to have one on. Otherwise, we could get in major trouble. That’s why you see all the signs.”

“Oh.” She glanced around, eyes lingering on one of the many safety signs. “I’m sorry. I...we need to talk. Is there someplace private?”

There was an odd note in her voice that had me studying her face before I nodded. As I passed by Ben, I leaned in and told him I’d be a few minutes and to handle anything that might come up.

He scowled. “Does that include Ms. Hale?”

“If she shows up before I’m done, yes. If she causes trouble about it, ask her if she’d like to schedule an appointment.”

Grumbling about how the woman should have done that *anyway*, Ben stomped off. It wasn’t anger, though. He was a bear of a man and couldn’t move without looking like he wanted the earth to shake before him.

“I can tell you’re busy,” Talia said as I led her into the office trailer out in the back of the old home. “I’ll try not to take up much of your time.”

With a slow smile, I said, “Tally, you can take up as much time as you want. Ben can handle anything that comes up.”

She gave me a cool look before glancing out the window. Moving closer to look at the busy scene, she took the hard hat off and put it on the cluttered file cabinet. “Seems like you have responsibilities out there.”

There was an edge in her voice now, and I wondered at it.

“I do. But I’ve got a solid team working for me.” With a shrug, I moved around her and picked up my bottle of water, taking a sip before turning to meet her gaze. “If you’re in charge of a team like this and can’t trust them to handle themselves for a little bit without you, then you need a better team.”

She pursed her lips at that, started to respond, then stopped.

After a few moments of quiet, I asked, “What’s up, Tally?”

“Did you know who I was when we met?”

Confused, I lowered the bottle and capped it. I was always thirsty as hell on a job like this in the summer. The dust and heat combined to make my throat feel like it had been lined with sandpaper on the average day, and I could go through a gallon of water, easy. But now my thirst was forgotten.

“What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said,” she replied, her words icy. “*Did you know who I was?*”

“Sure, after you told me your name,” I said, irritation starting to simmer.

She was clearly upset about something, but for the life of me, I couldn’t figure out what—or what it had to do with me.

“So, it’s *pure* coincidence that one of *Boston’s most eligible but out-of-reach* bachelors ends up finding me so fucking attractive he asks me out within five minutes of meeting me?”

The quote was one that had been in a society piece done back in the spring. Conall and some of the other guys had quoted it to me until I threatened to choke them with said society article. Then they’d cut it out and hung it on the wall of the office.

I’d dumped it in the trash.

It had reappeared the next day.

The cycle kept up for a week before they got bored with it.

“If you’re unaware of the fact that you’re fucking gorgeous, Talia, then you need to look in the mirror,” I snapped, getting pissed. “And I’m still not sure what in the hell you’re getting at. You’re clearly angry, but *I don’t know why.*”

“So, you have no clue who my father is.” Her tone conveyed more than a little disbelief.

Frustrated, I pulled my hard hat off and dumped it on my desk before shoving a hand through sweat-damp hair. “No. I don’t. And what’s it got to do with anything?”

“Plenty, considering the fact that I just had a meeting with your brother at the Hartwell Foundation,” she bit off. “And he was more than *happy* to talk to Willard Marlowe’s only child, seeing as how the foundation is looking for *investors.*”

Pieces fell into place. Matt had mentioned meeting Marlowe’s daughter. A daughter none of us knew he had.

Folding my arms over my chest, I held her gaze. “I had no idea who your father was. Besides that, my brothers hardly even bother to talk to me about shit going on at the foundation. I heard Matt was meeting with Marlowe’s daughter, but only because the four of us got together at Jamie’s yesterday to talk.”

“Sure.” With a snort, she eyed the office around us before looking out the window. Shoulders tense, she said, “If I’d known you were some rich kid playing at work, I never would have gone out with you.”

Playing?

Stung pride and hurt cut into me.

“You think I spent my ass baking out in the heat during the summer, then freezing it off in the winter because I’m *playing* at work? I bust my ass off at this job, Tally.”

“It’s *Talia!*” she half-shouted.

“Fine.” Bitterness began to fill me, and I shook my head. “You’ve got no idea the kind of work I do, how hard it is, or how much pride I take in it. But then again, since you think I’m some *rich kid playing*, I guess you don’t know shit about me, do you? Of course, if your father is Willard Marlowe, then you’re richer than Croesus, so I don’t know what the fuck your problem is with me coming from money.”

“There’s a difference. I didn’t grow up with it,” she snapped.

“Oh, so because I was fortunate enough to be born into money, that makes me a leper?” Caustically, I glared at her. “What about your father? Did you read him the riot act too?”

She had no reply to that.

“What’s this really about?” I demanded roughly. “If it’s because I didn’t tell you I’m loaded, I don’t see the point. A lot of people already know when they hear the name *Hartwell*, and those who don’t...I’d just as soon they get to know *me* for *me*.”

“And I’d just as soon a guy not date me because his family’s foundation is in need of investors,” she said bitterly.

Hurt cut into me, and the urge to tell her that even if I’d known who she was, I wouldn’t have asked that of her rose to my throat, but I held it back.

I wasn’t going to fight for her to give me the benefit of the doubt. I wouldn’t have assumed the worst of her like this, and it sucked she’d done it of me.

“If you think that’s something I’d do, then I guess you haven’t really been

paying attention.”

She gave me a cold glare and turned on her heel.

When she didn't pick up the hard hat, I snapped, “Put the fucking hat on.”

With one last fulminating glare over her shoulder, she did so.

The sound of the trailer door shutting probably seemed quiet to those on the outside, compared to the din of the worksite.

But to me, it was louder than a clap of thunder.

Sagging back against the desk with my hands braced on it, I muttered, “What the hell just happened?”

SEVENTEEN

TALIA

I'd planned on going back to my dad's place after the meeting with Matt so I could give him an update, but as soon as I climbed into my car, I knew that wasn't going to happen.

Feeling like my heart was bleeding, I pulled my phone out and sent him a text.

Feel like the meeting went well, but I left a bit early. Wasn't feeling well. Will have to think about the Hartwell Foundation, if that's okay with you. I'm going back to Salem to see my mom. Haven't visited her in a few weeks and I miss her. Will talk to you soon.

I hadn't been on the road long before another text came through, probably from him since I doubted Shawn would be contacting me again—asshole—and Mom wasn't into texting much.

Tears burned my eyes, and I angrily dashed them away.

“Crying while navigating Boston traffic is a surefire way to wreck your new car,” I told myself angrily.

Shawn wasn't worth the damn tears, anyway.

But even as I told myself that, I thought about the way he'd looked at me. There had been a flash of something in his blue-green eyes. It had looked like...hurt.

“Stop,” I told myself. He'd been able to pull off acting like he had no idea who I was, so clearly, his skills in that arena were more than adequate.

How do you know he wasn't telling you the truth?

The soft inner voice whispered to me for the entire drive, almost driving me out of my mind. In the end, it forced me to change my destination. I'd planned to head straight to the house where I'd lived with my mom for the

past few years, but I knew if I was alone there, I'd end up brooding until she came home.

And I would be alone.

She'd already be working. I knew her schedule like the back of my hand after so many years of being her sole employee, so I headed to the office where I knew she'd be working, parked, and let myself in using the set of keys that had gotten buried in the bottom of my cavernous purse.

This particular office was a satellite office for a cardiology group based out of Boston, and they were only in on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, so Mom handled the cleaning every Tuesday.

Not wanting to startle her, I called out, "Mom?"

She was already peering around the corner to see who'd come in and smiled at the sight of me. A moment later, I was in her arms, fighting to hold back the tears.

I wasn't ready to talk about what happened. Not yet.

She pulled back and studied me.

But she knew me well and said nothing when I flashed her a smile. "I was in the neighborhood. Need a hand?"

HOURS LATER, we sat down to dinner.

She'd stopped by a fresh seafood market and picked up mussels, shrimp, and crab legs, one of my favorite meals that we rarely indulged in since it could be time consuming *and* messy. In the middle of a workweek, she rarely had the energy to deal with the mess or had the time, but I wasn't surprised when I saw her carrying in the bags with the familiar logo.

"Mom, you didn't have to do that."

She waved the comment off. "I haven't had a good boil in ages. Come on. Help me get everything started."

I'd gotten home before her and had already showered and changed, leaving the pretty pantsuit I'd worn to the meeting folded on my bed. I'd have to get it dry-cleaned. One thing about being able to buy all the pretty clothes I'd always admired but never had the money for? Caring for many of them was a pain in the ass.

Now, in faded old denim shorts and an even more faded tank top, I joined

her at the sink as we started preparing the food.

She stayed quiet.

Even when I started to sniffle, she asked no questions.

But I knew it was just a matter of time.

Florence Nicholson was many things, including patient.

But that patience had a limit, and she had a fierce love for me too. That was why I'd come back home, though. There were times when you needed the comfort of a familiar shoulder. If ever I needed that, it was now.

Grateful she gave me a little more breathing room, we finished preparing dinner in silence, and once it was ready, I retrieved a bottle of wine I'd picked up on my way home.

"This should go well with the boil," I said, presenting the soft white wine I knew she loved but rarely indulged in.

Her eyes widened, then a slow smile curved her lips. "I think that will go quite well, yes."

We talked about friends in town and typical gossip, catching up the way we always did when we hadn't had a chance to talk in a while.

But as the food disappeared from my plate—wow, had I been hungry—the glint in my mother's eye became more focused. Before she decided to take the bull by the horns, I looked her in the eye.

"It's about that guy I met."

Sipping her wine, she waited a moment before asking, "I'm assuming by the look on your face, things aren't going well."

"Well, they *were*," I said with a weak laugh. "Until this morning, when I found out he was using me."

"Oh, baby." She covered my hand with hers.

And the tears spilled out, along with the story.

She listened, as I knew she would, and when I finished, she scooted her chair closer to mine so she could wrap her arm around me.

"I really liked him, Mama. So much."

AN HOUR LATER, my tears dried, face washed, along with the dishes, we sat on the back porch.

We didn't have a view of the bay, but on quiet evenings, we could hear

the music of the water, smell the tang of it in the air.

I breathed in the scent, realizing how much I'd missed being here.

I said as much and saw Mom smile a little. "I'd wondered if you would," she said softly. "I was never able to give you much and now, your father—"

"Don't," I said, covering her hand with mine. "You gave me *everything* I needed. You loved me, you were there for me. You still are. Geez, where did I come when I was hurting? I came home."

She looked away but not before I caught the brightness in her eyes. She took a breath that sounded a little watery. A few moments passed before she looked back at me. "About this man...Shawn."

Even the sound of his name hurt my soul, and I looked away. "I don't want to talk about him anymore, Mom."

She tightened her fingers on mine. "I know things looked bad, baby, but you didn't even give him a chance to explain, really. At least not from what you told me. Not to mention the two of you met by sheer, random coincidence. Plus, it's not like there have been huge spreads in the local media about you and Willard. It's entirely likely he *didn't* know who you were. And his brother sounds like he was rather upfront. Maybe he really is what you'd first thought, a nice guy."

Something in her voice had me looking over, and she couldn't wipe the bitterness from her face in time.

"Mom?"

She started to shake her head, then stopped with a sigh. "I never found anyone else who made my heart flutter quite the way it did the first time I saw your father. We only had the one day together, but..."

As her words faded, she let go of my hand and rose, walking to the edge of the porch, staring out of the small but pristine backyard.

"But what?"

"I kept hoping he'd come back looking for me. I fell asleep that night thinking, *maybe he's the one*. But there isn't a *one*, not for me."

My heart felt like ashes in my chest as I thought back to what my father had told me. The need to tell her burned in my throat, but before I could even figure out the right way to start, she spoke again.

"Talia, you've never been one to give your trust easily. That's likely on me, because I became rather...jaded after what your father did. But I don't want you closing yourself off from what could be a real chance at happiness. If this Shawn *was* using you, then, by all means, don't bother with him. But if

there's a chance you were wrong..."

The questioning lilt in her voice brought back the memory of the way he'd looked at me, that hurt in his eyes.

Swallowing, I rubbed my palms down my thighs. "Maybe you're right."

"I usually am," she said. She smiled, but it wasn't the warm one I was used to.

And I knew why.

She was thinking about my dad.

"Mom...there's something you need to know about Dad...and why he left that morning, why he never came back."

She started to shake her head, but something on my face must have clued her in. She passed a hand over her hair and took a deep breath.

"I...this is going to be bad, isn't it?"

"Yes." Hesitating only a moment, I held out a hand. "Come sit with me."

EIGHTEEN

SHAWN

Somehow, I got through the meeting with Beverly Hale without snapping her head off. I managed to insult her, though, and I couldn't even be sorry about it.

After she shoved her tits against my arm for the fifth time, also giving me a clear view down the front of her silk camisole-styled top, I stepped back—again—to put some distance between us.

Then, since it hadn't done the trick last time, I stepped around to the other side of the worktable where the mock-ups for the full renovation were spread out.

“Ms. Hale, I'd like to say I'm flattered,” I lied, and I knew it was obvious. “But I'm not interested.”

She blinked, her lashes so lusciously long and thick, I wouldn't be surprised if they were fake. I *was* surprised she was able to keep her eyes open, considering just *how* long and thick they were, though, and it took all my self-control not to point that out too.

“I'm sorry?” she said, her throaty voice deepening even more.

Shit, she was going to pull the *I don't know what you mean* act.

Fine.

“If you could respect my personal space, I'd appreciate it,” I said, baring my teeth in a shark's smile.

Her face flushed as she jerked her gaze away. “I'm simply trying to get a better look at the plans.”

“There they are,” I said, spreading my hands wide to indicate the plans. “Look your fill.”

She did—for all of five seconds.

Then, with a flick of her fingers, tipped with nails the color of rubies, she said, “Make sure your team sticks to the timetable. I don’t tolerate delays.”

“Understood. Of course, I’m part of the team, and it’s easier to stick to the timetable when there aren’t unexpected interruptions. Appointments are easier to work around. Or email.”

She gave me a hard look before stalking out of the trailer.

“Don’t forget to wear—”

The door slammed shut, the hard hat left behind on the table.

“Fuck it,” I muttered, stowing the mock-ups and checking the time. It wasn’t quite lunchtime, but I wasn’t waiting any longer.

After checking with Ben to make sure he could handle things for a while, I called Conall and told him I was heading out. I’d sent him a message earlier to let him know I’d be leaving, telling him that I had a personal matter I needed to take care of.

My friend said he’d head out to the site in my stead. One of us was almost always on hand during the early stages of a job, and lately, that one was me, but I had to talk to somebody.

The traffic wasn’t as bad as it could have been, considering it was midday during the tourist season in New England, but it still took a hellishly long time to get from Plymouth to Boston.

I’d texted earlier to make sure my brother would be in the office for a while, and after receiving confirmation, I’d sent back one more, with a request that he let me know if he had to leave before I got there.

I was getting some fucking answers, even if I had to wrestle Matt to the ground and beat them out of him.

His car was still in its reserved spot behind the building, and I parked next to him, my work truck looking about as out of place here as I always felt, but I didn’t give a damn. Several of the employees greeted me, and I managed polite nods as I made my way up to the top floor, knowing Matt wasn’t likely to be anywhere else.

Mica saw me and smiled. “Well, hello, Shawn. I haven’t seen you in a while. How are you?”

“Fantastic,” I said sourly.

Her smile faded. “I see. I take it you need to see your brother. I’ll make sure you two aren’t disturbed.”

With a nod of thanks, I shoved my way into the pristine office where Matt stood talking on the phone with his back to me.

At the sound of the door slamming, he turned, a look of surprise flitting over his face.

“Tommy, I’ll call you back, okay? Yes...yes...in a few weeks, maybe next month we’ll get that round of golf in, thanks.” Then he lowered the phone back into the cradle. “Well, you look like you’re in a bad mood.”

“What the fuck did you say to Tally about me?”

It’s Talia! The echo of her shout tore through my mind, and I shoved it back, slamming the door on that memory as I glared at my brother.

“Who?” he asked, confusion in his eyes.

“Talia Nicholson,” I snapped. “Willard Marlowe’s daughter, apparently. What did you tell her about me?”

Matt looked even more confused now. “I didn’t tell her anything. And how in the hell do *you* know her? I thought none of us even knew he *had* a daughter?”

“I didn’t know she *was* his daughter until she stormed onto my worksite and tore me a new asshole,” I half-shouted. “She accused me of shacking up with her because the foundation is in need of investors! She thinks I’ve been dating her because I wanted her fucking money!”

Matt’s confusion faded, and sympathy darkened his eyes. “Hell, Shawn. I didn’t know you were seeing anybody.”

“I’m not now.” My heart ached in my chest, like she’d taken it out and smashed it beneath one sandaled foot before storming off the worksite. “What the fuck did you say to her? I don’t want to ask again.”

“I didn’t say *anything* to her about you, Shawn, because she didn’t ask.” Matt blew out a tired sigh as he shoved his hand through his hair. The gesture was out of place for him, but I was too pissed off to think much of it. “Look, kid—”

“Stop calling me *kid*,” I said, cutting him off. “I’m twenty-six years old. I’m a partner in one of the most respected historical renovation businesses on the east coast *and* the United States, and I’ve been paying my own bills, wiping my own ass for quite a while. *Stop calling me kid.*”

Matt looked taken aback by the viciousness of my comment, but I didn’t care.

After the gut-punch I’d taken from Talia, my give-a-shit meter was pretty much broken beyond all hope of repair.

Taut silence stretched out, then Matt inclined his head. “Point taken, Shawn. But...as I was saying, I didn’t tell Talia *anything*. She was here for a

meeting, which ended rather abruptly. We were talking about the foundation, and I learned that she's taking over the charitable aspects of the Marlowe family fortune and was looking for insight, and I was upfront that the foundation is looking for investors. We're in financial trouble, Shawn, a lot of it."

"Yeah," I bit off. "I'm aware. I had Dad make sure I get all the financial reports since you didn't bother adding me in when I received my trust. I'm capable of reading the reports too. I've seen the writing on the wall, but that doesn't explain why *Talia* thinks I have shit all to do with her being here today!"

"I can't explain that!" Matt snapped. "We were..." He stopped, eyes clouding. "Fuck. I showed her around the hall."

The hall was the exhibition-like room set up on this floor that displayed various antiques and photos from each generation of Hartwells, going all the way back to when Felix first settled here in Boston back in the 1700s.

"She saw the picture of us," I said roughly. "And you were telling her about how we needed outside funding."

"Yes." He shoved his hands into the pockets of his trousers. "I guess she just assumed..."

"Looks like." Like somebody had pulled a plug, the anger drained out, and it left me feeling empty. Moving over to the window on the other side of the desk, I looked out over the city. "Fuck it all."

After a long moment of silence, Matt said, "You like her."

"Yeah. I was thinking...hell, it doesn't matter now. Sorry I jumped down your throat."

"Well, it sounds like you had a bitch of a day. Don't worry about it."

Turning to face him, I reached for something else to say but couldn't find the right words. "I've got to get back out to Plymouth. Conall is handling the site for me for now, but he has payroll and shit."

I was halfway to the door when Matt spoke. "You going to call her? Talk to her?"

Without looking back, I shook my head. "What's the point? If she thinks I'm the type of person who would use her like that, then I guess whatever I thought we had between us was one-sided, at best."

"Shawn..."

This time, the roughness of his voice had me looking back at him.

Eyes troubled, he studied me. "I can get why you're hurt and angry. I

would be too. Out of all of us, you're the last one I'd ever think would be out to use anybody for money. But if you care about her that much, maybe you should at least try. Nothing in life worth having ever comes easy. If I've figured out anything over the past few months, it's that."

NINETEEN

TALIA

Morning came earlier than I liked. I'd told Mom I was only staying through Friday, explaining I had plans to meet with one of Dad's financial advisors, then went and told her about the job Dad asked me to take on.

She'd looked a little dazed by the entire idea as we talked about it over dinner the night before, and I'd confided that I was nervous about what I had promised to do. She'd taken my hand and told me I could handle it.

Her confidence in me had always been a steadfast thing.

"You're getting on the road soon," she said softly.

Glancing over my shoulder, I saw her standing in the door. Caught aback at her appearance, I didn't even think to respond as I took in the pretty, pale blue dress and the elegant knot of her hair. "Wow, Mom. You look gorgeous."

"Thank you." She nervously brushed a hand down the side of her dress as she stepped into the room. "I was wondering...would you mind if I went to Boston with you?"

Again, shock knocked me sideways.

She could clearly see it too.

Cheeks flushing, she started to look away but stopped herself. Florence Nicholson seriously hated confrontation, but when push came to shove, she could hold her own, and she'd never been one to back down.

"I need to see him," she said, voice firm. "I've spent the past twenty-two years thinking one thing, and now..." She lifted a hand, but it fell to her side almost immediately, and she looked away.

"Mom." Going to her, I pulled her into my arms and hugged her close. "I'm glad."

While Mom was in the bathroom, I sent my dad a quick text to let him know.

I didn't think he'd mind. Actually, I kind of wished I could see his face, because of the way he talked about Mom...

But I also didn't want to show up with her without saying something to him first.

Not even a minute passed before his response came up.

Are you serious?

