



*Secret Baby*  
*for*  
**MR. GRUMP**  
SOFIA FINN

# SECRET BABY FOR MR. GRUMP

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A BILLIONAIRE BOSS ROMANCE

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

SOFIA FINN

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ONE

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# ALLIE

*He was getting worse.*

My heart ached as I watched my son, whose eyes remained focused on the fish figurine in his hand. It was his favorite, the one he always grabbed whenever he was feeling anxious about something. Like today.

I'd tried to ask him what was bothering him, but he didn't answer. Then I'd tried to make friendly conversation, asking him what he wanted for lunch or if he wanted to go to the park today. It'd been snowing pretty heavily for the past few days, so we hadn't gone out much, but the weather wasn't too bad today, and I thought he might be feeling claustrophobic from all the time spent indoors. I even asked if he wanted to go visit the aquarium, one of his favorite places to go.

But he didn't answer any of my questions.

In fact, he didn't even act as if he heard me, barely making eye contact. When I placed the plate of pancakes in front of him, he averted his eyes the second I got too close.

I felt like crying.

"Hey, buddy," I tried again. "Do you want to tell me what's wrong?"

I slipped into the seat opposite him, making sure I didn't get too close.

He glanced at me then but shook his head.

I gave him an exaggerated eye roll. "Come on, buddy. Something is bothering you. You've said five words to me the entire week. I know because I counted."

According to the psychiatrist, Caleb had selective mutism. At first, it was mild, but it seemed as the days passed, it was getting more severe.

I initially thought he was simply a quiet child, the kind who spoke only

when spoken to or hid behind my skirt to avoid meeting strangers. But slowly, it got worse. Gradually, he would only say a word the entire day, and then it turned to a word a week until he stopped talking altogether. And now we were at the point where he actively avoided eye contact, even with me.

And I didn't know why.

I tried to fight back the helpless self-deprecation that threatened to drag me into a pit of despair.

I was his mother. I was supposed to know what was going on with my baby boy, and I was supposed to be the one to fix it. But here I was, cluelessly bumbling about while he got worse and worse. The therapist said it likely stemmed from social anxiety and that I shouldn't try to pressure him too much to talk. But not pressuring him only meant that he retreated even more into his shell. And there was nothing I could do about it.

The phone ringing interrupted my morose thoughts. I went over to the kitchen counter to grab it.

"Hey, Athena."

"Hey yourself. What's going on? Your voice sounds sad."

"Nothing...just the usual." I didn't want to talk about Caleb in front of him, and Athena knew what 'the usual' meant anyway.

Her voice went quiet for a second before she asked sympathetically, "He's still not talking?"

"No," I said, and even just saying it made me sad.

"I thought he was doing better," she said.

"I thought so too." A few months ago, after we'd started seeing this new psychologist, Caleb showed some marked improvement. He still wasn't a chatterbox, but he would occasionally answer my questions with words rather than gestures. He even sometimes gave me full sentences. I'd seen hope, and I encouraged it to continue.

And then, without warning, he started regressing.

I couldn't pinpoint anything that could have triggered the regression. We were still attending our weekly therapist visits, and I'd been going slowly, not trying to push him out of his comfort zone too quickly.

But still, here we were.

"I don't really want to talk about it, Athena, if you don't mind," I said.

"Of course, sweetie. I'm so sorry you're having a hard time." Athena was only four years older than me, but sometimes she acted more like a mother than a sister. I knew that a part of her still saw me as her baby sister who



couldn't handle even some basic adult things.

"No, it's fine," I said. "Is everything okay on your end?"

The sigh was an answer in itself. "No," she said. "We have less than fifty sign-ups for the resort this Christmas, and today is the deadline."

"Crap," I said, then remembered my resolve not to curse or show negative emotions in front of my son anymore.

"Sorry, sweetie," I said to him belatedly, flashing him a smile that told him everything was okay.

He wasn't looking at me, though. He was studying the wall at his side pretty intensely.

"What happened to the Miller church group?" I asked Athena.

"They canceled a few minutes ago."

Double crap.

My family owned a resort just on the verge of town, where the road bled into mountains, and a dude ranch sat not far off. The resort was pretty dead during most of the year, but usually, it more than made up for it during Christmas time, when it suddenly got flooded with tourists, many of whom became regulars.

It was a major attraction for our small town of Summit, Montana, or at least it used to be. Three years ago, a large Holiday Inn opened up in the next town just twelve miles away, and since then, we'd seen our visitors dwindle every year, despite our best marketing efforts.

We needed about a hundred visitors this year to keep it running, and Athena and I had been busting our asses on the marketing angle with social media ads, promos, and even doing some footwork with flyers. Even then, we'd only barely been able to scrape up the hundred people needed to allow us to break even with running the place, and that was only thanks to a church group that signed up at the last minute.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I have no clue," Athena said. "But it might have something to do with that negative review someone posted about how boring it was last year."