Laughing, I sent my response back before my nerves suddenly welled up, and I asked if it was okay.

Absolutely.

Several moments passed before my phone vibrated again.

I can't wait to see her. Thank you for letting me know.

He said nothing else, and I didn't have time for anything else because Mom was calling my name.

We were on the road shortly after that, and I tried not to think about the events that had led up to me all but running from Boston just a few days earlier.

Thinking about Shawn hurt.

But I couldn't seem to keep my mind from drifting to him. Mom was lost in her own thoughts, no doubt trying to prepare herself to see my father after so many years, so the drive back to the city was quiet.

You think I'm some rich kid playing.

I'd just as soon they get to know me for me.

Those words, and so many other things he'd said, circled around through my mind, over and over.

And the *hurt* I'd seen in his eyes.

By the time we turned off the road and started up the long, winding drive that led to my father's home, I was in such a state, I didn't notice my mom's nervousness until she suddenly blurted out, "Am I doing the right thing?"

"Yes." I didn't have the clearest mind at the moment and didn't know what else to say but that. Pulling my car to a stop in front of the house, I turned to her, but I didn't have a chance to say anything before the door opened, and my father stepped out.

He was walking.

I sucked in a breath, and Mom turned her head slowly, almost as if she wasn't ready for what she'd see.

“I...” Mom cleared her throat. “I thought you said he was in a wheelchair because of the MS.”

“He spends most of his time in it, yes. But he can still walk. It tires him pretty fast, though.”

That he was on his feet now to greet her said so much. I wonder if she knew that.

“Come on,” I said, brushing my fingers down her arm.

I might not have been here when Dad got my message about me bringing Mom to see him, but that was okay. Now, looking at him as he stared at her made my heart do crazy little flips that both hurt and healed.

There was so much wonder and joy in his eyes, and when I glanced at Mom, I saw that expression echoed in her own gaze.

Not even a half hour later, I let myself out of the house.

Mom and Dad might have spent the past twenty-two years apart, but it was hard to tell by the way they acted. They talked with the ease of people who’d known each other all their lives, and when I’d slipped from the den a few minutes earlier, they’d been holding hands.

It made me smile just thinking of it.

That smile was gone by the time I got to Boston.

I hadn’t had any particular destination in mind, but when I found myself nosing my car into a parking spot less than a block from where Shawn and I first met, I wasn’t surprised.

I told myself to leave.

From where I parked, I couldn’t see the renovated building, but even if I *wanted* to talk to him—and I didn’t know that I did—I knew he wouldn’t be here. This project was pretty much done. He’d told me that. And I’d found him on the site of the new project, all the way in Plymouth a few days ago. He’d told me about that project too.

You’ve got no idea the kind of work I do, how hard it is, or how much pride I take in it.

Swearing, I climbed from the car. Slamming the door shut as hard as I could, I started to walk.

No, I didn’t know much about the work, other than what he’d told me. But I knew his eyes lit up when he talked about it. I knew his face became more animated as he described the various houses and buildings he’d renovated with his former boss, who was now his partner. I knew he was fascinated with the history of the homes he worked on.

And I'd thrown all of it in his face.

"Damn it," I muttered, feeling like a fool. A bitchy one.

Slowing to a stop at the edge of the small yard of the building where we'd met, I stared at the house.

Maybe I *should* talk to him. If for no other reason than to apologize. I'd probably destroyed what we'd been building, but I'd hurt him, and ignoring it because it was easier than facing him was cowardly.

I'd been wrong to jump on him like I had, wrong to make the conclusions I'd drawn. And if he didn't want to talk to me, I could at least apologize—

"Talia."

I'd been thinking so hard, I could almost believe I'd imagined his voice.

Almost.

But the shiver that ran down my spine, I didn't imagine that.

And the prickle of awareness that broke out over my flesh? I didn't imagine that, either.

Slowly, I turned and saw him standing just a few feet away, eyes hooded. Crossing my arms over my chest protectively, I met his gaze.

He flicked a look at the house, then back to me.

I half-expected him to ask what I was doing there and scrambled to come up with a suitable explanation that wasn't *I'm missing you and I was stupid and can we talk?*

A muscle pulsed in his jaw.

I braced myself for whatever he had to say. I deserved any anger I might get from him.

"I shouldn't have barked at you like I did," Shawn said.

My mouth all but fell open.

What...

He continued talking, the words coming out in a rush, like he had to get them out now, or else.

"I promise I didn't know who your father was until you told me. I don't have much of anything to do with the foundation since none of my brothers think I'm capable of doing shit there, but that's not the point. I can understand why you might have made the assumption you did, but I never would have tried to use you, or anybody else, like that."

He hesitated a moment, then gave a short nod, more to himself than anything.

"Take care of yourself."

Then he turned and started to walk away.

TWENTY

SHAWN

“Wait.”

Her soft but insistent voice stopped me in my tracks. Conall and I had met at the house today to talk with the realtor we usually worked with. We’d just finished up the meeting, Conall and I talking outside the coffee shop across the street when I saw Talia’s familiar form.

Part of me wished I’d just stayed over there, but despite my wounded pride—and the other wounds she’d given me—I hadn’t been able to stay on the other side of the street as she slowed to a halt outside the house, gazing up at it.

“I’ve got work to do,” I said, keeping my tone level and biting back a sarcastic comment about the job she thought I *played* at.

“I...do you have a couple minutes? Please?”

The hitch in her voice hit me like a blow to the chest, and I closed my eyes, swearing under my breath. If I’d just stayed away...

“Shawn?”

Her voice was closer, and when I opened my eyes, I found her standing in front of me. There were shadows on her face, a sign of restless nights. She looked about as miserable as I felt. The idea didn’t please me, though. I wanted to stroke away the line of tension between her brow, smooth my hands down her shoulders, and pull her against me.

Shoving my hands into my pockets, I asked, “Why?”

“I...I just want to talk a minute.” She sucked in a breath and shoved her hands through her hair. “Look, you aren’t the only one who shouldn’t have... barked. And you had more reason to do it than I did. I just...I’m sorry, okay? Trust isn’t exactly my strong suit, and I just...” She stopped and looked

away. “I’m babbling, and you said you need to get to work. I just wanted to apologize. So...”

She went to turn.

I didn’t know what drove me to step closer, but I did.

She went still, her dark brown eyes sweeping up to meet mine while a flush settled on her cheeks.

“I guess we were both being idiots,” I said quietly, wondering if it was more idiocy of me to want to hope we could get past this. “It happens to the best of us, right?”

“Maybe.” She licked her lips again.

Reaching up, I brushed my thumb over the damp lower curve. I hadn’t even thought about touching her until her warm, soft flesh met mine, and I knew I wanted a lot more than to touch her mouth. I wanted to kiss her and drink in her taste, feel her hands push into my hair as she pressed closer.

Her eyes widened a fraction.

Before I could do something stupid, like push her up against the outer wall of the building at her back and kiss her mindless, I lowered my hand. *Say bye*, I told myself. In a day or two, maybe I’d text her and see if she wanted dinner. We could try again, if she was willing.

But I was having the hardest time stepping away.

Talia was the first one to actually make that move—but she didn’t step away.

She came toward me and reached up, curving her hand over the back of my neck.

Surprised but not so much that it would keep me from kissing her back, I pulled her against me. She fit in my arms like she was meant to be right there, only there, and I groaned as she opened for me, her tongue slipping inside my mouth to tangle with mine.

Immediately, the blood started to drain lower, and my cock began to pulse in hungry demand. A horn blared on the street somewhere close by, and I broke the kiss, pulling away.

Talia looked a little dazed, her eyes foggy with hunger, and her cheeks flushed as she looked around. “Um...”

“Yeah.” Taking her hand, I started to walk.

“Where...” She went quiet as I started up the sidewalk to the now empty building where we’d first met. “I thought you had to get to work.”

“I lied. My foreman is running the show today. My partner and I had an

appointment scheduled with the realtor, and I'm not due at the site until after lunchtime." Pulling my keys out, I unlocked the front door and hurried her inside, barely remembering to do the locks back up behind me before urging her deeper inside. I was already cursing the decision I'd made to go with replacing the frosted glass windows that flanked the door with clear ones. Frosted glass, at least, would have given me the privacy to pin Talia against the door and have her mouth under mine already.

"What are you...oh..."

Talia's softly voiced question ended up on a moan as I pulled her into the small bathroom off the hall and nudged her back against the wall, boosting her up in the same movement so I could fit my hips into the cradle of her thighs. "Give me your mouth, Talia. I missed kissing you."

The words hadn't even left my lips before she had hers pressed to mine, a hungry noise escaping her. It broke off into a gasp as I rocked against her. I hadn't worn my normal work gear today—jeans and a t-shirt—going instead with khaki trousers and a polo. The thinner material of the khakis made it easier for me to feel the heat between her thighs, and I groaned, burying my face against her neck.

"Do you have anywhere you're supposed to be?" I asked, barely able to force the words out. Logic was quickly fading.

"What? Um. No." She gave a bleary-eyed shake of her head.

Glad to know I wasn't the only one hit sideways. Cupping the back of her neck, I tugged her closer and caught her lower lip between my teeth. "If you're going to tell me to stop, do it now."

"Why on earth would I do that?" She bit me back and tugged my shirt up, pushing her hands underneath to scrape her short, neat nails over my skin.

I'd had other women stroke my cock with less impact.

Grabbing her hands, I pinned them over her head and slanted my mouth over hers. "No touching."

"That's not fair." She pouted, but the soft moue faded as I switched both wrists to one hand and stroked my palm down her side, pausing to stroke her breast, then moving lower to grasp the hem of her dress.

"I promise you won't regret it," I told her, stroking my tongue over her full lower lip. At the same time, I dipped my fingers into her panties and found that she was already wet, the dark curls slick with desire.

"Shawn..."

Her breathy plea was like music, and I wanted more.

Sliding lower, I pushed two fingers inside, rotating them before slowly withdrawing.

She cried out.

The sound was harsh and high, and she bucked her hips closer, as if trying to prolong the contact.

I pumped back inside her again, then again, working her to the edge of orgasm.

But as soon as I felt her hovering on the brink, I stopped. As she cried out, I grasped the side panels of her panties and wrenched, shredding them. Then I spun her around.

“Look,” I whispered in her ear as I bent over her, guiding her hands upward until she had her weight braced against the counter.

Her eyes widened when she saw our reflection in the large, ornate mirror hanging over the sink fixtures.

I filled her just as she took in a startled breath.

I did the same thing, because it wasn't until that second that I realized I'd neglected something crucial.

A rubber.

Swearing, I gripped her hips and held her still when she arched and tried to move back on me.

“Don't,” I said, swearing under my breath. “Please...fuck, don't.”

Talia made a hungry noise low in her throat and rolled her hips again. Squeezing tighter, I crowded her up against the sink, so she had no room to move. Now, with no space to maneuver and no leverage, she was effectively impaled on my cock, which wasn't much of an improvement, especially with her inner muscles milking and flexing around my aching dick. But at least she wasn't pushing me closer to orgasm with every roll of her hips.

“We need to stop,” I said, lips pressed to her ear.

“No...” She gripped my forearm in her hands and strained against me.

“We have to stop,” I said again, the words a growl now. “I'm not wearing a rubber, Tally.”

“I don't care.”

The hungry bastard in me urged me to move. She'd said it was okay—or pretty much.

But I couldn't do that to her. Reaching around her upper body, I cupped her chin in my hand and pressed my mouth to her ear. “Tally...look at me.”

Her lids lifted, and she met my gaze in the mirror, her eyes fogged with

heat and lust. The sight of it was a punch square to the chest, and I wanted to forget everything but the feel of her in my arms, the feel of her wet cunt squeezing me so perfectly.

I didn't do it.

"Listen to me." Sliding my hand to her throat, I caressed the fragile skin there. "I'm not wearing a rubber. I...fuck. We'll have to stop. We can go to your place. It's not far."

I wished like hell I was one of those guys who kept condoms in my wallet at all times, but I wasn't.

"We don't need it." Her voice was breathy, catching on the words, but her eyes held mine steadily. "I'm on the pill. So unless there's another reason...?"

Dropping my head to rest on her shoulder, I drew in a rough breath.

Whatever she said, we shouldn't do this.

"Shawn...please..." She moaned and clenched tight around me once more.

"Fuck it," I muttered, shifting my stance and gripping her hips. Withdrawing to the sound of her husky moan, I drove back inside, the feel of her so velvety wet and tight, I almost couldn't stand it.

Talia braced her hands on the counter, rocking up on her toes to meet me as I slammed into her a second time, a third.

Her head fell forward on a whimper, and I reached up, fisted my hand in her hair, tugging enough to give her an edge of pain. "Look at me."

"Please..." She moaned but met my eyes in the mirror, the dark brown of her eyes so dark and deep, I felt lost.

She shuddered, her pussy clutching at me so tight and hard, I thought the pleasure would kill me. Almost mindless, I filled her again and again, the small space filled with the erratic sounds of our breathing and broken cries.

"Shawn!" She went stiff, her climax hitting hard and fast, catching both of us off guard.

The milking sensation of her muscles shoved me straight over, spine locking as I started to come. The orgasm was so powerful, my knees felt weak, and I had to brace my hand on the counter next to hers to keep upright.

Dropping my head to rest between her shoulder blades, I closed my eyes.

The scent of her filled my head.

And the rest of her...well, she seemed to fill every other part of me.

I COULDN'T SAY things were awkward between us as we cleaned up.

But it was...odd.

Talia sent me several looks that seemed both happy and shy, mixed with a little apprehension. If I hadn't felt some of those emotions myself, it might have been confusing.

The shyness, well, that wasn't an issue, but the dark cloud that had been following me for several days was gone. And I was scared to death. Finally, unable to handle the nerves, I looked at her. "I didn't...look, I didn't talk to you about everything just so we could have sex."

"I know that." She shot me a nervous smile and pushed her hair back.

Even after cleaning up and finger-combing her hair, she still looked deliciously ruffled, and I wanted to lick her all over, then eat her down in greedy bites.

Some of what I felt must have shown on my face because she flushed and smoothed her dress down. "Stop looking at me like that, or we'll end up naked."

"Is that supposed to be a deterrent?"

She scowled, but there was something playful about it. But when she spoke again, it was with somber intensity. "I need to be going. But...can we meet up later? I'd like to talk to you, tell you about...stuff. I mean, everything with my dad. It's kind of complicated."

I'd gathered as much, but I nodded, trying not to seem too eager.

Moving closer, I brushed her hair back. "I'm kind of crazy about you, Talia."

"The feeling is mutual." She bit her lip, her eyes growing soft with affection. "And I love it when you call me Tally."

TWENTY-ONE

TALIA

I had to give Shawn the real address where I was staying. He'd frowned as he looked it over, then told me he knew exactly where it was—he'd been to Willard's before.

I hadn't been surprised and told him that I'd had him meet me at my father's downtown condo, but I'd explain everything later.

Hopefully, he'd understand.

Now, several hours after I left, I walked back into the library and found my parents. Dad was in his wheelchair, but he looked completely comfortable. Mom didn't seem bothered by it as she sat in the seat across from him, talking avidly.

My heart swelled inside my chest just looking at them.

How different would my life...

I cut the thought off before it could really form. There was no point in looking back, no point in wondering about *what ifs*. It wasn't like I'd had a *bad* life—it had been a good one. Yes, I'd often wondered about the man who'd fathered me, but I'd never felt like things were lacking.

And seeing my mother now...

She caught sight of me lingering in the doorway and stopped talking. "Hey, baby."

I smiled and moved deeper into the room.

"We've completely been ignoring you, haven't we?" She rose and came over to me. As she gave me a tight hug, I looked over her shoulder at my father.

He had the same brilliant, glowing, sappy looking smile that she did.

"You two had some catching up to do, so it's not a problem." I kissed her

cheek and moved to take one of the empty seats. “I guess I don’t need to ask if you all have been having a good conversation.”

They both beamed at me, and when Mom sat down, she took Willard’s hand.

I fought a delighted smile. I’d hoped they might still feel a connection, but figured it would take some time.

Apparently not.

“So…” Struggling to keep my surprise from showing, I smoothed my hands down my skirt. “I wanted to let you both know I have plans to go out tonight. Mom, were you wanting to go back to Salem soon?”

“Ah…” She blushed, then glanced over at my father. “Actually, I think I’ll stay the night. Likely the weekend. If you can take me home sometime early Sunday afternoon, I can take care of the one building I clean on the weekends.”

I couldn’t stop my jaw from dropping open. “I’m not sure I heard you right,” I said faintly.

While my mother started to stammer, my father stepped in smoothly. “I asked Florence to stay the weekend, and she graciously agreed. I have clothing that I keep on hand for guests. Sometimes, there’s an accident or spilled drink at a party or gathering, so I keep a variety of extras. She can use something we have on hand here, or I can take her shopping later. It doesn’t matter. But we’re going out to dinner. Like you said, we do need to catch up.”

There was a light in his eyes that made me wonder what sort of catching up he had planned.

Immediately, I decided I didn’t want to know.

My mom must have had thoughts along the same line. In an overly effusive voice, she said, “You said you had a date…dare I hope it’s Shawn?”

“It is.” Blushing, I shied away from going into details. “He’s picking me up here in a few hours.”

“Am I allowed to know about the date?”

Although there was a teasing note in Willard’s voice, there was also a trace of wistfulness. I met his gaze. “Of course. Although you already know him. It’s…ah…it’s Shawn Hartwell.”

For a few seconds, he looked puzzled, then a broad smile broke out over his face.

“Well, here I was wondering if I could manage to look properly

intimidating, but that won't be necessary. I've known Shawn for most of his life. That boy is pure gold. How did the two of you meet? When you talked to Matt?"

"Um...no..." I took a deep breath, then told him a short version of how Shawn and I had met. I left out the details of the fight. I still felt ashamed over what I'd done and said, and now wasn't the time to get into that with Dad.

"Such a small world," Willard murmured as he studied me. He still held my mother's hand, and I watched as he stroked his thumb over the back of it. "He's a good man, Talia. The Hartwell family is about as fine as they come."

I hesitated only a few seconds before I said, "The foundation is seeking investors, Dad. Matt told me. I've talked to Taylor, and he thinks the place is still a sound investment, but from what I can understand, they're having some trouble."

"Oh, I know that." He waved a dismissive hand. "Don't let any of that interfere with your personal life, sweetheart. Many families, mine included, go through times of crisis. Shawn's father and I have already talked about some of the issues the foundation is facing."

A weight I hadn't been aware of lifted off my chest. If Dad wasn't concerned about the Hartwell Foundation's money issues, then it wasn't something I needed to worry about either.

I hadn't really been stressing over it too much, but the doubt had lingered.

"Well, since you don't need a ride back to Salem, Mom, I think I'm going to take the afternoon and do some self-pampering before my date."

BEFORE SHAWN ARRIVED, I told my parents that he didn't know anything about our rather complicated history, and I'd be telling him more about it tonight. I hadn't wanted to risk any odd questions coming up, so I figured it was better to head them off rather than hope for the best.

I also told them that I wanted a minute with him *before* introducing them, just to make sure he was okay with it. I also planned on telling him that I'd explain everything later, so hopefully, any awkward questions on *his* part could be avoided as well.

All of my worrying turned out to be for nothing.

Willard and Shawn greeted each other like old friends, albeit ones separated by a couple of decades. Shawn was polite with my mother, and she seemed charmed. But after ten minutes of the small talk, I decided I was glad I'd avoided this awkwardness for the most part.

"Shawn," I said into the first opening I had. "I don't know about you, but I'm starving."

"YOUR PARENTS ACT LIKE NEWLYWEDS." Shawn's comment was the perfect opening to the conversation we needed to have.

Seated in the outdoor dining area of a bay side restaurant in the small town where my father lived, Shawn and I sat sipping wine. I knew he was waiting for me to start the conversation, but I hadn't been sure just where to start.

Now...well, I couldn't have asked for a better segue.

"Funny you say that." Lowering my glass of wine, I glanced toward the outdoor bar and said, "I should have gone with something stronger than pinot grigio for this conversation."

"Want to order something else?"

"Yes." Then I made a face. "But I've already had one glass of wine. If I toss liquor on top of that, I'll regret it."

In response, he took my hand and lifted it to his lips. "Whatever it is, just tell me. It can't be all that bad."

"It's just...complicated." But it wouldn't get any less complicated if I waited or got drunk, either. "Okay, so it goes something like this..."

Maybe ten minutes later, Shawn sat back in his chair and blew out a long, steady breath.

"Well, I'll be honest, Tally. I didn't know what to expect, but it sure as hell wasn't anything like this."

"I told you it was complicated," I said with a weak smile.

"That you did." He sipped his wine, staring pensively into the glass before looking at me. "I have to tell you, sweetheart. You're a master of understatement."

Uncertain how to respond, I just shrugged. "In case you couldn't tell, the two of them are probably like...well, I don't want to sound hokey or sappy,

but they just saw each other again today for the first time since that night, and they're all googly eyed. It's almost sickeningly sweet...and I'm a romantic at heart."

"Sometimes, people just fit," Shawn said softly. His eyes met mine over the table, and although he didn't say anything else, I felt those words hit me square in the chest.

Tension stretched between us. It wasn't an uncomfortable one, but it wasn't one I could handle surrounded by other people. Clearing my throat, I said, "So, you know my life story now...and a fair deal about my parents too. What about you and yours?"

Judging by the glint in his eyes, Shawn knew I was asking out of more than just curiosity.

But he didn't push.

He told me about his parents and his brothers, and we chatted as the meal was brought out, the conversation stretching from his family to the foundation and how it had gotten started.

The check came, but we continued to talk. Even after he paid the tab, neither of us were too interested in leaving.

Talking to Shawn was so easy, it felt like I spend hours doing just that... talking to him. About anything. Everything. Even absolutely nothing.

TWENTY-TWO

SHAWN

Matt eyed me cautiously as he came into the kitchen, carrying something tucked under his arm. “Are we good, or are you going to kick my ass?”

Jamie and Keith eyed both of us curiously, but I shook my head. “We’re good. Tally and I talked.”

“Tally, huh?” A slow smile spread across his face. “Well, seeing as how that’s the case, I guess I’ll keep this.”

He brandished the bottle he had under his arm, and quick as lightning, I snagged it. “No, I think you owe me for all the shit you’ve given me in my short young life.”

Matt cocked a brow but didn’t say anything.

“You two going to clue us in?” Keith asked, interest lighting his eyes.

“Nope,” I said easily, studying the bottle of scotch. It was from a small distillery in Scotland and one of their reserve batches. I hadn’t had it before, but I was familiar with the label. Matt must have felt pretty bad about the thing with Tally.

It wasn’t his fault, not that I’d tell him that or give the scotch back.

“Well, if you’re not going to tell us, at least say you’ll share the booze.” Jamie winked at me as he spoke.

“I think I’ll pass on that.” I put the bottle on the counter by my keys and gave Keith a gimlet glare. “Touch it and die.”

“You suck, kid,” Keith said, heaving out a breath. There was no true rancor in his voice, though.

I flipped him off with an easy smile. “That’s what you get after a lifetime of never letting me play with your camera or touch any of your electronics.”

“Boys, before this devolves into a fight,” Jamie said, catching our

attention. "Let's eat."

After we loaded our plates, Matt glanced over at Keith. "I appreciate you letting me use the plane for a while. I'm going to look into getting one sooner or later, but I want to wait until things level out with the foundation before I do it."

"It's not a problem." He shrugged. "I won't be using it for a while. Veronica and I plan to stick around here for the next few months. School starts back soon, and I don't plan on traveling without her. She's already back at the job. Geez, the work that woman does...teaching isn't for pussies, you know."

Conversation meandered, and I let it flow around me until a lull came. Then, clearing my throat, I said, "You all remember the last time we got together, and Matt mentioned Willard Marlow?"

Matt's eyes slid toward me, but if he was surprised, he didn't let it show.

Keith eyed me over the pilsner glass he held. "Yeah. He was meeting with Marlowe's daughter. I still don't remember ever hearing anything about him having a kid."

"Ah...well, I'm dating her."

Keith choked on the swallow of beer he'd just taken.

Matt gave him a few hard whacks on his back while Keith's face turned an interesting shade of red.

After a quick glance, Jamie turned his attention to me. "I thought none of us knew he *had* a daughter...you included. And now you're dating her?"

"Well, I was dating her before I knew who she was." Without going into any detail about Tally's parents, I mentioned that they'd just reunited. I was braced for suspicion, but to my relief, there wasn't any.

"I liked her," Matt said into the silence after I'd finished talking.

Jamie swung his head around to look at our oldest brother. "You knew about this?"

"The two of them? Not until a couple days ago." Matt shrugged and sipped his beer. "We figured out the connection when she was at the foundation for her meeting. I'm hoping she might become one of our first investors."

Jamie's eyes narrowed slightly, and he glanced toward the bottle of scotch but remained quiet.

Keith gave me a curious look. "Are you okay with Matt hitting up your girlfriend for funds for the foundation?"

“It’s not my money,” I told him, wondering how they’d react if they knew about the money *I* had quietly been investing in the foundation.

Silence fell, but it didn’t last long. Jamie cleared his throat. When we turned our attention toward him, it was to see the smile had faded from his face, replaced by a quiet solemnity.

“You’ve got news about this cousin,” I said softly.

“Yeah.” Blowing out a breath, he leaned back in his seat. “So...Joelle is as puzzled by some of the stuff going on as I am. She’s an only child, but has a lot of cousins and second cousins, aunts, uncles...you get the idea. They wanted to surprise their grandparents with a gift for their upcoming anniversary, and the grandkids all did the genealogy thing. But Joelle’s came back different—on the mom’s side.”

“Like us,” Keith murmured.

“Yeah. Well, she had it out with her mom, thinking she was adopted or that her mother cheated or something. But her mother swears that’s not the case. So Joelle and her parents went to an independent lab for DNA testing. They just did it a few days ago and are waiting on results. They’ll probably need to have a talk with Joelle’s grandparents next, but they want to make sure the tests results were accurate.”

“I don’t think they’ll find anything different,” Matt said softly. “This is all adding up to a picture I’m not sure I like.”

I wasn’t sure I did, either.

“When will you know more?” I asked, thinking about Gran the last time I’d seen her. She was doing phenomenally well and would be discharged soon.

The answers lay with her—her and Grandpa.

But now wasn’t really the time for a stressful conversation with her, was it?

“A few more days.” He met my eyes. “Joelle promised to call as soon as she knew anything.”

TWENTY-THREE

TALIA

I woke up restless and feeling like I was going to come out of my skin.

It was all Shawn's fault too.

Last night, after dinner, he'd driven me home, and after a kiss that had stolen my breath away, he'd said good night.

Then he'd *left*.

Just *left*, leaving *me* high and dry—okay, maybe dry wasn't the right word. I'd fallen asleep not long after, despite my frustration, but he haunted my dreams, and in those dreams, he did a lot more than kiss me.

Hot, sexy dreams of that variety weren't my norm.

I was out of sorts and cranky—and I wanted sex. *Now*. With Shawn, of course, but it wasn't like I could call him up and say, *Hey, can we meet so I can jump your bones?*

One, it was still rather early in our relationship.

Two, he had plans.

If it wasn't for my normal reservation and number one, I probably would have shot him a text. So maybe I should be glad number two was an issue.

He was having lunch with his brothers today, he'd told me. We didn't have plans for the next few days—actually, we didn't have plans at all. He'd said he'd call me after kissing me.

And that kiss...

My blood heated just thinking of it, and knowing I couldn't do anything about it made me cranky. Even a cold shower hadn't helped, nor had seeing my mom and dad all but cooing to each other over breakfast.

Since I didn't want to inflict my bad mood on anybody, I retreated to my rooms with plans to watch movies for most of the day.

At some point in the afternoon, Mom came in and told me that Dad had asked her if he could take her out to dinner. Judging by the sparkle in her eyes, I knew what her answer had been.

“Have fun.”

She blushed as she smoothed her dress down. “We have to go shopping first. Will...ah, well, he wants to take me to the opera. I’ve always wanted to go, you know.”

“Yes.” I managed not to roll my eyes. Her love of opera was one thing I hadn’t inherited. “I imagine you’ll have killer seats.”

“He has his own booth.” She bit her lip and glanced behind her as if expecting somebody to pop out and say *boo!* Then, with a laugh, she said, “I don’t know why that surprised me after seeing this house...but it did. Anyway, we need to go shopping. He said it was a rather formal affair, and if it was all right with me, he’d love to treat me to a night on the town.”

I could see the guilt in her eyes.

“Mom. You deserve it. It’s not like he’s hurting for money.” This time, I rolled my eyes. “And what were you telling me just weeks ago? He’s not trying to buy your affection or forgiveness. He just wants to give you something nice...so *let him.*”

“I’m going to do just that.” With a limp smile, she added, “After all, I have to set a good example for my...*our* daughter. And how can I do that if I don’t practice what I preach?”

TWO HOURS LATER, I stood on the porch, watching the limo pull away from the house.

Man. When Willard decided he was going to go all *out*, he did just that.

Mom had worn a pretty pantsuit in a flattering shade of amber that did amazing things for her hair and eyes, while Dad had already been in a tuxedo that had transformed him from a mildly attractive older man into a stunning silver fox.

I’d told him, and he’d blushed, clearly pleased with the compliment.

Mom had confided that she felt underdressed, but they wouldn’t have time to come back here and change once they finished shopping, so she’d have to handle looking like shabby Cinderella next to her Prince Charming

for a while.

That had made him laugh even as he took her hand and kissed it. “Just don’t disappear at midnight, darling. Promise me.”

The naked emotion between them was so open, so...*there*, it left me with a knot in my throat the size of Boston Harbor.

But now I was alone.

As the limo took one of the winding curves that disappeared out of view, I sighed and turned to go back inside.

I hadn’t heard from Shawn all day. I hadn’t really expected to, but...I missed him. How that could be, I didn’t know. I’d spent more than two decades of my life just fine without him. Now things didn’t feel entirely complete without him there.

Sometimes, people just fit, he’d said.

Were we a fit?

It *felt* like we were, but it was so soon...

“Stop,” I muttered, forcing myself to push those thoughts aside. I’d already made plans for a long evening of gory horror movies, the scarier the better. Sure, it might leave me unable to sleep for half—or most—of the night, but considering the dreams I’d had last night? That might not be a bad thing.

I definitely didn’t need another long session of twisting of the sheets in my dreams, only to wake up unfulfilled.

That was *no way* to do things.

NOTE TO SELF: *it’s a lot creepier to watch horror flicks alone in a great big house.*

My suite of rooms in my father’s house was just that—a *real* suite, complete with a bathroom bigger than my bedroom back home, a walk-in closet, a bedroom that was *almost* as large as the house where Mom and I lived, and a separate, smallish, relatively speaking, entertainment room.

The TV was a good four feet across, and I flinched as I watched an undead serial killer stalk his victim before ripping her throat out, the colors so vivid, it was a wonder I didn’t smell the blood. Or the colored corn syrup or whatever Hollywood used to pass as the real thing.

Shoving a handful of popcorn in my mouth to pretend I wasn't about ready to squeal in terror, I chomped down the buttery, salty goodness before grabbing the rum and diet I'd mixed earlier—from my own personal liquor cabinet, no less. I was on my third but was alternating between that and water as I watched the third and final movie in the trilogy.

I had to pee like crazy but was mildly terrified I had a killer of my own lurking in my bathroom.

Still, as the screen faded out, and the next scene started to roll, featuring the ingenue who was the 'unexpected' heroine of this particular movie, I grabbed the remote and paused the movie. If I didn't go to the bathroom now, I just might pee on *myself* the next time the killer struck.

Once inside my bathroom—my *locked* bathroom—I managed to calm myself down. Of course, that was only after checking inside the shower stall, because what self-respecting, smart woman *didn't* do that? Taking care of business took a bit longer. I had a nervous bladder. I couldn't help it. But once that was done, I washed my hands and splashed water on my face to clear the rum haze from my brain.

“Okay,” I said in an overly bright tone to the woman staring at me from the mirror. “Let's go—”

The doorbell rang.

I yelped.

Heart racing, I backpedaled and fell against the door, wondering if I'd imagined it. I mean, I *was* a little tipsy, and I had been watching the third movie in a horror franchise where some sexy undead killer rings the doorbell of his intended victim...

The doorbell rang again, and I gulped.

Then, deciding to do the smart thing instead of calling 911 or rushing downstairs in my camisole and yoga pants, I went to one of the large windows of my bedroom. The two biggest ones overlooked the front lawn of the estate...and if I opened one of them, it gave me a birds-eye view of the porch.

I did so with the utmost caution, still not entirely certain I wasn't fabricating something in my slightly tipsy and terrified state. But when I leaned forward a little to peer outside, I caught sight of a familiar work truck.

A warm, goofy sensation flooded me, and I thought I might have giggled a little in relief as I realized who was knocking at my door a little before ten o'clock. Bracing my forearms on the windowsill, I leaned farther out and

craned my head. “You rang?”

A tall, lean form backed away from the door and swung his head up.

Even though yards separated us, I felt the impact of his gaze all the way down to the tips of my toes.

I had to swallow to loosen the knot in my throat enough to speak, and even then, I was glad Shawn took the bull by the horns.

“Hi, Tally.”

Clearing my throat to loosen the tightness there, I managed, somehow, to smile. “Hi, Shawn. What brings you out this way on such a fine night?”

“The company. I missed you.” He held my eyes as he spoke. “Any chance I can come in?”

Inside my chest, my heart fluttered, but memories of the heated, unfulfilled dreams from the past night still lingered.

“Well, I don’t know...are you going to do anything other than kiss me?”

A slow smile spread across his face. “Do you want me to?”

This time, my heart didn’t *flutter*. It slammed against my ribs so hard, it was like it wanted to leap clear out of my chest.

“Let me come down and unlock the door.”

Before leaving my room, I darted into the bathroom and pulled the clip out of my hair, dragged my hands through the tousled mess to restore some sort of order, then checked to make sure I didn’t have bits of popcorn on my clothes. That would be so sexy.

Satisfied that I didn’t look too bad, I quickly brushed my teeth, then darted out of the room.

The hall lights were on, a soft, muted glow, and I tried not to think about the echoing silence as I rushed through the big old home.

Taking the stairs at a jog, I was a little out of breath when I opened the door.

Shawn arched a brow quizzically.

Feeling silly, I jerked a shoulder. “My parents are out, and I decided to have a horror movie marathon. I...ah...well, big old house. Me, alone. I’ve been jumping at every little noise for the past three hours. I yelped when you rang the doorbell.”

Waving him in, I shut and locked the door behind him. When I turned, he moved in closer, crowding me up against the solid wooden door, arms caging me in. “Want me to come up and check under your bed?”

I had other things in mind for him and my bed—and I had just enough of

a buzz to tell him so.

He looked startled, then a wicked smile spread over his features. “Do tell.”

I wasn't *that* buzzed. Nudging him back, I took his hand. “Better idea. How about I show you?”

TWENTY-FOUR

SHAWN

Talia's eyes were a bit too bright, and the smile on her face wasn't the normal, sweet one I was used to. Instead of letting her tug me toward the staircase, I stayed where I was, holding onto her hand.

"Are you drunk?" I sure as hell hoped not, because my cock was already hard.

She pursed her lips. "No. I'm a little tipsy, but nowhere near drunk."

Giving her a narrow-eyed look, I said, "Prove it. Stand on one foot."

"Mine or yours?" She gave me a whimsical smile, then laughed when I didn't smile back. "Spoilsport. Okay."

She lifted her left foot, then, not satisfied with that, she caught it in her hand in one of those yoga moves and pressed her heel to her ass.

Holding the pose for several long seconds, she lowered her foot back to the ground. "Satisfied?"

"Yes." I hauled her against me and slammed my mouth down on hers. I tasted toothpaste and a hint of something else...rum, maybe, but under all that, I tasted her, and I was ravenous for more. She gripped my shirt and hauled me closer.

More than willing to oblige, I caught her by the hips and boosted her up, but when I slid my hands under her shirt, she twisted away and caught my wrists. "Stop."

Scowling, I did but demanded, "Why?"

"Because my parents still aren't home, and I don't want them walking in to find me naked and you...well...you know." She blushed as she said it.

"Fucking you?" Her blush deepened, which was utterly charming and adorable, but I had to admit... "All right, good point."

Letting go of her hips, I let her slide to the floor, and she did so with a slow, sinuous curl of movement that almost drove me mad.

“Tease,” I mumbled against her neck before biting her.

She shivered. “Do that again,” she demanded.

“Not until we’re in your room.”

She groaned and caught my hand, all but dragging me toward the staircase. I laughed at her impatience but had to admit I felt the same.

But by the time we reached her room, I’d managed to find more control than I would have expected. She locked the door and started to let go of my hand, but I twined my fingers more tightly with hers and tugged her to me. Bracing my back against the door, I pressed my mouth to hers. “Come here.”

She made a soft little humming sound in her throat as I pressed my mouth to the hollow at the base of her throat, her head falling back to give me better access. The noise reverberated through the delicate skin to vibrate against my lips, then came again as I bit her gently before kissing a path along her neck to her ear.

“I want to strip you naked and kiss every last inch of you.”

“I...ah, I’m okay with that,” she said, her voice shaky.

I swept her up into my arms, and the sound of her giggle had my lips twitching. Carrying her to the bed, I put her down on the edge before stripping her down to the skin, glad the lights were on because I wanted to enjoy every inch of flesh I revealed.

It pinkened with a blush that deepened as I stared at her, but she didn’t attempt to hide herself, even when I nudged her farther back onto the bed and pressed at the inner faces of her thighs until she spread them.

“You’re already wet,” I said, my voice hardly more than a rasp.

“Sometimes, you just have to look at me and that happens.”

If I hadn’t already been hard as stone, that statement alone would have done it. Swearing, I levered my weight over her body and caught her mouth, starving for the taste of her all over again, even though I’d just kissed her.

Hard, heavy breaths left her when I finally ended the kiss to work my mouth down her neck so I could devour every inch of her collarbone with kisses before working lower...and lower.

By the time I lay sprawled between her thighs with her hips in my hands, she was panting and pleading. Pressing a hot, open-mouthed kiss to her slickly wet folds, I reveled in her startled, pleased cry.

My cock was a heavy weight, throbbing and aching with the demand to

be inside her.

But she tasted so fucking good—salty and sweet—and even when I thought maybe I couldn't take much more, she shoved her hands into my hair, pressing me closer.

Hell, now I couldn't have stopped if I had to. Groaning against her, I flicked my tongue against her clit, then tugged, teasing the firm peak until she started to shudder, then doing it a little more.

Once I had her on the brink of orgasm, I slid up her body. Tearing at the front of my jeans, I freed myself, but I didn't have the patience for anything else. Driving deep, I caught her mouth, our lips fusing together. She didn't turn away from my kiss, either, undisturbed by the taste of herself on my lips. She twined her arms around me and clung tight as her climax broke over her.

I rocked against her as she shivered and moaned through it, and once she was limp, I broke the kiss and lifted up.

“Hopefully, that took the edge off, Tally...because I'm just getting started.”

She blinked up at me, then a slow, impossibly sexy smile spread across her lips.

“Do your best.”

MORNING CAME, and although I wasn't too bothered by the early morning sun angling in through the windows and shining almost directly in my eyes, I was confused.

I never left my curtains open that much.

Also, why were my windows in the wrong place?

And why did my room smell like Tally...oh.

Rolling toward the center of the bed, I opened my eyes and saw her sprawled on her belly, arms flung wide, face turned away from me.

Tally was probably right at average height and had a slim build. But somehow, she managed to take up more than half the king-size bed. She'd also kicked off almost all the blankets and the one she hadn't lay draped at waist level, leaving the smooth expanse of her back bare.

I wanted to stroke my fingers down that soft skin but wasn't sure just how early it was, or how lightly she slept, so I kept my hands to myself and just

watched her.

There was something strangely soothing about it, watching this woman sleep.

A soft noise escaped her, and I couldn't stop the grin that broke out. She snored. Not loudly and not obnoxiously. But that faint sound was, nonetheless, a snore. Somehow, I found it ridiculously cute.

But there wasn't much of anything about Tally that *didn't* appeal to me, as I'd already learned.

Time drifted by in a slow, lazy pace. Normally, once I woke, the last thing I wanted to do was lay around in bed, but I had no desire to get up and do much of anything that didn't involve just being right here, close to Talia.

My internal clock finally decided to kick into gear, and I guessed it to be around eight-thirty. For me, that was sleeping in, but I still wasn't in any rush to move. I had places to be, but not until around noon.

Although sometime soon, I would have to get up and piss, my bladder panging enough now to be uncomfortable. I'd ignore it for a while longer, though.

Maybe ten more minutes passed before she started to stir, stretching and yawning lazily before lifting her head and peering around. When she turned her head toward me, she looked faintly startled before her lips curved in a smile.

"Good mornin'," she said, her voice husky.

"Morning." I moved in, crowding against her until she rolled onto her back, then I kissed her gently, a soft buss against her lips before lifting my head to study her. "I've discovered two things this morning. Want to know what they are?"

She blinked, a lazy action that told me she was still struggling to wake up. "Am I going to have to think too hard to understand?"

"I doubt it." Grinning, I dropped a kiss on her nose. "I like watching you sleep. I've been laying here maybe thirty minutes doing nothing but that."

Her eyes went dewy and soft. "That's sweet." Then she wrinkled her nose. "Or, under the wrong circumstances, it could be considered creepy. But I'm going to consider it sweet."

"Good call." Nipping her on the chin, I said, "The second thing I discovered...Tally, you snore."

She gaped at me, then shoved at my shoulders. "I do not."

"You definitely do." Laughing, I caught her in my arms and rolled onto

my back with her pinned against me. “It’s a cute sound, though. It’s not like I’m listening to my grandpa saw logs as he naps on the couch. This is...well, like I said, cute.”

She continued to glare at me, but a smile twitched at her lips. “You’re a jerk, Shawn Hartwell. The last thing a woman wants to hear after spending the night with her boyfriend for the first time is that she *snores*.”