I winced. Last year was the worst year we've had so far. We didn't have enough money, so we downscaled most of our major activities, narrowing it down to only a few. Plus, one of our visitors suffered a near injury due to a creaky step. We'd been meaning to fix up the stairs before the incident happened, but we just didn't have the spare funds. My father had been in the process of haggling with our carpenter when it happened.

I rubbed my forehead, feeling a headache coming on. “So what are we going to do now?”

“Frankly, I have no clue,” Athena responded, and I could sense the exhaustion in her voice as well. It was discouraging that we’d worked so hard with nothing to show for it, but as Dad liked to say, it’s the nature of the business. “I think it might be easier if we just sell.”

“No,” I said with a gasp, horrified at the thought. “How could you say that? The resort has been our family business for years.”

“Yeah, and right now, it’s costing us more money than it’s making,” she said. “We barely broke even last year. And we’re in debt this year. We don’t have to wait till we’re completely submerged in it to sell the place.”

“Look, it’s not hopeless yet. We still have time to—”

“Allie, Dad’s already looking for buyers,” she announced, and it was like a bomb was dropped on me.

It was like losing a significant part of us—our family, our traditions.

Plus, working at the resort was the only job I had. How would I provide for Caleb without it?

And then I realized why Athena sounded so calm about the whole thing. They’d probably already had the meeting and decided to sell before letting me in on it.

“And you guys didn’t think to invite me to this meeting y’all had?” I asked, trying very hard to keep the childish sulk out of my voice. They already saw me as a kid. I wouldn’t give them the satisfaction of acting like one too.

“I’m sorry, Allie,” Athena said sympathetically. “Dad didn’t want you to know just yet. He was thinking about how to break it to you in a better way.”

“He doesn’t have to do that. I’m not a child. He can just tell me things.” I sighed. “How long do we have until we sell?”

“Allie—”

“How long, Athena?” I knew she wanted to tell me not to bother and that there was no way we were going to find enough visitors in such a short time, but I didn’t want to hear it. The resort meant a lot to all of us, and I wouldn’t give it up without a fight—until I was completely out of options. It might be irrational, but there it was.

“A week at most.”

“Alright. I’ll see what I can do. I’ll call you later.” I hung up before she could say anything else and turned to look at Caleb.

The resort was also one of the few places I'd seen my son happy. Last year, that was the only place he felt safe enough to talk and play like the kid he was.

And if they sold it, that would be another major change in his life since my divorce.

I couldn't keep doing this to him. I couldn't keep taking away his safe zones.

"PB and J."

My mouth dropped in shock. *Did he just say something to me?*

"PB and J sandwich," he repeated in the same quiet tone, and joy jumped into my soul. It wasn't much, but it was a start.

I immediately leaped to my feet and searched my cabinet but didn't find the makings to prepare what he wanted. Luckily the store was only a few blocks away, so I quickly grabbed my coat. "I'm going to run down to grab some peanut butter from Rose's. Make sure you lock the door behind me, okay?"

He didn't look at me when he nodded. I kissed him on the cheek and headed out.

I stopped to ask my neighbor, Mrs. Winchester, to keep an eye out for Caleb and then jogged to Rose's. Thankfully, the ground wasn't too slippery.

The grocery store was pretty crowded when I got there, which was expected. It was only November, but everyone was getting their Christmas shopping done and taking up most of the space in the aisles. It was while I was squeezing through in Aisle 9 that I bumped into someone's back.

A large, bulky someone in a khaki jacket and some faded denim.

"Oh, sorry, I didn't—" The words died in my throat when the man turned around, and familiarity slammed into me.

I knew that face.

I knew those serious-looking dark eyes, that hooked nose, and the strong scarred chin.

Those lips with a hard top and a pouty bottom.

"Marcus?" The name breathed out of me, shock and something else firing through my blood. "No freaking way. Is that you?"

He cocked his head to the side. "Allie?"

*He remembered me.* "It is you!" Excitement had me jumping forward and hugging him before I could think twice about what I was doing.

Before I realized that even after eight years, the buttery feelings and

breathless sensations he inspired weren't gone, merely brimming under the surface.

Before I even thought about the fact that there was too much between us for me to be this casual about his arrival.

Including the secret I never told him eight years ago.

The secret that was currently waiting for his peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

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TWO

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## MARCUS

I tried not to let the hug affect me.

I even tried to muster up the usual annoyance at the act. I wasn't a touchy kind of guy, nor was I the type for the sentiment. It was very atypical for me to accept a hug, even from someone I knew.

But with Allie, it was impossible not to draw her close, not to inhale her scent, which was like daisies and sunshine. My heart should not have doubled its beat, but trying not to react to her gentle touch was like fighting a losing battle.