“What...” Giving her an affronted look, I said, “Didn’t I tell you I also spent thirty minutes just watching you sleep?”

“*And* listening to me *snore*, apparently.” She rolled her eyes but stopped trying to break free, choosing instead to cuddle against me. “I like this.”

Now that she was awake, I could give into the indulgence to stroke her back, so I did, my right hand traveling up and down while I cupped her neck in my left. “Yeah.” I only hesitated a moment before I confessed, “I don’t usually spend the night with somebody after we sleep together. They tend to take it as...meaning something.”

She lifted her head and looked at me, face solemn. “Is that your way of telling me that you don’t want me to take this to mean anything?”

“No.” I tangled my fingers in her hair, holding her gaze intently. “This means something. It means a whole hell of a lot, actually. Tally, I’m crazy about you, and it just seems to be getting more and more intense the longer I’m around you.”

Silence hung between us for a lot longer than I liked, and I started to wonder if maybe I should have waited. But then, a slow smile bloomed across her face, and she asked, “Even if I snore?”

“Your snoring is adorable.” Heart thudding hard in my chest, I rubbed my mouth over hers. “Matter of fact, I hope I hear you snoring a lot more in my future.”

VOICES, along with the scents of bacon, bread, and other breakfast-type goodness, drifted toward us.

Next to me, Talia hesitated a bit, and I heard her suck in a quick gulp of air.

Looking over, I saw the fine lines of strain bracketing her mouth, although she gave me a quick smile the second she noticed my attention.

“Everything okay?” I asked, keeping my voice low.

“Yeah.” She winced and gestured toward the wide-arched doorway several yards away from us. “It’s just...I haven’t done this before. Had a guy sleep over and my parents...well, you know.”

“Well, I never did move my truck, so unless they have some secret back entrance...?” I arched a brow. “Besides, I think it’s safe to say your parents have *untraditional relationships* down to a fine art form.”

She pursed her lips, but I saw the humor lighting her eyes.

“I suppose you have a point,” she said, a smile twitching at her lips. “Come on. Let’s get this over with. The first few minutes should be the hard part, right?”

Taking her hand, I walked with her into the bright, cheerful kitchen.

The next few minutes passed by with some awkwardness, but considering the fact that I’d never had this particular experience, it went far smoother than I would have expected. It helped that Willard and I knew each other, and it helped that Talia’s mother, Florence, seemed rather uncomfortable herself. She’d only been wearing a robe when we walked in, so her discomfort was understandable.

She’d quietly excused herself and returned shortly after dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, but we all carried on as if she’d never left.

I didn’t stay much longer, keeping an eye on the time.

“My grandmother’s being discharged from the hospital,” I told Talia as I rose from the table.

“How is she?” Willard asked, concern coloring his voice.

“Better,” I said, smiling at him. “Scared all of us, sir, but she’s expected to make a full recovery at this point.”

“Wonderful.” He gave a pleased smile. “Have your grandfather give me a call when she’s up to company.”

“That will be in probably less than twenty-four hours. She’s going crazy at the monotony. Her words, not mine. Go ahead and call Grandpa, Mr. Marlowe.”

“Call me Will,” he said, glancing at Talia with a faint smile. “It seems we will likely be seeing a great deal more of each other, Shawn, and you’re hardly still a schoolboy.”

“Yes, sir.”

His brows arched, and he sighed but waved Talia off when she excused herself.

At the front door, I caged her up against the wall for one more kiss.

“I’ll call later,” I told her. “I don’t know when, but I’ll call.”

“Tomorrow is soon enough.” She brushed her fingers down my cheek.

“Take care of your gran, Shawn.”

TWENTY-FIVE

TALIA

I didn't wake as early as I usually did, but I wasn't surprised.

After having tea with my mom and lingering to talk for quite a while, I was happy to learn that she'd decided to stay on a few days longer. The girl she had hired had been pleased to take on the extra work, so everything was working out perfectly.

Later, I'd found Dad waiting for me. He, too, wanted to talk, although it wasn't about either of our personal relationships.

Instead, he told me he'd called the younger Matt Hartwell, Shawn's brother, and they'd talked at length about the foundation and he'd wanted to know my opinions about the charitable enterprise.

We'd only talked for a little over an hour, but the discussion had left me thinking, and I'd stayed up late researching the organization, and the family itself. That had been odd, digging into the family of the man I was dating, but if I was going to take over the charitable arm of the Marlowe family, I had to be objective and set emotions and other matters aside.

Everything I could find seemed to back up what my father had told me.

The Hartwells were a solid family, and their foundation had done nothing but good for the Boston community and the general New England area. They hadn't ever had issues with money until the recession a few years back when the housing industry bottomed out, and going on the data Matt had sent me, it looked like they just hadn't recovered, although, again according to the same data, they were streamlining and making adjustments that should address things.

Taylor's opinion, which I'd gotten last night, was that they were likely a safe risk, assuming they *did* make changes to fix their problems.

He wanted to schedule a formal meeting, and I was fine with that, but first, I wanted to talk to Matt by myself once more. The lawyers were something I'd have to get used to, but for this, considering the personal connections between his family and my dad, not to mention Shawn and me, I didn't want to clog up the lines of communication with any more legalese than necessary.

Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I glanced at the clock and calculated.

If I hurried through my shower, I could slip out the door while Dad was busy with therapy. I didn't want to tell him I was heading out to grill Matt a little more.

After was soon enough for that.

FIGURING it was taking a chance heading in without calling to make an appointment, I was prepared to be told I'd have to get on his schedule and be turned away, but to my surprise, I saw him in the main entryway, chatting to a slim gray-haired woman the moment I entered.

He caught sight of me and smiled, lifting a hand in greeting. He said something to the woman with him, then came over to greet me.

"Hello, Talia." He held out his hand, and as we shook, he said, "I wanted to apologize about how the last meeting went. Finding out who Shawn was the way you did must have been a surprise."

"You don't need to apologize." Cursing my pale complexion and propensity toward blushing, I hurriedly changed the subject. "I was wondering if you had a few minutes so we could talk a little more. I didn't have a chance to ask some of the questions I needed to ask."

Well, I *could* have asked plenty of questions, I supposed, but I'd been too busy stressing the hell out and being pissed.

A smile curved Matt's mouth, framed by deep grooves in his cheeks. "Of course. Let's go up to my office."

As we walked, he introduced a few of the people we passed and pointed out some of the more interesting pieces of art or family memorabilia that seemed to decorate every floor.

Once in his office, he offered coffee or water. I went with water because I was already nervous enough.

“So, what questions can I answer?”

I’d already decided the blunt approach was best, so diving right in, I said, “According to the files you gave me, there’s been a steady drop in the foundation’s assets and funds over the past decade, and it’s become more marked in the past few years. Do you have any ideas as to why?”

His eyes narrowed slightly on mine, and I had the feeling I’d surprised him.

He cocked a brow. “I take it you’ve spoken to your father.”

“About...?”

Now, puzzlement on his face, he leaned back in his seat. He didn’t answer me, though. At least not *that* question.

“I have some solid ideas about the money flow issues. They’re being looked into, and I’ll have answers within the next month, two at most.” He spoke slowly, as if he was choosing his words with great care.

“That sounds very...decisive.”

“It is. We could discuss it more at length, but I’d rather not do so...yet.” His gaze flicked around the office as he said it, and that minute pause made me wonder if I really was right about *my* suspicions.

“You think this resolution will curtail the money problems, then?”

“Yes.” His blue eyes bore into mine now, intent. “What else did you want to discuss?”

It was obvious he wasn’t going to elaborate. More, it was clear he didn’t want *me* talking more about it right now either—although maybe it wasn’t the *timing*, but the location.

Winging it, I said, “If I decide to become an investor, what all would that entail?”

A faint smile curved his lips as he responded, keeping the explanation simple. Toward the end, he said, “There is the issue of you and Shawn. Your relationship, specifically.”

“What about our relationship?” Narrowing my eyes, I gave him a flat look.

“I have no plans to interfere,” he said with a wide grin. “But I do have to keep the foundation’s interests in mind, even though I hope you give my little brother hell. Also, if you hurt him, I’ll be pissed. That said...what happens if you become an investor, but things don’t work out between you? The foundation needs long-term, committed investors. If you break up, it could make working with the Hartwell Foundation problematic for you. These are

things I have to consider, and you should as well.”

“That won’t be an issue.” I’d thought about that very thing myself. “My relationship with Shawn is personal. This is business. If things don’t work out, I’m sure our lawyers can have a trustee appointed who can handle matters on behalf of the Marlowe family.”

MATT WALKED me out less than a half hour later.

It wasn’t just courtesy that prompted the action, although I imagined that was part of it.

“Thank you for not pursuing that particular...avenue earlier,” he said once we were next to my car.

Although he kept it casual, I’d noticed that he took care to look around and make sure nobody was in the vicinity before he spoke.

“Not a problem.” Eying him speculatively, I said, “It was rather clear you didn’t want to discuss it...yet.”

He grinned. “Wasn’t I subtle enough?”

“Oh, very.” Rolling my eyes, I dug my keys from my purse. “I imagine you’re waiting for those answers first. Although I do want to hear more about it before I make my final decision, I am leaning toward becoming an investor.”

“It wasn’t the timing,” he said, surprising me. He glanced back toward the building, another casual glance that somehow took in everything. “It was the surroundings. I’m concerned somebody might have bugged my office. Please, don’t look surprised because we *are* being watched.”

I had to struggle not to gape at him *or* look around to see what—or *who*—he was talking about.

“Somebody’s embezzling.”

He gave a short nod. “We’re almost certain we know who. I wasn’t being honest about the time to get answers, though. We’ll have everything we need within the next couple of days. I don’t want him getting antsy before we’re ready.”

“Does Shawn know?”

Matt shook his head. “I only got the hardcore details late last night and haven’t had a chance to inform the needed parties. If you could—”

“That’s not information that should come from me,” I said, shaking my head. “Don’t worry. But don’t hold off telling him. He *does* need to know.”

After another minute or so, Matt went back inside while I settled into the car.

Thinking about what Matt had just confirmed was both frustrating and reassuring. Once they had this issue resolved, the foundation would be on solid ground so I didn’t worry about being an investor.

But knowing something *that* important before Shawn made me really uncomfortable—almost guilty, really.

Without any conscious decision on my part, I found myself driving toward his current worksite in Plymouth. The long drive gave me time to clear my head and get my thoughts in order.

There was nothing, really, to feel guilty about, especially once I reminded myself of what I’d told Matt. My relationship with Shawn was personal. Important, yes, but very, *very* personal. The matter with the Hartwell Foundation was business. Shawn was a smart guy. Once the matter with the embezzler was settled, we could talk about it, and I knew he’d understand why I hadn’t mentioned it. It wasn’t like any of this was *my* business, anyway.

“I should have just kept my mouth shut,” I muttered, parking the car some time later.

The big, beautiful old house was in an ordered state of chaos, and I lingered by my car for several moments, imagining how the home would look once everything was done.

My reverie was interrupted by raised voices—*yelling*, actually.

“I can’t believe you’re fucking doing to this to my *family home!*”

“Well, I can’t believe you were *fucking* my best friend!”

The two angry people came around the corner of the temporary gate, the man wearing a hard hat while the woman carried one in her hand.

One of the construction workers passed by them, not even coming too close, but he made the bad mistake of *daring* to glance at them, and the woman, a slim blonde, turned her ire on him and hurled the hard hat in his direction.

My jaw dropped as the unexpected missile glanced off the poor guy’s shoulder.

That was when Shawn appeared, his face drawn tight with anger. He had his cellphone to his ear and was talking rapidly—to the cops, I hoped.

The worker glared at the woman, which only made her screech louder, and the man with her looked mortified. Part of me wanted to duck back into the car and disappear, but Shawn's gaze landed on me at that moment. Unsure what to do, I half smiled, half grimaced at him.

He looked at the couple, at the worker, then at me. To my surprise, a smile twitched at his lips.

It was likely one of those things where a person can only do one of two things—laugh or scream. Shawn didn't strike me as the screaming type. A moment later, he lowered the phone slightly, but I had a feeling he hadn't ended the call.

He started to speak, but the woman was still ranting. He hit a button on the phone—mute, maybe, because a second later, he lifted his free hand up and did one of those piercing whistles, the kind loud enough to make the dead pay attention.

Silence fell.

"The cops are on their way," he said in a flat voice. "Ms. Hale, if my employee wants to file assault charges for your actions just now, I'm more than happy to back him on that. I've told both of you that I'm *not* working or making my team carry on in a war zone."

"Good," the man snapped.

"Assault charges?" she demanded. She let loose a stream of profanity, then said, "You have no idea what you're talking about."

Deciding there was no point in acting like I wasn't there, I stepped forward.

"He's talking about how you went and hurled a hard hat at the guy because he *looked* at you. It's not his fault you're causing a scene."

She cut her head my way, eyes slamming into me. "Who the fuck are you?"

Smiling sweetly at her, I said, "None of your concern, Ms. Hale."

Cops must have been close. A squad car pulled into the lot and stopped next to me, and I almost laughed at the relief that came over Shawn's expression. It was almost as amusing as the way the woman's face reddened.

Thirty minutes later, Shawn led me into his trailer. Dumping his hard hat on the table, he shoved a sweaty hand through his hair. "Well, I bet you weren't expecting *that* fiasco."

"No...." I drew the word out. Leaning against the door, I studied him. A rush of heat went through me at the sight. Wow. Sweaty male hadn't ever

been high on my list of heart-racing images...until now.

His t-shirt was damp. The tool belt slung low on his hips and somehow drew attention to certain attributes—attributes I was becoming very fond of. Worn denim jeans outlined the long, long legs that had twined with mine as we slept together just the other night.

Tension spread between us when I dragged my eyes up to meet his and found him watching me with heated awareness.

“If you keep watching me like that, I’m going to forget I’ve already lost a good hour of work time,” he said, voice thick with things unspoken.

Clearing my throat, I looked away before I went over and kissed him in full view of the open window.

He chuckled ruefully. “Maybe I should have kept my mouth shut.”

“Stop,” I muttered, pushing my hair back after shooting him a dark look. “I...ah, I’m not staying long, anyway. I need to head back to the house and talk to my father about a few things. But I wanted to talk to you too. I’m waiting on a few more details, but I’m probably going to be investing in your family’s foundation.”

I didn’t know what reaction I was expecting.

But it *wasn’t* for the way his features suddenly went blank and remote, or for the way his voice iced over as he said, “Excuse me?”

TWENTY-SIX

SHAWN

What the fuck?

That was the only clear thought in my head.

The shitty day had *finally* started to turn for the better when Talia showed up—and the day had been shit from the minute my feet hit the floor. It had started with a curt text from Matt that all of us needed to get together soon because he had information for us, but *no*, of course he couldn't talk to me on the phone at the moment, and he'd call me when he had time. A delay in some needed materials for the Hale project was next, then the fucking client from hell showed up, with her ex practically on her bumper.

Now, Talia stood in front of me, smiling an overly bright smile as she repeated the words I had hoped I'd misheard.

“Why?”

She blinked, looking confused. “What do you mean, *why*? The foundation needs money, and my father *has* money and wants me to put it to use. That's why.”

I thought of the list of names Conall and I had put together, two of whom had already voiced interest in becoming investors and were on schedule to come into the foundation to talk with Matt—with two guests. Matt didn't know there would be guests, though. Namely, Conall and me.

Those two investors wouldn't fix *all* the financial woes, but they'd sure as hell go a fair way to smoothing things over—once that damn leak in the foundation was plugged. I wondered if that was the information Matt had wanted to share and made a mental note to ask, because I needed those answers before the two potential investors came in.

Fuck, all the work I'd been doing, everything I'd planned to put in front

of my brothers to show them I wasn't the fifth wheel they all treated me like.

And now my girlfriend swoops in with Marlowe money.

"Why didn't you talk to me about this?"

She blinked, caught off guard by the sharpness of my tone, but frustration kept rising and rising inside.

"Why would I?" She crossed her arms over her chest. "It's a business matter. It shouldn't affect our relationship."

"Maybe that's how *you* see it," I snapped. "But the foundation is a big deal in *my* family, and you dropping in like you did to save the day without talking to *me* about it first is a big fucking deal. It's the kind of shit my brothers have done to me *my whole life*, treating me like I'm not intelligent enough to understand all the ins and outs of the business."

Her mouth fell open.

"Guess you didn't consider *that* viewpoint," I said sourly. Grabbing my hard hat, I cut around her and headed for the door. "I have to get back to work. I've lost enough time today as it is."

"Don't you dare go out that fucking door."

"Sorry, sweetheart, I've got a job to do." I shot her a look.

She glared at me, her dark brown eyes hotly intense. "Shawn, if you walk out that door, I'm going to follow you, and then you and I will be the second couple giving a free show today. You want that?"

I started to say she wasn't the type, but then she lifted her chin stubbornly.

"Make it fast," I bit off as I folded my arms across my chest. "I have a job, sweetheart."

TWENTY-SEVEN

TALIA

“Don’t you talk to me like that. And I’d advise you to think twice before talking to me about *jobs*.” Frustration and uncertainty mixed with downright anger, leaving me shaking with emotion that I refused to show. “I hate to break this news to you, but up until a few months ago, I’d been working six out of seven days a week, *every week* without so much as a vacation unless you counted long weekends when there were holidays on Mondays or Fridays. And that’s been since I was *fourteen years old*.”

He scowled. “I don’t—”

I held up a hand. “My mother runs her own cleaning service, *sweetheart*. Once I was old enough to help, I did so, because it let her expand enough to pick a few more clients so we could save up enough money to buy a house. We’d always rented and had to move every few years before that. When you’re raised by a single mom with no serious education and few skills, you learn quite a bit about the value of hard work, and you do it from a pretty young age.”

“Is this what you wanted to snarl at me about?” He sounded bored, and the way he leaned back against the door, the expression in his eyes as he looked me over, pretty much echoed that.

But tension seethed underneath the surface—I could feel it.

“No. And I’m not *snarling*,” I said. I hadn’t even raised my voice, although I was tempted. No, I told myself. I was going to be calm and handle this the way I should have when I first learned about his connection to Matt and the Hartwell Foundation. Because I hadn’t, because I’d assumed the worst, I’d almost lost him. I wasn’t doing that this time—and he wasn’t going to screw things up either, regardless of what the problem was. “I’m *talking*.”

“Well, talk *fast*. I have work to do.”

That tone, so dismissive and cold, almost snapped the grip I had on my temper, but I reminded myself of how I’d messed things up before.

I wasn’t going to let Shawn pull this shit.

“Look...either you and I have something, or we don’t. You need to figure out which one it is.” I took a deep, calming breath. “I let my temper and my fears do my talking when I saw that picture of you at the foundation, and I was wrong. You’re doing *the same damn thing*. Jumping on me and making the wrong conclusions.”

He shoved off the door, bored expression replaced by anger.

“The wrong conclusion?” Closing the distance between us, he shoved his face just inches from mine. “So, clue me in here...did I misunderstand you, or did you *not* rush in to save the fucking day at the family foundation? I mean, that *is* what you were telling me earlier, right?”

That tenuous grip on my temper slipped even more, but I held on tight.

“No.” Jabbing him in the chest with my finger, I said, “Earlier, I was *telling* you that I’d decided to go along with my father’s recommendation *and* do something that would help the Boston community out by investing in the Hartwell Foundation. They do a lot of fucking good around the region, Shawn, and I don’t want that to change. Now, I don’t know *where* all your anger is coming from, but maybe you need to take a few steps back and calm down, *think*, because I can’t see how in the hell me investing *my father’s money* in your family’s foundation somehow makes me guilty of whatever sin you think I committed.”

He glared at me, temper sparking in his eyes.

“Well?” I asked in a cool voice. My phone rang at that moment, the ringtone the one I’d selected for my mother. I didn’t answer. Whatever she wanted, it could wait a few minutes.

Shawn said nothing.

My heart, heavy in my chest, seemed to climb its way up my throat and lodge there. Swallowing the hurt caused by his silence, I told myself not to give up. I had to do this—we had to do this.

“I made a mistake when I jumped to conclusions about you,” I said. “You’re making one now. I messed up, but I know that. I also know what I want. Maybe it’s time you think things through and figure out what it is *you* want. If it’s me, then you need to figure out what the hell it is you’re so mad about and deal with it.”

My phone rang again.

And it was my mother's ringtone—again.

Frowning, I pulled the phone from my purse and looked at it. Turning away from Shawn, I answered. She wouldn't have called twice in a row so close together unless something was wrong.

"Mom?"

"Talia." Her voice was steady, but I knew her too well not to pick up on the undercurrent of fear. "Listen, your dad fell. We're on our way to the hospital. I don't want you to worry—"

"Is he all right?" I demanded, everything else falling away in that moment, save for a strange, cynical sort of amusement.

She didn't want me to *worry*?

The hesitant pause seemed to last a lifetime. "I...I don't know, honey. He hit his head, and there...there was blood. I know head wounds bleed and all. Why, I remember when you fell and hit your head while learning to ride a bike..."

She babbled on a few more seconds while I processed what she was saying.

As soon as she took a breath, I interrupted. "Which hospital?"

She told me, but my mind came up blank. I still wasn't that familiar with Boston. But I had a car with GPS and a phone too. I'd figure it out. "I'm on my way. It will take a while. I'm out in Plymouth, but I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Okay." She released a shaky breath. "Be careful, baby. I'll see you soon."

Gripping the phone like a talisman, I started to walk.

A hand came up and covered the door, preventing me from leaving.

"What's wrong?" Shawn's voice was incongruously gentle as opposed to the tension that still simmered in the air between us.

"Don't worry about it," I said, tugging on the doorknob ineffectually. "We'll have to finish talking later. I've got to go."

"Tally—"

Something akin to panic rising inside me, I jerked on the door. "Move, damn it! I have to go!"

He moved.

But halfway to my car, I realized he was right on my heels, and once we got there, he nimbly plucked the keys from my hand. More than a little dazed

by everything crashing through my mind, I stared at him dumbly. “Give me my keys. I told you I needed to go.”

“Wherever it is you have to go, I’m taking you.” He took my arm and escorted me to the passenger door.

I didn’t even think to argue. He opened the door and nudged me inside.

The oppressive heat wrapped around me like a strangulating fist, but it never occurred to me to do anything about it, even after Shawn started the car and pulled out of the parking lot.

He fiddled with the controls, and the air conditioner kicked on.

After several minutes, the cool, circulating air had eased the smothering heat.

I started to shiver, although it wasn’t from the AC, or anything external.

A nagging fear settled in my gut as my mind kept flashing back to the morning when Shawn had spent the night. We’d walked in to find my parents chatting and laughing, looking so happy.

What if he was really hurt?

I’d just *found* him.

“Tally.” Shawn’s hand took mine, his thumb stroking over the back of it. He squeezed gently. “Talk to me. What’s wrong?”

“My dad.” The words sounded like they came from far away, not from my own throat. “He...he fell. That was my mom. He fell and hit his head, and they’re going to the hospital.”

TWENTY-EIGHT

SHAWN

The sight of her pale face as it slowly drained of blood would linger with me for a long, long time. Fortunately, that expression would have company because her words were already haunting me.

She had thoroughly put me in my place, and she had been right to do so. The need to apologize burned in my throat like acid, but now wasn't the time.

We'd gotten to the hospital in record time, especially considering the typical traffic in Boston. For the past forty-five minutes, we'd sat in a small but nicely appointed private waiting room tucked off the side of the emergency department.

Talia's mom had been pacing the floor when a staff member escorted us to the room, and upon seeing her daughter, she'd rushed over, and the two women had hugged each other.

Florence had explained what had happened, to the best of her understanding, although she hadn't been in the room.

Willard, she'd told us, was having CT scans and other tests.

The seconds on the clock seemed to tick by with excruciating slowness. It had to be worse for Talia and her mom. The endless slow glide of time after Gran's stroke had been torture, so I knew from experience.

Maybe I should go get everybody coffee or something. Hell, at least that way I'd feel like I was of some use.

My phone buzzed, and I pulled it from my pocket. Conall's name flashed across the screen. I'd texted him earlier when I left the worksite and called him from the road once I knew what was going on. My partner and friend had said he'd keep in touch with Ben for the rest of the day, but he was certain Ben could handle everything—as long as neither of the Hales showed up.

Which reminded me I hadn't updated him about the last debacle.

We might have to consider breaking the contract with Ms. Hale—not that it was really breaking it. We did have an opt-out in our contracts for certain specific untenable situations. We'd never had to utilize it before, but I suspected even the devil would find Ms. Hale *untenable*.

I'd have to call him and give him the low-down on that mess, but later.

After reading the text, I shot Conall back a quick response.

Don't know anything yet. Have Ben call if he needs me.

Conall's response was almost immediate.

No need. I'm already heading out there. Called him earlier, and he updated me about the Hales. Figured it would be best if one of us was on hand to deal with them. You just worry about your girlfriend.

He added another quick text, asking that I keep him updated, and I assured him I would before tucking the phone away. After a quick look at the clock—fuck, only another five minutes had passed—I decided I'd see about coffee. Maybe the damn clock would move faster if I wasn't looking at it.

No sooner had I risen than came a knock at the door. It opened to reveal a woman in a lab coat with gray-streaked red hair, swept back into a ponytail. Her eyes were tired, but she had a smile on her face.

"Ms. Nicholson? Talia? Florence?"

TEN MINUTES LATER, after listening to the doctor's brief explanation on Willard's status, I was in a small treatment room in the emergency department with Talia, her mother, and father. I'd been prepared to stay out in the waiting room, but Talia had taken my hand and tugged, asking me to come with her.

Willard lay propped up in one of those miserable looking gurneys, a bandage on his forehead, and a pretty impressive looking bruise. He'd started to smile when he saw Florence and Talia, but it faded quickly, and he reached up to his brow.

"Will," Florence murmured, going to his side.

He took her hand. "Don't start worrying, sweetheart. It's just a concussion. I'll be fine."

Talia's hand tightened convulsively around mine, and I squeezed

reassuringly. I wanted to stroke her back, promise her everything would be fine, but that wasn't really anything I could do. So, I just stood there, holding her hand, and wishing I could fix everything.

Florence and Willard talked another minute before he shifted his attention toward us. Giving his daughter an abashed grin, he said, "This is what happens when I overdo it. You'd think I'd know better."

"Seventeen stitches," Talia said, her voice a little husky but otherwise steady. "You'll have a nice scar to serve as a reminder, Dad."

"I'll serve as a reminder," Florence muttered.

Instead of looking disgruntled or frustrated by the comment, Willard seemed rather pleased.

I wasn't surprised when he tugged Florence down to sit on the edge of the narrow bed, still holding her hand.

He beckoned for Talia to join them, and after she disentangled her hand and pulled away, I leaned back against the wall and waited quietly. She pulled a chair closer to the bed and took Willard's free hand.

The three of them made a picture.

A fist closed around my heart as I watched her.

She'd told me to figure out what I wanted.

But that was an easy enough thing to do.

I wanted her and had pretty much from the beginning.

Now, I just had to fix what I'd screwed up earlier.

SPYING my work truck in front of Willard's house, I made a mental note to text Conall and Ben to thank them.

"Somebody drove your truck out," Talia murmured, her voice distant.

"Yeah." She'd sounded that way, distant, ever since we left the hospital.

It wasn't the distance of anger, though. It was just...distance.

I didn't know how to bridge it, either. The need to pull her against me was overwhelming, but considering how things had been before she'd had taken the call from her mother, I wasn't certain I had the right to give her the comfort I wanted just yet.

I'd come pretty damn close to screwing things up with her.

Yeah, some might argue that she'd jumped to conclusions about me,

which she had, but that didn't give me license to do the same thing. We weren't grade school kids playing a game of *she did it first*.

Plus...I had to admit, while I didn't *like* the fact that she'd gone and made the assumption she had, I could see where she'd gotten the idea.

On the other hand, I'd just been flat out wrong. She'd never done a damn thing to warrant the shit I'd dumped on her. For the past couple of hours, I'd been brooding over what she'd said—and thinking about just why her actions had set me off.

The truth of it, once I figured it out, had hit me like a two-fisted punch, and I didn't like the head-ringing impact.

I had to apologize and just hope like hell I hadn't fucked things up too badly.

Clearing my throat, I slowed to an idle at the juncture close to the house. "Should I just park the car in front or go around to the garage?"

"What?"

Her voice was faint, almost like she was half asleep.

Looking at her, I found her staring through the windshield with a dazed expression on her face. My heart clutched inside my chest, and I wanted to grab her and haul her close, protect her from everything.

"Tally."

She blinked, then shook her head, focusing on me. "I'm sorry. My mind...I keep thinking about Dad."

Hoping I wasn't making a mistake, I pulled the car to a stop next to my truck, then turned off the ignition. Brushing her hair back, I said, "I don't know how you couldn't *not* be doing that. Today must have scared the hell out of you."

"Yeah." She offered a wan smile. "Thank you for bringing me home."

"No problem." I took the keys out of the ignition and climbed out.

She was already closing the door, eyes fixed on the large, lovely old home that was the Marlowe estate when I rounded the car. Still clutching her keys in my hand, I waited for her to look over at me.

"I'm sorry," I said quietly.

She inclined her head to the side in a silent question.

"For earlier. You were right. I shouldn't have jumped on you like I did." I inhaled a long breath. "I know why it happened, but it's sort of complicated. The reason isn't really relevant, either, because it has nothing to do with you and everything to do with me. I let my issues get in the way, and because of

that, I hurt you.” My throat, my chest, both of them were tight, and getting words out had become complicated, but I kept going. “I’m sorry. I hope you can forgive me.”

Talia took a step forward and cupped my face in her hands.

When she pressed a kiss to my lips, the crack in my heart split wide open, then sealed over, mended, strengthened.

Shaken, I wrapped my arms around her. “You told me to figure out what I want. I already know the answer to that. It’s you, Talia. It’s been you almost from the second we met.”

TWENTY-NINE

TALIA

Sometime during the drive to the hospital, a strange chill had settled over me. The fear that I might lose my father just after I'd found him had all but consumed me, the terror inside me one I couldn't voice. That inability, and the fear behind it, was likely the root of the surreal sense of cold that settled over me, encasing me from the heart out to my skin.

I'd heard Shawn talking as we pulled up to the house, but the words just barely connected.

But then, outside the car, he'd said he was sorry.

At first, I'd thought he was talking about Dad, and I'd almost told him to save the apology—my dad would be *fine*.

But he'd kept talking, and somehow, what he said penetrated that shell of ice. His words melted it and went straight on to melt my heart too.

Unable to say anything, I took his hand and led him inside.

The butler opened the door, and I had some vague thought that he looked like he wanted to ask me something, but he didn't. That was good, because I had only one thought in mind.

Getting Shawn up to my room, then getting both of us naked. Okay, that could be two thoughts, but there wasn't any need to be picky.

Dimly, I heard Shawn speak to Havens.

"...doing well, Florence...the night...Talia...rest."

"Of course..."

Then Shawn had his hand on mine and was guiding me to the staircase. The seconds blurred together until we were in my room, and then everything became crystalline.

Each second seemed etched in exquisite detail as he led me to the bed.

“You need to rest,” he murmured.

“No.” Wrapping my arms around his neck, I said, “I need you.”

Shawn cupped my face in his hands, blue-green eyes connecting with mine. Conflicting urges lit in the depths of his gaze, and I knew his need to take care of me was warring with other, baser urges.

I wasn't opposed to fighting dirty.

Rising on my toes, I wrapped my arms around his neck and pressed my mouth to his. I didn't kiss him, though. I licked my tongue along the line of his lower lip, then nipped at it. Dipping one hand into his hair, I raked my nails across his scalp, then tugged at the silky strands.

He groaned, hands spasming before dropping to grip my waist. His fingers slid lower, and I felt them slip under the hem of my shirt, stroking my skin.

“I need you,” I told him again, arching closer, my shirt creeping higher. “I need to feel you against me, inside me.”

He groaned. “Fuck.”

“That's the plan. Let's fuck, Shawn.”

He shuddered, and his control broke. The movements came so fast, I couldn't separate one from the other, but then he was boosting me up, his hands going to my thighs, pushing my dress up even as he lifted me. The bed was under me a second later, with his weight crushing into me before I had time to draw even one breath. His leg pushed between my thighs, separating them as he pressed his mouth to my neck.

My head spun as he began to kiss his way down to the line of my collarbone, then to my breasts. They were so full and heavy, aching for his touch, and he gave it, both hands molding the taut flesh as he closed his mouth over the tip of the right. I cried out as he tugged it between his teeth before sucking deep.

“Shawn!” Squirming against him, I tried to lift closer. I wanted him so bad I *hurt* with it.

“I'll make it better,” he said, shifting until he could rub his thigh against my core.

I hadn't realized I'd said it out loud, but as long as he *did* make it better...

A moment later, his hand was in my panties, his fingers pushing deep in my body. He thrust, rough and fast, while circling his thumb over my clit. I came in a hard, sudden rush that left me breathless.

“Damn, Tally...” He shifted his weight once more, now lying between

my thighs. He kissed me, hard and deep, and so wet it was like he was making raw, dirty love to my mouth.

I was quivering, fingers digging into his arms and body shaking by the time he lifted his head.

“Inside me,” I said, barely managing to gasp the words out. “Now.”

He didn’t argue. Levering up onto his knees, he tore at his jeans, ripping open the fly, dragging down the zipper. I fumbled with my underwear, but it was awkward with my thighs spread wide and him kneeling between.

He solved the problem by flipping me and urging me onto my hands and knees. Legs still half-trapped by the sexy little boy shorts I’d pulled on that morning, I started to raise so I could deal with them, but he nudged me back down and with my thighs still together, thrust inside.

A harsh cry ripped out of me.

The stark vulnerability of the position, combined with the intense tightness of his penetration, almost sent me straight into pleasure overload. He slammed into me again, hands clutching my hips and holding me at just the right angle as he drove inside me again, then again.

Intense, erotic bliss shattered through me, building and building in intensity.

I couldn’t handle it. I knew I couldn’t.

“Shawn,” I gasped out, but the sound was muffled against the comforter, barely a faint whisper.

My pussy spasmed, clenching and going tight around him. His cock jerked in response.

It was too much.

That hard, that fast, I came, his name escaping me on a keening wail.

“More,” he demanded, hauling me up so my back was plastered to his front. He took my hand and guided it between my thighs. “Stroke yourself, Tally.”

Dazed, still wrapped up in the bliss of climax, I did.

At the same time, he lifted me, strong, hard hands dragging me up, then down. But he wasn’t *fast*. No, he went with a slow rhythm that let me feel *every single ridge...every single pulse*, and when his cock throbbed inside me, when it swelled and stretched me, it was so damn delicious, I thought I’d die from the sheer, indescribable bliss.

“Stay with me,” Shawn murmured against my ear as he stroked inside me once more. “Stay...”

“Shawn.” It was a whisper. A plea. A promise.

I felt him coming a moment later, and it was none too soon because my body took over, responding to his ministrations and the torturous glide of my fingers over my own flesh, the nub of my clit so hard and erect under my fingers, it almost hurt.

When it was over, long, long moments later, the two of us lay on the bed, Shawn curled against my back with his arm thrown over my middle.

“Stay with me,” I whispered, an unconscious echo of what he’d said to me just moments earlier.

“Try to make me leave.” He tugged me closer and nuzzled my neck.

I went to respond, but sleep came and grabbed me, dragging me under.

WE BOTH SLEPT.

I woke before he did, and far earlier than I should have.

A glimpse at the clock told me it wasn’t even three in the morning, and I muffled a groan as I cuddled closer to Shawn, burrowing in until I could press my face against his chest.

He grumbled sleepily under his breath but made no response, other than to throw his arm around my waist and haul me closer.

This, I thought, was bliss. Lying there in his arms, my face against his chest and his chin on my head, arms tight around me, this was every dream I’d never let myself have.

Daring to ease forward, I pressed a kiss to his chest, then rubbed my cheek against the soft, smooth warmth. “Shawn...”

He murmured something under his breath and curved his hand around my neck.

I could have slept there, happily, forever, but for a cool brush of air over my flesh. Shivering, I squirmed closer to him.

“You’re cold,” he mumbled, voice thick, heavy.

“A little.” I didn’t reach for the blankets, though. I wanted to stay this way with him. Forever sounded like a good time frame. I had no desire to do anything but keep cuddling with him.

Shawn chuckled and shifted, maneuvering us even closer before pulling the blankets up. Brushing my hair back, he asked, “Better?”

Instead of answering, I pressed a kiss to his lips.

He smiled. In the dim light, I couldn't make out the intense, beautiful color of his eyes, but I was able to see as the smile slowly faded, replaced by concern. "Are you all right? I know you've got to be worried about your dad."

"I'm...dealing," I said. "It's about all I can do. I'm glad you're here with me."

He cupped my cheek, the tender touch practically melting me. "Nowhere else I'd rather be."

I didn't doubt him, but there were unspoken things between us still, things that filled the room with a quiet, fraught tension. The normal peace of early, early morning had taken on a strange quality, humming with that tension that grew weightier with every passing second.

And my father wasn't the source.

"Why did you get so angry about the fact that I'm planning to invest in the Hartwell Foundation?" Nerves twanged inside, even asking, but I had to know. There was something deeper than the anger I'd seen earlier, and I needed to understand it. "I don't want to rehash that fight or anything, but we have to talk about this."

His lashes swept down as he sighed, but to my relief, there was no sign he was upset over the question. "I know we do."

He sat up, taking care to pull the blankets up over me before sliding from the bed.

Unable to remain lying down as he got to his feet, I sat up, propping my back against the headboard, dragging the comforter up to combat the chill now that I didn't have him there to help keep me warm.

"Is it okay if I turn on a light?" he asked, voice quiet.

"Yes."

A soft, diffuse light filled the room a moment later, emanating from the lamp on the nightstand. He dragged a hand down his face as he turned away and looked around.

"If you're thirsty, there's a beverage service over there." I gestured in the direction, remembering my surprise when Havens had first pointed that out to me when I'd come to stay with Dad a few months earlier. "It's stocked. Like...*really* stocked."

He shot me a smile. "You want anything?"

"Wouldn't mind a bottle of water, but you have whatever you want."

He took me at my word and came back with a tumbler of scotch, the bottle tucked under his arm as he carried a glass of ice for me. He passed the bottle and glass over and put the scotch on the nightstand before sitting. One foot braced on the floor, the other on the bed with his knee bent, he faced me.

“You probably noticed I’m quite a bit younger than Matt. My parents weren’t planning on having me. Dad had gotten snipped, but he was one of those guys that the procedure didn’t work on. You can imagine their surprise when Mom ended up having morning sickness and craving beets and bacon all the time.” He made a face. “I don’t get the beets thing. I hate beets. So does she, unless she’s pregnant, apparently. They weren’t expecting me, but they love me like crazy. My brothers...well, by the time I came along, they were pretty much a unit. I was always the odd one out, although I don’t think any of them intentionally tried to make me feel that way.”

He swirled his scotch around in his glass, stared down into it for a long moment before taking a sip, and going back to pondering the amber liquid as if searching for some hidden answer.

He didn’t find it.

When he looked at me, his eyes were filled with an emotion so bleak, it made my heart clench in my chest.

“I know they love me, but I’ve never quite...fit. When it came time for me to start school, I was always getting in trouble. Mom and Dad sent me to the same private school my brothers went to, and all of them were excellent students, especially Matt and Jamie, so the school expected me to be like them, and I was the opposite. I had the hardest time being still, paying attention, listening...reading wasn’t so bad, but math and that sort of thing was almost impossible, and anything that bored me...”

“You’ve got ADHD, don’t you?” I asked when his words trailed off.

He crooked a grin at me. “Nailed it in one. My parents didn’t figure it out until I was in second grade, and that was because they elected to pull me out of school and put me with a private tutor who suggested they take me to get tested for it. I’m so ADHD, my ADHD has ADHD, basically.”

I smiled, because I could see he needed it. “I take it having a tutor helped.”

“Yeah. He knew how to work with special needs kids.” Shawn made a face. “I fucking hated being *labeled* special needs for the longest damn time, but finally came to grips with it. My brain is wired differently. It’s what makes me who I am. That’s my normal.”

“I *like* your normal.” I laid a hand on his thigh. “Actually, I’m pretty damn crazy about your normal. About you.”

“Same goes.” He covered my hand with his own and smiled at me. “Of course, that normal drove my brothers nuts, especially Matt. He was an adult and already working at the foundation before I was even old enough to understand *what* the foundation was. The tradition is for all of us to attend meetings starting at twelve, but for understandable reasons, my parents held off on having me go until I was fifteen. It wasn’t like we went to the full board meetings or anything. These were specially arranged meets with the kids of the family in mind so we’d learn what we needed to know about the family responsibilities and all. Since I didn’t start going until later, and since my brothers were already involved in doing what they did...by the time I started going, my brothers treated me almost like an afterthought. A fifth wheel.”

“Have you ever talked to them about this?” I asked.

“I’ve tried.” He jerked a shoulder and took another sip of scotch, no longer looking at me. “One thing they seemed to hear was that we needed to be more active with the foundation, other than just showing up at galas and shit. Every year, we spent a few weeks working with Habitat for Humanity, either somewhere here in the states or in a country that’s been hit by a natural disaster or something.”

“Sounds right up your alley.”

He grinned. “One thing that’s fun is seeing my staid older brother all sweaty and grouchy as he lumbers around trying to figure out how to do what I’ve been doing since I was eighteen. He’s like a fish out of water. I suppose I shouldn’t take so much pleasure in it.”

“Nah. We take our giggles where we can.”

He lifted my hand and kissed it. “I adore you.”

My heart fluttered.