I might hate almost everyone and everything else in this town, but Allie Beston could never be one of those people.

Still, I slipped on my mask of indifference, merely nodding as she pulled away.

"What are you doing here?" she exclaimed, excitement shining in her bright eyes.

"Shopping," I responded. "I assume that's the same thing you're doing here."

"Yeah!" She bounced in step, her energy filling the atmosphere. "I just came over to pick up some peanut butter for—" Her words cut off, and she bit her lip.

"For?" I inquired.

She waved her hand. "It's not important. Anyway, what are you doing back in town?"

I thought about it, then gave her the simplest answer. "My mother. She's not doing well. I'm trying to convince her to get medical care in the city."

Sympathy crossed her face. "I'm so sorry. I tried to visit her when I first

heard about her illness but...erm...I didn't think she wanted me around."

That was an understatement. "Hmm."

My mother had told me about the visit over the phone, including the fact that she ended up asking Allie to leave and never come back. My mother never made it a secret that she blamed Allie for being the reason I had to leave town, no matter how irrational the thought was.

It was never Allie's fault. It was the rest of them who'd tried to lock me up for a crime I never committed. They'd accused me with spittle flying from their mouths, calling me a murderer when it was pure hatred that glowed in their eyes.

All because of their grudge against my family.

Allie had been one of the few people who'd stuck out their necks for me, and it was something I could never forget.

Of course, she also played a part in my leaving town, but not in the way my mother thought. I left to protect her and to protect my mother as well.

Even after being cleared of the crime, the townspeople still needed someone to dump all their hatred on, and I was a suitable scapegoat.

I didn't care when they drove me out of their stores and refused to sell to me, but their animosity was starting to bleed over onto the only people who stuck by my side—Allie and my mother. I didn't want the people I cared about to be hurt, and I didn't have the money to fight back.

So I decided to leave town entirely. It wasn't like I had much left here anyway.

But then, here I was again, back for admittedly valid reasons.

What wasn't valid was why I'd chosen to go to a grocery store in this neighborhood despite knowing there was a chance I would run into Allie.

I knew she lived only a couple of blocks anyway. I'd walked her home enough times to know that.

"So, where have you been all this time?" she asked with her usual exuberance.

"New York," I answered simply.

"Oh, how nice." I could tell she didn't mean that. While she still smiled when she said it, there was a faint trace of displeasure that wrinkled her nose. I nearly smiled at it. Allie was a small-town girl through and through, and she despised big cities like New York. I didn't blame her. It wasn't my favorite place, either.

She shifted her feet as if feeling a little awkward, like the way she used to

sometimes do when she would come over to talk to me.

It began when she started dropping off food at the construction site for the guys who worked nights. She worked the afternoon shift at a buffet-style restaurant across from us and would bring over any leftovers, claiming they would spoil if they were left overnight.

She would always come to me with her bright-eyed smile and friendly conversation, her eyes flitting shyly around whenever I held her gaze for too long.

Her obvious crush was flattering, except she was eleven years younger than me.

Some men might not mind the age gap, but I did. When we'd first started forming a friendship, she'd only been nineteen years old, barely legal.

Sure, she seemed incredibly mature for her age, even with her innocence. She wasn't doing any of the stuff most girls from her generation were doing. I mistook her for much older at first due to her calming aura and eloquent speech.

By the time I found out how old she was, it was too late.

I was already hooked on her sunny presence and beautiful smile.

I'd decided, at the time, that we couldn't be anything more than friends, not only due to the age thing but also because I had nothing to offer her. All I had was my shitty construction job, and every spare change went to cover my old man's debt.

I could give her friendship but nothing else.

It was a deal we kept until that fateful night that I sometimes still dreamt about.

I thought about it when we hugged, when her body was pressed against mine, and when her scent teased my nostrils. I thought about the way she tasted, her innocent gasps and sighs, the way her body undulated like waves.

*Shit, now I was getting hard in the middle of the grocery store.*

She was blinking at me now, but I couldn't answer her, having been lost in thought for the past few moments. I couldn't even remember whatever it was we were just talking about.

Oh, right. We were making small talk like we were acquaintances and not like I wanted to drag her to the darkest corner of this building and see if she still tasted as sweet as I remembered.

"So what are you up to now?" she asked, pulling me out of that memory.

"Construction," I responded automatically.



While it was technically true that I still worked in construction, I failed to mention the major thing... that I was now the sole owner of a company that made somewhere north of five billion dollars a year.

I knew I didn't look like a billionaire, and it was a concerted effort. I was used to women throwing themselves at me when they found out how much money I made, and it would be even worse if I dressed the part. I didn't think Allie was necessarily like that, but I didn't want to shatter the illusion I had of her yet, or see her eyes glow with opportunistic ambition when she realized I was no longer just the construction guy.