“Other than being more active in helping out, though, my brothers don’t tend to listen to me when it comes to anything serious. It’s like they think I’m still the ten-year-old kid who thought I could fly if I had a cape and ran fast enough and jumped high enough.” His smile didn’t reach his eyes. “We each received an inheritance when we turned eighteen. Some of it was specifically earmarked for education, but the rest, we can use for whatever, although there are conditions on it. We’re not supposed to reinvest our money in the foundation. It’s meant to be used for *us*. But...” He hesitated and rubbed the

back of his neck. “We get these reports. As a Hartwell, I’m already on the board of the foundation, so I get the same information, financials, and all of that. I...well, the work Conall and I do, we’re good at it. I used some of the money from my inheritance to buy half of the company from him. Conall’s also a fricking genius when it comes to things like the stock market and cryptocurrency. You wouldn’t think it to look at him, but he can take five dollars and turn it into five hundred practically overnight.”

He lapsed into a silence that lasted well over a minute.

I drank some water and waited, although I was dying to hear where this was going. I had a feeling I knew.

“I invested about fifteen percent of what remained of my inheritance, with Conall advising me along the way. Within a couple of years...” He shot me a smug smile. “Well, between my investments and the company, I’m sitting damn pretty now, and I don’t need a penny of Hartwell money. I’ve had to have Conall help me do it since I’m officially not supposed to put my money back into the foundation, but I’ve already paid back the money I received from my trust, and more. Like about five times more over the past years.”

“And how much is that?” I asked.

He named a sum, and my jaw dropped open.

Gently, he reached over and pressed a finger to my chin, nudging up until my mouth was closed once more. “I was an asshole yesterday, there’s no way around it. It’s just...” He blew out a breath and looked down. “All this time, I’ve been feeding money back into the foundation, knowing my brothers don’t think I’m even competent enough to discuss the ins and outs of all the money trouble we’re having, and when you came along and told me you planned to invest in the place, it was like...hell, I felt like you decided you were going to step in and save us because I couldn’t do it.”

“Shawn.” I wiggled out of the blankets and rolled to my knees, wrapping my arms around him.

He hugged me to him, the chill of the glass he still held pressing into me. “I’m sorry,” he murmured into my hair. “I’ve got these issues, and I let them affect how I was seeing things. I shouldn’t have taken it out on you.”

“It’s okay.” Nuzzling him, I squeezed tighter before easing back. “You know you can’t keep all of this bottled up inside. It’s affecting you too much.”

Grimacing, he tossed back the rest of his scotch. “I’ll get a handle on it. Just telling you helped.”

“But I’m not the one you need to talk to,” I said gently. “Talk to your brothers.”

“Hell.” He groaned and shoved a hand through his hair. “It’s not like they’ll listen.”

Cocking a brow at him, I said, “How much money did you say you’ve managed to funnel back into the foundation again?”

A smile twitched at his lips.

“Look at it this way,” I said, leaning in to kiss him. “Imagine the look on Matt’s face when you tell him that figure.”

THIRTY

SHAWN

Jamie leaned against the deck's railing, sipping a beer as I finished flipping the steaks.

"You okay?"

I didn't look at him. "Yeah. Just things on my mind."

"Figured as much," he said. "You usually aren't the one to call us and say we need to talk. Although I can't say I mind not having to be the one getting food on the table for all of us."

Now, I *did* look at him—and grinned. "Not our fault none of us are into the fancy gourmet lifestyle you so love. But I can manage meat and potatoes."

Jamie flipped me off. "It's a good thing Keith never wants to meet up and talk serious shit. We'd die of pizza overload. That jackass can burn water."

"Nah." I shrugged, hearing the door to the house slide open. "Keith would just burn the pot since he'd forget to fill it *up* with water."

Keith strode onto the porch. "If you two idiots are going to make fun of my culinary skills, I won't let you have any of the cake I brought."

"Cake?" I glanced at him. "Did Veronica make it?"

"Nope. Picked it up from the bakery."

"You shouldn't have gone to so much trouble," Jamie said, straight-faced.

"Yeah, yeah. I sweated and labored and broke a fricking nail." Keith shoulder-bumped him and leaned against the railing next to him, tipping the beer he'd grabbed from the fridge in my direction. "Matt's finishing his phone call. Said he'd be out in a minute."

With a nod, I took the steaks from the grill and dumped them on a platter, going over what I planned to say for what felt like the ten millionth time. I

hadn't eaten much of anything all day, and although normally, a steak and baked potato was right up my alley, I had no desire to eat anything right now.

Matt came out onto the deck a couple minutes later, carrying the dish with the potatoes in it, his face relaxed, a faint smile that told me he'd been talking to Gabrielle. Business calls never made him look like that.

Good, I thought. At least he wouldn't be in a shitty mood when I started out.

"So, what did you need to talk about?" Keith asked as he cut into his steak.

"We can eat first," Matt said.

"It's okay." Shaking my head, I reached for the drink in front of me, a double of scotch I'd poured when I went inside to grab the toppings for the potatoes. Beer wasn't going to cut it right now. After taking a sip, I put the glass down and looked at them one at a time before picking up the folder I'd brought out earlier, along with my drink and other stuff. Flipping it open, I took out the papers and passed them out, giving one to each of my brothers.

"What's this?" Keith asked, frowning.

Matt's eyes widened a fraction, and I knew he'd already made the connection.

"That's the information for the incorporation of a company that has made a number of large donations to the Hartwell Foundation," I said, blood rushing up the back of my neck.

"Conall's been making these donations?" Matt asked in disbelief.

"No."

It wasn't me who'd answered.

Matt and Keith both looked at Jamie. Jamie, however, was looking at me.

After a second, he looked at Matt. "HM Enterprises, Matt. I bet the advance from my next book that the *H* is for Hartwell, and the *M* is for McDowd. Conall might be the one who signed the incorporation papers, but I suspect all the money going into this so-called company is from Shawn, not Conall. Conall just put his name on the paperwork so if anybody took a look from the foundation, they wouldn't automatically make the connection to Shawn."

Matt shifted his gaze to me now, eyes narrowed, expression thoughtful. "Since you haven't said anything to correct Jamie, I'm guessing he's right."

"Pretty much." I hitched up a shoulder, hoping I sounded nonchalant.

"Why?" Keith sounded befuddled. "That's *your* money."

“I don’t need it.” Unable to stop the smug smile from spreading across my face, I told them what I’d told Tally. “Conall is a fricking genius when it comes to the stock market and cryptocurrency. He gave me some pointers early on, and I made good investments. Between that and the business we’ve got going, I’m...well, I made enough to cover what I received in my inheritance several times over within the first couple of years. I didn’t need the money. The foundation, however? It did. It’s been in trouble for a while. Took a while to figure out how to invest in it without causing a ripple.”

“And why are you just now telling us this?” Matt asked.

I cocked a brow at him. “Seriously? When was the last time you talked to *me* about the problems the foundation was having? I think it was...oh, maybe the last time it snowed in hell.”

Matt opened his mouth, then closed it. A few seconds later, he nodded. “Point taken. Although you never really showed much interest. Hell, you don’t even attend the meetings unless Dad or Grandpa drag you.”

“That’s bullshit.” I kept my voice steady even though frustration had me wanting to shout the words. “I showed up at the meetings like clockwork up until you kept shutting down everything I tried to bring up.”

“That’s not true,” Keith said. “We’ve been doing the Habitat for Humanity thing for almost five years now.”

“And how long did it take me to talk you into that?” I didn’t give him time to answer. “Not to mention all the *other* things I suggested that you shot down, one right after the other.” I held up a hand. “But I don’t want to rehash all that old history. I didn’t tell you about the money because all of you still treat me like I’m ten years old and about to wreck everything I touch. I’m not a kid anymore, and I’m tired of being dismissed by my brothers.”

“We don’t—”

“Keith.” Jamie cut him off. “Yes, we do. All of us.”

“Jamie’s right,” Matt said softly. He looked at me as he spoke. “I’m sorry, Shawn. That doesn’t fix it, but it’s all I’ve got. That, and my word that I’m going to try to do better, starting now.”

“Same,” Jamie said.

Keith was quiet a moment, then with a faint smile, he said, “Yeah, me too.”

SOMEHOW, I managed to find my appetite.

Jamie rose and went into the house, rummaging around until he found another bottle of scotch, bringing it out, along with three other glasses.

We ended up sprawled on the wide wooden steps of the deck, talking about the foundation. The conversation segued into the money issues—and the root of it.

“It’s Gary Howell.” Disgust in his voice and stamped on his feature, Matt braced his back against the railing behind him as he faced us. “Asshole has been with us for more than twenty years and started skimming from us back when Dad was running things, but it was at a much smaller amount. The forensics accountant I hired to look things over suspects that Howell got greedy because he knew I was looking into upgrading the software we use to keep track of donations and expenses, plus I was trimming the fat everywhere I could to save money. Cindy, the forensics accountant, as well as the team at the private investigation firm she works with all think Howell is probably planning to rabbit soon.”

“Cops?” Jamie asked, swirling his scotch in his glass, a scowl tightening his features.

“That’s where I’ve been most of the day.” Matt looked tired, but the grim smile on his face held an air of satisfaction. “Cindy and Tom, the head PI with the group, went with me to turn everything over. I got a call on my way over that the detective I spoke with was able to secure a warrant. Howell is being picked up even as we speak, and Cindy has one of her men watching Howell’s place in case he *does* try to rabbit.”

“Good.” Keith sounded pissed. “I’d hate to have to run him down somewhere in the islands and beat the shit out of him before hauling him back here because he thought he’d just hide out in some country with no extradition laws.”

That made me smile, because honestly, I could see Keith doing just that.

“Ah, just so you know...” Matt gave me a pained look. “Talia is somewhat aware that there was somebody embezzling.”

“What?” I scowled at him.

“She guessed.” He held up a hand to stop me from saying anything. “When she came by the other day, she had some questions. That woman has a mind like a steel trap. She’s crazy sharp. Put two and two together and because I didn’t want her wondering, I only confirmed we did have an issue that was about to be resolved. I also asked her not to mention it to you

because I planned on updating everybody once I had the hardcore answers. Don't be mad at her. I texted you a couple times this weekend to see if you had time to talk, but you told me it would have to be this week...so...well, we just talked."

I frowned into my drink as I turned over what Matt had said. Finally, I shrugged. "Her dad fell and hit his head. He'll be fine, but she spent a lot of time at the hospital with him, and I was with her. Plus, I've been thinking through everything I needed to tell you guys."

Matt eyed me warily. "Are we cool?"

"Yeah. And no, I'm not mad at Tally."

He nodded, relaxing minutely. "You know she wants to invest in the foundation, right?"

"Yeah. That's between her, her father, and the foundation. It's their money. But for the record? I'm not planning on letting her go."

"Hell, you went and fell for her," Keith said, a wide grin splitting his face.

I flipped him off. "It's your fault, you know. You started all of this."

THIRTY-ONE

TALIA

You busy tonight?

The text came in mid-morning on Wednesday, and I smiled when I saw it. I hadn't talked to Shawn since Monday night, and I'd had to fight the urge to call or text him last night to see how the talk had gone with his brothers.

Not that I know of. You got plans for me?

His reply came back almost immediately, but instead of one of the funny or dirty replies I'd gotten used to receiving, he sent an address.

Remember the place? It's where we met.

Warmth rushed through me. How could I forget? After I responded, he texted back with a time and asked if I could meet him there—and to come hungry.

“What are you smiling about?”

Dad's question came just as I sent Shawn a final text, and I looked up to find Willard in his wheelchair, coming toward me. He had a bandage on his forehead, but it didn't quite cover the spectacular bruise.

Neither the bruise nor the bandage took away from the amused glint in his eye as he studied me with a knowing look.

“Ah...” Blood rushed to my cheeks under that gaze.

“Let me guess,” he said, tapping a finger to his chin. “It has to do with Shawn.”

“You nailed it. We've got plans for dinner.” Hesitating, I asked, “Will you be okay if I go out?”

He waved a hand. “Of course. Havens will be here. You know that.”

Mom had gone back to Salem yesterday. She still had work to do, although I knew Dad was fighting the urge to tell her he'd take care of her. It

was in the way he looked at her, in the way he spoke to her. Not that my mom needed anybody *to* take care of her. She'd never needed it, although after spending her whole life working so hard, she definitely *deserved* an easier time of it.

"You and Shawn have fun." He winked. "But not too much fun. Otherwise, I'll have to talk with him."

Rolling my eyes, I said, "And should I talk to you or to Mom about having *too much fun*?"

To my delight, Dad blushed even as he chuckled.

"You two had a good time together," I said softly. "Well, until..." I waved a vague hand toward his brow.

"We did." He all but preened. "And don't worry about this little bump." He grimaced and touched a finger to it. "When you're in my condition, you have to be more aware of your body and when you're overdoing it. I overdid it. I knew I was doing it but didn't take care and get some rest. This is the result of my carelessness. And the good news...it didn't seem to throw your mother off."

"Of course not." I went closer and crouched in front of him. "I don't think she ever got over you. It will take more than this to throw her off now that she realizes the truth of what happened all those years ago."

"I hope so." He had a look in his eyes as he took my hand. "I have to tell you, Talia. I never got over her, either."

FLICKERING golden light emanated from inside the far back of the building when I pushed the door open.

"Shawn?"

"Back here."

He emerged from a room in the back, and my breath caught at the sight of him.

He was such a beautiful man, but now, as he came toward me in a pair of black trousers and a crisp white dress shirt that highlighted broad shoulders and set off skin that had tanned from working outside in the sun, he just about took my breath away.

"Wow." Leaning back against the door, I blew out a breath. "I feel

underdressed.”

“Actually, considering what I’ve got planned for you, you’re overdressed.” Hot eyes traveled over me, making me feel like the pretty, kelly-green dress I’d worn was made of gossamer strands, utterly transparent. “You’re stunning, Tally.”

The rough timbre of his voice almost melted me, and my bones were already nearly putty just by the look in his eyes.

“If you keep looking at me like that, I won’t be fit to go out into public.”

“Not a problem.” He chuckled as he closed the distance between us and lowered his head. Lips to my ear, he murmured, “We’re not going out in public.”

He nipped my ear, and the sensation jolted through me, making thought impossible. As he took my hand and led me through the building, his words bounced around through my mind, but they didn’t really connect until he led me into the room where I’d glimpsed the soft golden light.

“Oh.” My heart fluttered in my chest as I took in the sight before me.

Candles, tucked inside pretty hurricane lamps, were all over the room, more than a dozen of them, their flickering light muted and gentle, playing softly over the blanket spread out in the middle of the bare floor. On it lay platters of food, fruits, cheeses, sliced meats...chocolate covered strawberries. There was a bottle of wine in a bucket of ice, as well as two wine glasses, a delicate, golden liquid inside each.

“Wow,” I whispered.

Shawn wrapped his arms around me from behind and pressed his mouth to my ear. “You said that already.”

“I can’t think of anything else to say.” A raw, sweet ache settled in my chest as I stared at the romantic display he’d created. “What’s all this for?”

“It’s for you. Because I wanted to do something for you.” He nuzzled my neck. “I talked to my brothers. It was...weird, but I think things will get better.”

Turning in his arms, I pressed a kiss to his mouth. “Good. So, is this my thank you?”

He shrugged. “If you want. But I wanted to do something for you...just because.”

I tried to kiss him again, but he eased away. “No. Later.”

I would have pouted, only he gave me a look that turned my blood to molten lava. He took my hand. As he led me over to the blanket spread laid

out for us, I told myself I could be patient. Maybe.

Patience proved to be a worthy virtue.

Shawn wouldn't let me do anything, not even serve myself my own food—or feed myself.

I'd never felt so indulged. As he lifted the last chocolate-covered strawberry, I pushed his hand away. "No more," I said weakly. "I'm so full I feel like I might pop."

"Can't have that." Eyes on mine, he slid the berry into his own mouth.

I felt like I was watching something dirty. He made that simple act incredibly sensual, his lips closing over the berry, teeth sinking in slowly.

My heart skipped a couple of beats before kicking into double time.

"Are you trying to kill me?"

The smile that curved his lips was pure sin. "I don't know what you're talking about. Here."

He pushed my wine into my hand before rising. "You relax while I clean up."

I could have argued that I hadn't done much of anything since arriving, but if he wanted to wait on me hand and foot for the evening, I wasn't going to argue with him.

Besides, my bones were so soft and liquid now, I wasn't sure I trusted them to hold my weight. Who knew simply having a man feed you could be so utterly seductive?

It took him little time to clean up the remains of the meal and clear the blanket. When he returned, he stretched out and put his head in my lap. Heart stuttering as I looked into his eyes, I brushed his hair back.

"Want some good news?" he asked softly.

"Sure." I continued to stroke back his thick, dark hair, the strands curling around my fingers.

"I sold this building today."

Oddly, I felt a pang in my chest, but I managed a smile. "That's lovely news. I'm kind of sad, though. This is where we met."

"Yeah...but I imagine the new owner will let you come in any time you want. There will be a private office you can make use of at your will." His lids drooped, that faint smile taking on an even more seductive bent. "He'd be particularly accommodating if you were to come in wearing a dress like that one and no panties."

My mouth went dry.

My brain went blank.

My panties went damp.

It took a few moments to connect the dots, thanks to him scrambling my brains.

“You bought your own building?”

“Well, it wasn’t *completely* mine,” he said. “The bank owned a fair share of it. So, really, I bought it from them.”

“Why?”

He moved then, all lazy grace and strength, twisting and rolling onto his knees to crouch in front of me, so close if I swayed forward even an inch, our mouths would touch.

“It’s where we met,” he said, the words starkly simple. “I kept talking to everybody who wanted to buy it, and thinking...*I don’t want these people here.*”

“Oh.” It was official. I was going to melt into a puddle of sappy goo right there in front of him. Heart so full I thought it was split open from pure happiness, I pressed my brow to his and cupped his cheek. “Oh.”

He rubbed his nose against mine before sitting back on his haunches.

“What are you going to do with this place? It’s not exactly set up to be a house.”

“Well, the top floor works fine as an apartment, really.” He shrugged, eyes on my mouth. “I was actually thinking maybe you could move in with me...once I have that floor ready.”

“I...” Once more, he’d managed to completely stun me.

“We left it partly unfinished, though, so the new owner could decide which way they wanted to go. So I have to finish it, and it will have to wait until after we finish our current projects. Then it needs to be completely furnished. All of that will take a while, a few months. And I’m not going to make this the official office until Conall is ready to retire, and I’m not sure when that’ll happen. So...you’ve got time, you know.” He sounded a little nervous now.

Surprisingly, that made me feel a little *less* nervous. “Conall?”

“Yeah.” He jerked a shoulder up in a shrug. “I’m buying him out once he’s ready to retire, which will be soon. I already own half the business. Right now, the office is in the same place it’s been for the past thirty years, but I’m planning on moving in here once I’m in charge. I’ve already talked it over with him, and he’s cool with it, but I’m not doing anything until he’s

ready to step down.”

“I see.” I also saw something else—he was still nervous. Babbling, even.

“He’d probably be okay with moving operations here now, but—”

Pressing my mouth to his, I cut the stream of words off.

He made a noise low in his throat, then cupped the back of my neck. Nibbling his lower lip, I rolled onto my knees and wrapped my arms around his shoulders. Shawn shifted, then went to his back, pulling me with him so I ended up sprawled across his chest.

“Shawn.” Lifting my head, I peered down at him.

He tangled a hand in my hair and waited.

“Fascinating as all of that is...can you tell me later? I want to hear more about the plans you mentioned you had for me.”

His eyes grew heated. But instead of talking, he moved, rolling so he had me on my back. Brushing his mouth over mine, he murmured, “Now it’s time for my dessert.”

The raw sensuality of his voice left me shivering.

Then he began to kiss me, tongue licking into my mouth with such sheer, open carnality, he might as well already have stripped both of us naked and be thrusting deep, deep inside me. My breasts swelled, nipples drawn so tight, they hurt. Between my thighs, I was already wet, my pussy clenching in urgent demand.

When he broke the kiss to trail a line of them down my neck, I gripped his shoulders.

“Shawn...please.”

“Be patient.”

Patient...

I heard that probably a dozen times over what felt like *hours*. At the same time, it felt like minutes, the sensual torture he heaped on me turning my blood to lava and my bones to wax. My clothes might as well have disappeared, they fell away so easily. Soon, I was sprawled naked on the thick, fluffy blanket with Shawn lying between my thighs.

He gave the swollen folds between my thighs a long, lazy lick.

With a sharp cry, I arched up and cried out his name. “Shawn, *please!*”

“Delicious,” he said, voice practically a purr.

“Stop teasing!”

“Patience, Tally.”

I shoved my hands into his hair and hauled him closer, shamelessly

thrusting my hips up and rocking against him, desperate for the relief he could give. “Screw patience.”

He chuckled against me, and the vibration of the sound was enticingly sweet. But it wasn't as good as his tongue swirling against my clitoris, or the pressure of his fingers pushing inside me, two of them, opening and twisting before he withdrew, then screwing them back inside.

A choked sob tore from my throat.

He pulled back and blew a puff of air against me.

Whimpering, I tried to pull him closer by twining one thigh around his shoulders, but he pushed his hands against my inner thighs and spread me open, *wide* open. Lifting his head, he stared at me, taking in the exposed, wet core before flicking a look up at me.

Shaking, I tried to tug him closer.

“I'm going to lick you up, gorge on this sweet honey until you're right on the verge of climax. Then, I'm going to stop.”

“Shawn...”

His eyes burned into me. “Then I'll do it again. Maybe a third time. And when you're desperate, I'm going to sink my dick inside you. You'll be so ready, so tight, so wet, it will be like fucking a fist, and you'll come almost as soon as I thrust into you. But I won't let that be the only time.”

I felt like I was about to come right then, just from hearing him talk about what he planned to do.

“Stop teasing me,” I told him, my voice gone throaty and rough.

“But it's so much fun.” He lowered his head, eyes holding mine, and proceeded to do just what he'd described.

Three times, he brought me to the verge, and when he finally pulled back and levered onto his knees, I was shaking, my body drenched with sweat and my mind a haze of need and turbulent hunger.

“If you...” I panted, unable to finish what I wanted to say as I watched him unbutton his shirt.

“If I...what?” The taunting smile only made him look more deliciously wicked.

My belly tightened, and I curled my fingers into the blanket beneath me. “Stop teasing me and...” The words trapped in my throat.

He tossed his shirt aside and got to his feet, stripping out of his trousers. Once he was naked, he came down over me. Cock thick and hard against my belly, he murmured, “What do you want, Tally? Tell me.”

I glared at him.

He rubbed his lips over mine. “Tell me you want me to fuck you. I want to hear those dirty words come from your pretty mouth. Say it...and I’ll fuck you.”

“Fuck me, Shawn,” I said raggedly.

“Good girl.” He nipped my lip and moved.

I didn’t have a chance to catch my breath before he thrust inside me—and I came.

It was rough and shattering, and I was still shaking from the impact when I felt another climax building within as he filled me again and again.

“Shawn...” I tried to speak, but I had no breath this time, and he was kissing me, anyway. Curling my arms around him, I held on tight.

He went to his back, dragging me with him until I straddled him.

“Ride me, Tally,” he rasped against my mouth.

I sat up, hands braced on his chest.

He stared up at me, his hands cupping my breasts roughly. Sharp tugs at my nipples sent arrows of sensation straight down to my core, and I jolted against him, shaking.

“That’s it...more,” he said, voice thick.

I moved faster, chasing the orgasm I could feel hovering just out of reach.

He gripped my hips, lifting me up, pulling me down.

And then it hit.

We both came, hard and fast.

Shawn hauled me down to him, his mouth claiming mine in a hungry kiss.

Against my chest, I could feel his heart thudding, pounding in rhythm with mine.

The orgasm shuddered through me and left me quivering, muscles jerking in small twitches that seemed to last forever.

He hugged me then, arms coming around me with a gentleness that seemed almost at odds with the rough passion from just seconds ago. But it wasn’t. He went to his side, tucking me against him. It shouldn’t have been so comfortable, so easy to lay there with him like that. Yet it was, and I didn’t want to move from this spot.

“Tally...I need to tell you something,” he murmured against my brow after our breathing had slowed.

“Uh huh...?”

“I love you.”

My heart had finally slowed but kicked up again, banging hard against my chest. Slowly, I pushed up onto my elbow, staring into his eyes.

He watched me with a somber expression. “I know it seems like it’s fast, and I’m not expecting anything from you, but I—”

“Be quiet,” I said, kissing him. “Just...be quiet.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Taking a deep breath, I let his words settle over me, felt the rightness of them.

“Shawn...I have to tell you something.” A smile curved my lips as I lifted my head and met his gaze. “I love you too.”

THIRTY-TWO

SHAWN

“You ready for this?”

Talia looked at me with a weak smile. “If I say no, can we turn around and leave?”

Stopping in the middle of the sidewalk that led up to Jamie’s house, I pulled her against me. Arms around her waist, I rubbed my nose against hers affectionately. I could see the nerves in her eyes. “They’re going to love you, Tally. Besides, you’ve already met Matt. He’s the hard-ass of all of them, and he likes you just fine.”

She made a face.

Chuckling, I kissed her nose. “Tell you what. If you decide you want to bail early, just say the word. We can head back to our building and spend the rest of the day fucking each other’s brains out.”

She rolled her eyes. “So romantic.”

“Hey, I used up every bit of romance I have for the year earlier this week. It will be January at the earliest before you see another speck of tenderness from me, baby.” Happy to see her smiling, I backed away and took her hand. Then, despite my teasing, I lifted our joined hands and kissed the back of hers. “You ready?”

“I guess.” She heaved out a sigh.

I didn’t offer any more reassurances. The only thing that would make her feel better was actually biting the bullet and getting everything over with. Talia wasn’t shy by any means, but meeting new people wasn’t particularly easy for her.

She wasn’t just meeting the rest of my brothers, but their girlfriends too. Maybe that was why she seemed so nervous. Regardless, I had little concern

that once she'd met Gabrielle and Veronica, she'd relax. As for Jamie's girlfriend, I didn't really know the quiet, refined Olivia, but she seemed pretty nice, if somewhat reserved.

Once inside, it was Matt who stepped up to greet us first, punching me lightly on the shoulder, then smiling at Talia before introducing Gabrielle. She'd flown in the past day, and they'd be flying back out to her ranch early Monday.

Matt planned to stay out there for the next six months, with occasional trips back to make sure Keith and Jamie had things under control at the foundation. I wasn't up to take my turn until next year, which was fine with me.

I had other priorities right now, anyway.

I'd timed our arrival so there wasn't too much time before brunch was ready, cutting down on any empty time that could lead to awkwardness for Talia, but fortunately, as I'd expected, she hit it off with Veronica and Gabrielle right off.

Surprisingly, though, it was Olivia who seemed to click with her the most. The two of them had a shared love of books that kept them, and Jamie, occupied for the first half of the meal while Veronica talked to Gabrielle about her ranch, and Matt caught Keith and me up about what was going on with Gary Howell.

"They'll probably plead him down to a lesser sentence, provided he returns the money," Matt said, grimacing. "I'm not too happy about it, but I also don't want a big, ugly trial that will be carried out in the public eye for months or years on end. Besides, his lawyer dropped a bombshell yesterday. The asshole was recently diagnosed with cancer. It's early and treatable, but you know how sympathy can sway people."

"He's been stealing from us for decades," Keith grumbled. "If he was just diagnosed, then he can't expect sympathy to factor in there. Sure, I can feel sorry for him for having cancer—nobody deserves the big C—but he didn't start stealing from us to pay for cancer treatments. He did it because he was a greedy bastard."

"True." I glanced toward Talia as her bright laugh burst out and rang around the room. "But that greedy bastard not only got caught and ruined his life, he *does* have cancer, and regardless of how they plead him down, this will haunt him for a good long time. He's in his sixties, easy. He's been planning on living the high life, and now look. I'd say karma caught up to

him. I'm fine with them pleading him down. It will save the foundation the public hassle and us the headache."

Keith frowned, but after a moment, shrugged.

"Yes. He's not getting away scot-free by any means."

The conversation shifted, and during a lull, I took Talia's hand and kissed it, catching her attention.

She smiled at me, and I said, "I'm starting to wonder if I should be more jealous of books, or my brother and Olivia."

"Ha, ha." But she leaned over and kissed me.

Against her mouth, I murmured, "I told you there was nothing to worry about."

"Nobody likes to hear *I told you so*, Shawn," she teased.

I bit her. "Hush."

She poked me in the ribs and sat back in her seat, giving me a look that promised retribution. Matt was watching us with a gleam in his eyes that made it clear he'd caught the entire exchange.

Arching a brow at him, I said, "Don't you have your own woman you can be kissing?"

He smirked. "I do, indeed. But it's fun to watch you, sitting there with that hook in your mouth. It's...cute, really."

A phone chimed.

Jamie was the one who reacted. He was the only one who'd programmed the Imperial March as his ringtone, so it was pretty easy to figure out who was getting the phone call.

He glanced up. "I need to take this."

Matt, Keith, and I exchanged glances, the seriousness of his voice cutting through the room like a blade.

It wasn't until he left the room that anybody else spoke, and it was Gabrielle, with a smile to Talia.

"Matt tells me you live in Salem."

"Yes...well, not so much anymore, but that's where I grew up."

Gabrielle's pretty face lit with a fascinated smile. "Okay, so you've probably heard this before, but the history of that town fascinates me."

"Oh, me too." Talia grinned. "And I *live* there."

They chatted about the infamous town and the witch trials, Veronica chiming in with a couple of comments, while Keith, Matt, and I waited.

It was almost twenty minutes before Jamie returned. The room fell silent

as we all looked at him.

He lingered in the doorway, a frown on his face. He still held the phone and looked down at it as if still pondering whatever it was he'd learned during his discussion.

"That was Joelle," Jamie said, finally looking away from the phone. His gaze landed on Matt first before moving to meet mine and Keith's in turn. "She had some answers. We...ah...I think we need to go talk to Gran and Grandpa."

"What is it?" I asked warily, the intensity of his gaze and the weight of his words hitting home hard.

He grimaced and shoved a hand through his hair before he told us the gist of what he'd learned during that phone call. When he finished, all of us sat there, stunned.

"Yeeeeeahhh..." Veronica said, blowing out a breath. She took Keith's hand and squeezed. "I definitely think you boys need to talk to them."

"You're coming too, baby," Keith said to her.

"I...no." She shook her head.

"You're coming," he said firmly. "You're family too."

THIRTY-THREE

TALIA

“I shouldn’t be here,” I murmured to Shawn as his grandfather helped his grandmother settle into a fat, comfortable-looking armchair tucked in close to a window. It faced out over lush, colorful gardens that were so beautiful, my heart sighed just looking at them. But the view offered no peace right now. I couldn’t stop thinking about what Jamie had told his brothers, and I knew that the questions they had to ask of their grandmother wouldn’t be easy ones.

Shawn tightened his hand around mine. “I need you here right now.”

Torn, I glanced at the frail-looking older woman. I’d seen pictures of Alice Hartwell, even recent ones. She was a popular figure in Boston society, and despite her age, she typically seemed to glow with health. But despite the fact that Shawn said she was recovering well, the stroke had taken a toll.

“This is something that should be discussed by the family, Shawn.”

Just then, Alice said, “Gabrielle, it’s so lovely to see you again. I was hoping I’d be able to travel back out to the ranch with you and Matt this time, even if only for a week or so, but it doesn’t look like it will happen just yet.”

“We’ll make it work out, Gran,” Gabrielle said, moving to sit on the arm of the chair so she could hug the older woman and kiss her cheek. “I can’t wait to show you my ranch. You’ll love it.”

Alice beamed at her and shifted her attention to Veronica. “How are your kids treating you this year?”

“Depends on the day, the assignment, and the kid, Gran.” She winked.

Alice chuckled.

Shawn cocked a brow at me.

“They *know* her. I don’t.” We’d been introduced just a few minutes ago.

Olivia stood with Jamie a short distance away, and I could tell she felt somewhat out of place too. We met each other's gaze. I grimaced, and she arched a brow in acknowledgment, then offered a small shrug.

"Well." Alice made a small clucking sound with her tongue, then said, "Jamie, you said you boys had something you needed to talk to us about, so...what is it, sweetheart?"

The question was delivered in a calm voice, but there was something in her eyes, a note of something that made me realize she might already have an idea why we were here.

Jamie glanced at Matt, then his other two brothers before clearing his throat.

"I...well..." He hesitated and blew out a breath, then cleared his throat again, his nerves obvious. "Gran, is there anything about our family that you two know, but we don't?"

The couple tensed, especially Matthias Hartwell, Sr. The older man's shoulders went rigid, eyes flying to his wife before moving back to his grandson. Alice, however, simply inclined her head. Her jaw was tight, and there was a bleakness in her eyes that told me I was right.

She'd already suspected why we were here.

But neither of them said anything.

"Gran?" Keith asked softly.

She looked away.

"I got the results of the DNA testing I did back," Jamie said when she remained quiet. "Apparently, we've got a cousin out west. Her name is Joelle. The funny thing is that Joelle's mom can't figure out why the DNA tests *her* family did came back showing that she wasn't related to her siblings. At all. No blood relationship to any of them."

"Look, Matt," the elder Hartwell said, his voice gruff.

"No." It was Alice who spoke, reaching up to touch her fingers to her husband's arm. "No, Matthias. It's okay."

She sighed and brushed a loose strand of hair back from her face. "You know, I've wanted to talk about this for so long, but at the same time, I've been afraid...ashamed."

"Alice." Her husband touched her shoulder, then cupped her cheek. "There's nothing for you to be ashamed of. You know that."

"Oh, honey." She gave him a wan smile and shook her head. Tapping her temple, she said, "*Here*, I know that." Then she pressed a fist to her heart. "In

here...? It's still not so easy to believe it."

A bad feeling settled in my gut. I tried to make myself as small as I could. From the corner of my eye, I saw Olivia doing the same.

"When I was seventeen, I was engaged to another man. Not because I particularly wanted to be, though." She laughed, but she sounded very tired. "It was a different world then, you see. So very different. My father was a wealthy man of great importance, and like many wealthy, important men, he was always looking to make more connections with other wealthy, important men. My fiancé was the son of a well-known, influential judge. He wasn't a kind man, though. One night, he..."

She stopped, looking away for a moment when her voice trembled. Her husband sat on the arm of the chair and took her hand, lifting it to his lips.

Alice closed her eyes.

"He raped me." The words came out soft. "It was that same night that I met Matthias. He was the one who found me, took care of me, made sure I got home. We became friends...and eventually, more. When I realized I was pregnant, Matt was the one I confided in. We left town. My fiancé wasn't the sort of man who'd take responsibility for the baby, even though she was his child. We let everybody think Matt and I had eloped. We went out west until the baby was born, and then I gave her up for adoption. Eventually, we came back here."

A raw, stunned silence filled the room with those words.

Matt Sr. was the one to break it.

"We came back after Alice recovered from childbirth. We hadn't married while we were out west. She kept saying no." He gave her a loving but frustrated smile. "But I kept asking, and finally, she said yes. The minister who married us did so in secret."

Alice looked at him with a love that was still so keen and bright, it made me hurt to see it. "Stubborn man," she murmured. Shifting her attention back to the room at large, she said, "Until now, we've never told anybody about the baby. I...I've thought about her so often, and despite how she was conceived, I've always loved her, hoped she was happy and cared for. I hope all of you can understand the choices we made."

It was her son who went to her. Bending over her, he wrapped her in his arms.

Tears stung my eyes as she hugged him back.

THIRTY-FOUR

SHAWN

“How many times do you think he’s going to kiss the bride?”

Talia smacked my arm, but there was laughter in her eyes. “Hush.”

In a gown of delicate gold, she’d made the most beautiful bridesmaid I’d ever seen. More beautiful than the bride, in my opinion, but considering it was her mother, I doubted Florence would have minded, even if she’d agreed her daughter outshone her on her wedding day.

Of course, I was biased. As far as I was concerned, Talia was the most beautiful woman in the world, and the way her face lit up when she gave me that smile she showed only me, she became even more beautiful.

We swayed to the soft music playing, and I murmured in her ear, teasingly counting down the minutes until I thought Willard would kiss Florence again.

“And...now.”

Talia poked me in the ribs. “Nope. And quit it.”

“How about...yep. There he goes again. That’s the tenth kiss in about twenty minutes.” Nuzzling her neck, I added, “He’s going to make us young guys look bad.”

“It’s his wedding day.” Eyes laughing as she gazed up at me, she said, “You’re terrible, you know that?”

“You don’t think I’m terrible.” Lowering my head, I murmured, “You look so fucking sexy in that dress. I keep thinking about finding someplace private and turning you around, tugging it up so I can slide into you from behind. We’d have to be quiet, of course. Even if we found someplace private here, if you moaned and begged me the way you always do, somebody would hear.”

Her face was flushed when I lifted my head. “Shawn...”

“Mind if I cut in?”

Inwardly, I grimaced but stepped back so my father could claim a dance with Talia. He smiled as she stepped toward him and I backed off the dance floor to find Matt and Gabrielle murmuring quietly to each other over one of the small high top tables scattered through the room. I hesitated before approaching.

Gabrielle and Matt had spent the past two weeks apart, Matt flying back to Boston to handle certain tasks that required his presence. None of us were yet familiar enough with all the obligations that came with running the foundation to handle everything that came up, so although he mostly worked remotely now, he still had to travel back every couple of months.

Deciding to let them have their time together, I started to turn in another direction, but Gabrielle spied me and waved me over.

“Hi, Shawn. Nice party, huh?”

“Sure.” I tugged at the neck of my dress shirt and grimaced. “If you like having to wear the fancy duds.”

A smile twitched at her lips. “You do wear them well.”

“Thanks.” Flagging down a passing server, I took a glass of wine and glanced back to see Talia laughing at something Dad had said.

“I hear the new arm of the Hartwell Foundation you and Talia are starting up is going well.” Gabrielle took a sip of her wine. “Restoring old homes and buildings throughout New England. Sounds like something that’s right up your alley.”

“It is.” Unable to stop that smile as it spread across my face, I said, “My former partner is going to be one of our advisers. He’s already bored with retirement.”

Conall had decided in August that he was ready to step down. The project we’d taken on with the Hales had turned into a clusterfuck, then completely stalled as the two battled it out in court. Conall had decided he was fed up dealing with some of the shit that came with our job.

But when I’d called to ask for some advice about the idea Talia and I had come up with, he hinted he wouldn’t mind taking a more hands-on approach when we were ready to move forward.

Although he’d moved to Hilton Head as he’d always planned, he’d assured me he’d be happy to travel back to Boston whenever he needed to help out. I was happy to have him, and not just because his advice was

always sound—I missed him.

Jamie and Olivia handled the more public part of the foundation as well as the literacy causes we'd always supported, with Keith sometimes playing back up there.

Everything was finally settling back down. Gary Howell had returned what money he hadn't already spent and was serving his sentence in a minimum-security facility.

The best news about the foundation, though, was that we were on stable ground again.

Talia had made good on her word to become the first investor, but she wasn't the only one. Although he wouldn't admit to doing so, I had a feeling Willard had dropped a word in a few ears because several more families had contacted us since early August, all stepping up to become investors in the foundation.

Then there were the people Conall and I had approached. Every one of them had made good on their promise and were now investing in the foundation. All in all, the Hartwell Foundation was in better shape than ever.

"I think somebody's trying to claim the next dance with your woman, little brother," Matt said, nodding to the dance floor.

Scowling at the unfamiliar man eying Talia, I put my wineglass down and strode off. Behind me, I heard them laughing but didn't pay any attention.

The dance with my father had ended, and he'd moved on to claim a dance with Olivia while Talia glanced in my direction.

"...dance..."

"Sorry, I'm here with somebody," Talia said.

The man saw me then, caught sight of the sharp smile I flashed him before making himself scarce.

As I took her back into my arms, Talia rolled her eyes. "You want to beat on your chest and throw me over your shoulder next?"

"Can I?" Normally, the over-possessive male thing wasn't my norm, but she looked too delicious tonight, and I wasn't about to share her unless absolutely necessary. As far as I was concerned, dances with my dad, her dad, and maybe my grandfather were about as far as I was willing to go.

"Behave." She pressed closer to me. In a low voice, she said, "Do you know how embarrassing it was to dance and act normal with your father when I was practically melting inside?"

"Are you still melting?" Sliding my hand down to her hip, I whispered, "I

want to see.”

“Shawn...” Her voice hitched as she realized I’d danced us to the edge of the polished ballroom floor.

“You know more about this big old house than I do. Where can we find a few minutes of privacy?”

She bit her lip as she met my eyes. “We shouldn’t.”

But that didn’t keep her from taking my hand.

My cock felt like it would burst through my trousers, so I walked mostly behind her to avoid being noticed. The large, elegant Marlowe estate was decorated for the holidays and the wedding, people spilling out into the hallway from the ballroom, talking in the small alcoves and sipping wine.

“Thanks for showing this to me,” I said to Talia in a neutral voice when it looked like one of the guests might try to stop us for conversation. “I’ve been wanting to see that private collection for a while.”

Without missing a beat, she replied, “Just keep in mind, you can’t touch anything. And you *only* get to see it because we’re dating.”

She led me up a flight of stairs past a staff member, or maybe he was a security guard in a three-piece black suit. The man clearly recognized her, offering a nod as he stepped aside so we could pass.

We climbed two flights of steps. Her bedroom was on the third floor but in another wing of the house and there was no way I was waiting. Spying an open room, I tugged her inside and shut the door, turned the lock.

It turned out to be a sitting room. The lights were off, but I didn’t bother turning them on. Enough light filtered in, thanks to the large picture window and the full, dazzlingly bright moon that I could see her. And that window, combined with its wide, fat seat and thick cushions, I decided, was exactly what I needed.

Guiding her over there, I nudged her closer and took her hands. “There,” I said, placing them on the thick cushions.

She was leaning forward slightly, her butt thrust toward me.

Her dress, gathered on the sides and a sleek column in the front, fell in a graceful sweep in the back. She’d called it a modified mermaid gown, of sorts. I didn’t care what it was. I just knew it did amazing things for her breasts, her hips, and her ass. Now, taking the material of the dress in my hands, I began to drag it up.

“You said you were melting...let’s see if you really are,” I murmured against her ear.

She shivered as I pushed the skirt up over her ass. Shifting back slightly so I could take in the view, I admired the narrow triangle of gold and cream lace that covered her buttocks, then groaned when I glimpsed the thigh-high stockings and garter belt. Pushing the skirt up higher, I realized it wasn't just a garter belt.

"Is this...fuck, Tally. Are you wearing a corset?"

"Sort of. It's more like a merry widow. Smooths everything out, makes my boobs look bigger."

No wonder I'd had a hard time dragging my eyes from her tits all night.

"Your boobs are already delicious," I told her, releasing the skirt on one side so I could stroke my fingers over the top curve of her left breast.

"I'm aware you like them, Shawn." The smile in her voice was obvious. "But you're really into how they look tonight. You keep trying not to stare."

"Apparently, I'm not doing a good job." Laughing, I moved in closer and caught the skirt in my hand again. "Take off your panties, baby."

It took some fumbling, and I had to help with the snaps on the garter belt, but finally, the silky, scanty garment fell to the floor. Nudging her back over to the window seat, I smoothed one hand over her butt, then slid my fingers along the crease, dipped lower until I reached her hot, silky wet pussy.

"Oh, Tally." Groaning, I dropped my head onto her shoulder. "You *are* melting. Your pussy is all but dripping."

She whimpered. "Shawn..."

I tugged something from my pocket, then dealt with my pants. I bit her earlobe. "I can't wait. Say you're ready."

"If I was any more ready, I'd come right now."

If my cock didn't hurt so much, I might have laughed. As it was, my hands were shaking when I finally freed myself. Tucking the head of my cock against her entrance, I gripped her hips to steady her, then drove deep and hard.

She sucked in a breath.

Reaching up, I covered her mouth with one hand, the other still on her hip. "No screaming," I rasped against her ear. "Have to be...fuck, I love how you squeeze my dick like that. We have to be quiet, baby."

She whimpered against my hand, straining around my cock.

I drove into her again, then again. When her voice stayed muted, I slid my hand from her mouth and caught her shoulder, steadying her as I began to thrust harder. Soon, the sounds of sex, wet flesh coming together, labored

breathing and smothered moans, filled the room.

“Fuck...Tally...come for me. That’s it...oh...*fuck!*” I barely managed to contain the shout at the last moment as she shoved back against me, her pussy going tight and spasming around me as she came.

I gritted my teeth as I rode her through it, then swearing, I jerked out of her and turned, coming into the handkerchief I’d grabbed from my pocket.

Talia sagged, dazed. She’d half-turned just in time to see me fisting myself, pumping rapidly as cum streamed out, filling the solid white of the cotton square.

Bemused, she looked at me.

I was struggling too hard to breathe to say anything for several seconds. Half collapsing on the window next to her, I folded the wet handkerchief in on itself. “I figured you didn’t want to go back downstairs all wet with me.”

“Oh.” She blushed, then leaned over to kiss me. “Thank you. Very considerate.”

Nuzzling her neck, I murmured, “You’re welcome. And later, once we’re back at our place, I’m going to make up for it...and come inside you all I want, and maybe come all over you, on your sweet tits, your belly... anywhere you’ll let me.”

She blushed so hotly, I could see the ruddy pink of her cheeks even in the silvery moonlight.

“I THINK Matt’s going to ask Gabrielle to marry him.”

We descended the steps a short time later, after a quick pit stop by the bathroom for us to wash up and Talia to check her hair and have me smooth out her dress. I ditched the handkerchief in the trash and stowed her panties in my pocket, to her utter dismay. I didn’t plan on returning them, either.

Looking at her, I cocked a brow. “Yeah? Why is that?”

“Call it women’s intuition.” She gave me a hint of a smile as we came down onto the landing facing out over the grand hall.

“Well, my guy’s intuition says it’s going to be Keith proposing first.” And, if neither of them proposed by Christmas, I’d beat them all to it. I’d ordered a ring for Talia, and it was being specially made for her. Focusing on the here and now, I glanced at her. “You don’t know Matt as well as I do.

He's loosened up a lot since he met Gabrielle, but he's only known her a few months. I don't see him popping the question that fast. Keith? Hell, I'm surprised he hasn't already convinced Veronica to run off to Vegas with him."

Her response was cut off by a sudden, raucous burst of applause, and both of us looked down to see a man kneeling in front of a woman, with Willard and Florence looking on. Willard was in his wheelchair, with Florence perched on his lap, an arm around his neck. The two of them were beaming at the couple in front of them.

At first, I couldn't make them out because of the people blocking the way.

But from where she stood, Talia must have had a better angle.

She poked me in the ribs. "I told you so."

The crowd shifted, and that was when I caught sight of my brother as he rose from the floor to catch Gabrielle in his arms, swinging her around before kissing her on her laughing mouth.

Matt's voice, more boisterous than I'd ever heard, rang out through the hall. "She said yes!"

THIRTY-FIVE

ALICE

“How do I look?”

“Beautiful, as you always do. Stop fretting, my love.” Matthias stood behind me, his hands on my arms as we waited by the window.

The driver had texted earlier to give us an ETA, and I’d been pacing the floor—and with hardly even a limp too—as we waited for the arrival of my daughter and her family.

My family.

My granddaughter.

My chest hurt to even think of it.

I’d so longed for another daughter, even as I felt guilty for that wish, unsure if it came from the right place. Not that anybody ever would have been able to replace that first child’s place in my heart, but there had always been a yearning for another daughter.

Now, I’d finally get to meet the one I’d given up so long ago.

Her name was Meredith.

My granddaughter was Joelle.

Meredith had other siblings, and I’d like to meet them, to know her family, but she’d elected to come with only Joelle this first time. Hopefully, it wouldn’t be the last.

I had the impulsive, immature urge to ask, *What if she doesn’t like me? What if neither of them do?*

I managed to keep the question trapped, though.

There was no point in asking that, and worrying about it...well, I wasn’t particularly superstitious, but there were such things as self-fulfilling prophecies, and I didn’t want to bring one to fruition.

“Gran?”

Jamie came to stand at my side, taking my hand.

I squeezed. “Hello, sweetheart. How are things going in the kitchen?”

Thanksgiving was tomorrow, and I’d been banned from helping. Jamie and his girlfriend, Olivia, along with Veronica, Talia, and her mother, Florence, and my daughter-in-law, Elizabeth, had descended en masse on the house earlier that morning to start the preparations for the meal the following day.

There had been times over the years when we’d had our meal catered or prepared by staff, but this year, we’d all decided we wanted only family around. This year, however, the size of the family had grown rather exponentially. All of my boys had lovely ladies of their own. Talia’s mother and her husband, Willard, were also with us, as well as Shawn’s former partner and friend, Conall. Family wasn’t always determined by blood, a fact I knew quite well. Florence and Willard had only just returned from their honeymoon, and the last I’d seen my son, he and Willard had been engaged in a game of chess with Conall and Keith looking on.

Smoothing a hand down the soft blue sweater I’d paired with a pair of sleek black trousers, I murmured, “I hope this won’t be too overwhelming for everybody, Matt.”

“Alice.” He turned me in his arms and kissed me.

After all these years, even at our age, his kiss still managed to make my heart flutter, and for a brief moment, I was distracted.

When he lifted his head, eyes gleaming, he said, “Stop worrying.”

“Yeah, there’s no time left for it, Gran. They’re here.”

I turned so quickly, I almost overbalanced. Both Matt and Jamie went to steady me, but I’d caught myself, lifting a hand to rest on the frame of the window as I looked outside.

The elegant black town car pulled to the front of the house, and I took a deep breath.

“Matt.” That was all I managed to get out.

But it was all he needed. Taking my hand, he squeezed gently. “I’m here, darling.”

Jamie remained inside as the two of us stepped out.

A trim, petite woman with dark hair stepped out of the car, her eyes already on my face.

I sucked in a breath.

Save for the dark hair, we could have been a mirror, one altered by time.
“She looks like me,” I whispered, my heart squeezing painfully tight.

Matt stroked a hand down my back once, a quiet testimony to his presence, his love.

Taking a step forward, I somehow managed to smile. “Meredith.”

“Hello, Alice.” Her smile wobbled, and I saw tears glinting in her eyes.

The door on the other side opened and shut, drawing my attention, and I looked up to see a tall, slender woman striding around the back of the car. She had her hands buried in the pockets of her coat, a hint of a smile on her pretty face, but it faltered as she met my gaze.

“You must be Joelle.”

“Yes.”

Before an awkward silence could fall, Matt stepped up. “Come. Let’s go inside. It’s cold, and I’m sure you’re tired of traveling.”

“I HOPE YOU CAN FORGIVE ME.”

For the second time in my life, I told the story of what had happened all those years ago.

And for the second time in my life, instead of being met with recriminations, I found myself looking into eyes that glowed with understanding...and tears.

Both Joelle and Meredith sat side by side on the couch across from me. Matt was at my side. It was just us in the sitting room, the rest of the family understanding the need for privacy in this.

“Alice...” Meredith laughed and brushed her hair back before lowering her gaze to the bourbon Matt had poured for her. “It feels odd calling you that. But...I hope you understand that it doesn’t feel right to call you *Mom*, either. My mom is Stella Wielter. She’s back in Texas, battling cancer and probably fighting with my sisters-in-law over whether or not cornbread stuffing is the way to go.”

“I’m telling you that it’s not,” I said, hoping to lighten the mood.

“We are *definitely* related.” A smile lit her face and her eyes. “See, Jo? She’s got common sense.”

Joelle rolled her eyes. “If either of you like stuffing of any sort, then no,

you don't have common sense." But some of the sadness had left her gaze as well.

"You don't need to call me anything that makes you uncomfortable, Meredith. Alice is fine with me. I'd never want you to do anything that makes you feel awkward, or that might cause your mother pain...and she *is* your mother." My throat felt tight. "Putting you in her arms was the hardest thing I ever had to do. But the moment she saw you, I could see that she would love you."

"She does." Meredith put her glass down and came over, kneeling in front of the chair. "I had a good life, Alice. I married a wonderful man, and we had so many good years together until he passed away. I've got a beautiful daughter. I hurt for what happened to you, but because you gave me to my parents...it allowed me to have *this* life. And I wouldn't trade it for anything. Now..." She gave me a shaky smile. "And now I have a chance to find out more about this new part of the family."

Tears burned the backs of my eyes. "You're not angry with me?"

"No." She took my hand and squeezed. "I'm *grateful*."

Unable to stop, I leaned forward.

And found myself wrapped in my daughter's arms.

I hugged her back, finally able to embrace her after so many years.

Next to me, Matt shifted.

I lifted my gaze and found him watching me. Even now, after all these years, the love in his eyes was so bright and true, and it warmed me clear through to my soul.

Especially now that my family was complete.

THE END

Turn the page for a preview of His Inspiration, a free book for subscribers.

HIS INSPIRATION: PREVIEW

ONE

JOSHUA

I didn't realize someone had run into me until I'd taken two steps back and she started cursing at me from the sidewalk. I wasn't the most social of people, but I'd always assumed that I had basic conversational skills for situations such as this. Knock someone down, help them up and apologize.

I stared at her, completely at a loss for words. I couldn't tell how tall she was, but she looked delicate from where I was standing. Shoulder-length jet-black hair and porcelain skin made me think of Snow White, but her mouth was definitely not Disney-rated.

To my embarrassment, my mind instantly went to other non-Disney things she could do with her mouth, and blood rushed south. I clamped down on those wayward thoughts and started mentally singing the Fluffy Bottom jingle. No better way to kill an erection than singing about toilet paper.

She tried to stand before I could offer her a hand but swore again as her leg buckled. A new wave of guilt washed over me as I realized she was hurt. Not just guilt, I realized. An unfamiliar wave of protectiveness hit me too.

"Let me—"

"What the fuck were you thinking?!" she snapped, her dark eyes angry.

My eyebrows shot up. I had no problem taking part of the blame for the collision, but she hadn't been paying attention to where she was going any more than I had been.

"I didn't see you," I said as I held out my hand.

"Are you blind as well as rude?" She glared at my hand. "I was right behind the thief who stole my purse. You managed to not run into him."

I remembered seeing a guy running across the street about half a minute before she hit me, and I turned to look, but he was already gone. He could've

been anywhere. I knew of at least half a dozen alleyways he could've used to get to the next street over where he had too many escape possibilities to count.

"I would've caught him if you hadn't gotten in my way."

I turned my attention back to the girl who was now gingerly touching her ankle. I'd first put her age around nineteen or twenty, but now that I studied her a bit more closely, I added a few years to put her closer to twenty-five than twenty.

And I noticed something else. She wasn't being bitchy because she was some self-absorbed teenager. She was angry at the situation, including the fact that she was hurt and vulnerable in front of a stranger.

"He went across the street," I said as I leaned down to put a hand under her elbow. "I didn't see where he went from there. It's too easy to disappear in this damned city."

She jerked her arm away the moment we made contact, and I mentally smacked myself as I realized that my previous statement wasn't very supportive.

I took in a deep breath and tried again. "My name's Joshua Lexington. I just want to help you up, I swear."

Her eyes narrowed, but she let me set her on her feet, her hand tightening on my arm momentarily as she tested her injured ankle. When she released me, I felt the strangest urge to tell her she could lean on me as long as she wanted.

"Let's go inside, and I'll call the cops while you get off that ankle."

The look she sent my way said that my suggestion wasn't a welcome one.

"I have my phone," she said, her voice softening a little. "Besides, my friend should have called them all ready."

I was surprised at how curious I was about this 'friend' of hers. Was she saying that as a protective measure, something to chase me away if I'd been looking to prey on a lone woman? Or did she have an actual friend waiting for her? A guy who might want something more? A girlfriend, maybe?

What the hell was I thinking?

I shook my head as she turned back the way she'd come. The laundromat she'd come out of was only a couple yards away, but I'd seen the pain on her face when she tried to put down her full weight. A part of me doubted she'd be able to make it even that far without help, but a larger part thought that she'd do it just to prove she could. Whether she'd be proving it to me or to

herself, I hadn't yet figured out.

I followed a few steps behind her, wondering if at any time she'd turn around and tell me to get lost or she'd be calling the cops on me too, but she didn't. She stayed focused on her goal, and the reflection in the glass front of the laundromat showed me the determined look on her face.

I had to admit, I was impressed. She'd charged after a thief, but even after she knew she wouldn't be able to continue giving chase, she hadn't called for help. She said she had her phone still, so she could have called her friend. No one would have thought any less of her.

"Trissa!" A slender blonde came running the moment the girl – Trissa – stepped inside. "What happened?"

"Ask him." Trissa jerked her thumb over her shoulder. "Gigantor back there got in my way."

"Gigantor? Really?" I wanted to laugh, but this didn't seem like the best time or place.

She turned toward me as she leaned against a washer, and I saw that her eyes weren't brown or black like I'd assumed, but rather a deep purplish-blue that I'd never seen before. Not in someone's eyes anyway. Her fingers snapped in front of my eyes, and I realized I'd been staring again.

"I said you can go. Bevyan already called the cops so we'll wait for them here."

"What if he comes back?" I countered. No decent guy would've let two young women wait alone in a laundromat after they'd been robbed. I could be a jerk sometimes, but I was close enough to my mother to hate thinking about what sort of guy would do that to her.

"Why would he?" Bevyan asked. "He knows that Trissa was chasing him and that we'd call the cops. If he got away free and clear with one of our purses, why would he risk getting caught?"

Logically, that made sense, but I knew criminals didn't always think logically. "Maybe he'll think that if he gets to you, he can keep you from pressing charges."

"Shit." Trissa's eyes went wide. "My license and my key were in there."

"That settles it," I said. "You two can stay at my place tonight."

"Excuse me?" Trissa's expressive face told me exactly what she was about to say. "You're just a stranger I *literally* just ran into. Why are you any safer than the punk who took my purse?"

I opened my mouth to give her a list of reasons and then realized that

those reasons didn't mean anything if she didn't know that they were true. For all these two knew, I was working with the thief, or I was someone worse than a purse snatcher.

"You're right," I said. When both girls tensed, I quickly clarified. "You don't know me. *I* know I'm trustworthy, but you don't know that. But you two shouldn't be alone tonight."

Why was I pushing this so hard? I didn't know these women. Sure, one of them had run into me, and as a result, had lost the person she was chasing, but I didn't owe her anything for that. I might not have been paying as much attention as I should have been, but neither had she. The only reason she'd been the one of us to get knocked down was the difference in our sizes.

"We won't be," Bevyan said, putting her arm around her friend's shoulders. "We'll stay with my boyfriend."

If I hadn't been looking at Trissa, I might've missed the annoyance crossing her face. Something told me that Trissa wasn't a fan of Bevyan's boyfriend, and Bevyan didn't know it.

"Is he on his way?" As soon as I asked it, I wanted to take it back. Everything I said was coming out wrong, making me seem like I was one of those creepy stalkers or serial killers who lurked in the dark, searching for single women to assault or kill.

"He's working, actually," Bevyan said. She yelped as Trissa dug an elbow into her side. "What? If this guy was going to turn us into lampshades, he would've done it by now."

Fortunately for both Trissa and me, the sound of police sirens filled the laundromat, and we all turned toward the door to watch the blue and red lights flash as a cop car pulled up front. I stepped back, my hands hanging open at my side. I didn't want to get mistaken for a criminal simply because I was a big guy in a room with two women more than a foot shorter than me.

The first cop rushed through the door, eyes wide in a way that made me think this was his first crime-in-progress. The way his hand hovered over his gun worried me as much as the fact that the kid nearly tripped over his own feet as he skidded to a stop. Then his gaze zeroed in on me, and he swallowed hard.

"What...who...I mean..."

The door opened again, and the other police officer came in. I wondered if the exhaustion on his face was from all the nervous energy his partner was putting out or something else.

“I called,” Bevyann announced. “Some guy stole my friend’s purse.”

“Wait, a purse?” The younger guy’s eyes darted from me to the girls and then back again. “I thought it was a robbery in progress.”

Bevyann put her hands on her hips and sighed. “It was when I called. This guy came in here, grabbed my friend’s purse and ran with it. She chased him but had a little...accident.”

“He’s not a little accident,” Trissa muttered, glaring at me. But I didn’t feel the heat of anger in the look this time. When her gaze met mine, pink crept into her cheeks.

No, not anger. Maybe interest? Something else?

“What did you do to her?” The younger cop stepped between me and the girls, cutting off my crazy thoughts. The action made me respect him a little more since I was several inches taller and definitely outweighed him.

I held up my hands, palms out. “I was out running, and when she ran out to follow the thief, we collided.”

“And then you followed her?” Now, the older cop was giving me funny looks.

“She hurt her ankle,” I explained, trying to keep the exasperation from my voice, “and I didn’t think it was safe for the two of them to wait here alone. In case the guy came back.”

“If we take you in, are they going to say the same story?”

How had I ended up a suspect? I’d just been trying to help.

“He didn’t steal my purse,” Trissa cut in. “He’s annoying, but not a thief.”

I huffed out a breath. “Thank you?” I turned my attention from Trissa back to the older cop. “Before she and I ran into each other, I saw someone in a hoodie run across the street. I didn’t get a good look, but he was probably a little under six feet tall and skinny. Fast.”

“Are you sure it was a man?”

“I’m sure,” Bevyann interjected. “I looked over when he first came in. The hoodie was dark gray, and he was wearing blue jeans and sneakers.”

“I saw his hands when he grabbed my purse. He had light brown skin,” Trissa said. “Like a really good summer tan.”

“Anything else? Identifying features?” The younger guy jotted down notes as we answered the questions he and his partner asked.

Now that I’d given them all that I had to offer and they knew I wasn’t involved in the theft, it’d be easy to leave. The cops wouldn’t keep me here,

and the women were safe.

Once they were done here, they'd go to Bevy's boyfriend's house for the night and then deal with changing the locks and canceling credit cards... and why was I even going through a mental checklist of the things they'd need to do? I'd already made this too much of a thing. I had my own life and my own problems. I needed to get back to them.

"Do you need me for anything else?" I asked during a pause in the interview. "I only wanted to make sure that the ladies were safe."

"Can you give me a number where you can be reached if we think of any additional questions?" the older cop asked.

I rattled off my cell number and then headed for the door. I could feel eyes on me as I left, but I didn't turn around. I just wanted to finish my run and go home. It wasn't late, but I'd had a long day already.

I'd cooled down while waiting, so I walked a few feet down the sidewalk and stretched my muscles back out, then bounced on my toes...but didn't take the next step and start jogging.

Dammit.

I couldn't do it. I couldn't walk away and not know they at least made it safely from here to where they'd go next. The cops probably wouldn't escort the pair home unless they asked, and my gut said that they'd tell the cops they needed to finish their laundry or something like that.

Mind made up, I jogged up and down the sidewalk, never going far enough that I couldn't keep an eye on the doors. When I saw the cops drive away after another five minutes, and no sign of the girls, I knew I'd been right.

How had those two survived in LA as naïve as they were? Maybe I was misjudging them, and maybe I was being a little chauvinistic, wanting to protect two young women, but I wasn't going to apologize for it. Not when all I wanted to do was keep them safe. I couldn't explain why I felt so strongly that I needed to do it, but I did. Once I knew they were safe in the boyfriend's place, then I'd go home.

END OF PREVIEW

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