And her eyes did glow up, except it was with her usual friendly smile. "That's great! You're still following your passion. I remember you telling me how much you loved it."

I cocked her eyebrow. "I did?"

"Yeah," she said. "Remember? We were sitting out on the lawn, and I brought over some crepes that I had made, and we talked. Then I asked why you chose to do construction, and you said, 'I dunno. Can't think of anything else I wanted to do more.'"

I tried to remember the incident but couldn't exactly recall if those were the words used. If they were, then that was not the full story.

"Not that I kept a record of everything you've ever said to me or anything," Allie said, a blush crawling up her cheeks. "That would be creepy."

I smiled despite myself, watching the adorable expression on her face as she looked away. "What are you doing later today?"

"Me? Oh, umm. I don't think I have any plans. Why?"

"We should go somewhere. Catch up." *What are you doing? You're still too old for her.* But the words were already out there, so there was nothing I could do about it now.

"Oh umm..." Her face showed her hesitation, and then she lifted her hand, brushing her hair away from her face. That was when I saw the tan line on her right finger, the clear sign of a wedding band.

My stomach tightened. "You're married."

Her eyes widened, and she shook her head. I gestured with my chin to her finger, and she looked at it and smiled. "No, I'm not. I'm divorced."

Relief vied with jealousy. "What did he do?" I asked.

It was likely an invasive question, but I didn't give a damn. I had never been the polite type anyway.

“He didn’t do anything,” she said. “We were just incompatible at the end of the day, but the separation was amicable.”

“Oh.” What was I supposed to say next? “I’m supposed to say sorry or something, but I’m just glad that you’re available.”

Far from being offended, she laughed. “I wouldn’t have believed you if you said otherwise anyway.”

“Great, then it’s a date,” I said. “I’ll pick you up at eight.”

“Um, no,” she replied quickly. “I’m not going home. I’m going to be at my sister’s house.”

“Then I’ll pick you up there,” I said, and that was final.

It was a date.

When I got home, my mother was seated in her wheelchair, staring morosely outside the window.

She did that pretty much every evening ever since my father left town and the mob descended on us to demand payment for his debts.

The memory still haunts me sometimes.

They had attacked us and demanded we pay them hundreds of thousands of dollars even though they knew we couldn’t afford it.

I’d been working in construction since I was a teenager. I was a pretty large kid, and at fifteen, I was already six-foot-three and one-ninety pounds of pure muscle.

I started working under the table so my mother wouldn’t have to work three jobs anymore, just so we could get by. I didn’t know what my father did, but I never saw him work, only travel a lot. I didn’t give a shit when he was gone. It wasn’t like he was much of a help when he was around anyway.

I worked and continued school because I wanted to show people I wasn’t going to be a deadbeat like him. I was determined to go to college, so I got good grades and gained a scholarship to Montana State for architecture.

And then it all blew up in my face the day it came out that my father scammed a bunch of people right before he skipped town.

We never saw him again.

The mob showed up at our house demanding compensation and took everything that wasn’t nailed down. Then, they threatened to send my mother to jail if we didn’t pay the rest. It may not have been legal, but this was a small town, so they could do whatever they wanted. They knew we didn’t have the power to fight them anyway.

The incident nearly broke my mother, who was already fragile after my

dad left. I gave up my scholarship because I needed to work to continue to provide for her.

I went back to construction.

So Allie was partially correct. Saying that I couldn't see myself doing anything apart from construction was true, but whether or not I loved it was another thing.

"You shouldn't have come back," my mother murmured. "They haven't forgotten."

And she was likely right, but I couldn't be too upset about it right now.

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THREE

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# ALLIE

“This isn’t a good idea,” Athena said as she watched me pull on the third dress I’d tried on that evening. It was a simple A-line black dress with just a hint of cleavage. Cute but also made me look like I was sixteen.

I sighed.

“Are you even listening to me?”

“Yes, Athena,” I responded, letting her hear how tired I was of the conversation.

This was why I didn’t even want to tell her about the date in the first place. But I needed to since she was the only one available to watch Caleb while I was gone. Caleb also preferred her company to anybody else who wasn’t me. Maybe it was the resemblance between the two of us that put him at ease.

But anyway, asking Athena for the favor ultimately meant divulging what I planned to do this evening because she would always ask a million questions until I told her. She was like a hound dog when she was looking for information—she wouldn’t stop until she got it.

And unfortunately, I’d never been that good at lying.

I’d tried to mention it as casually as possible, hoping it would somehow slip past her. When I’d dropped by with Caleb, I’d said, “Hey, could you help me watch Caleb for a few hours? I need to catch up with an old friend.” I’d hoped she would just say, “Sure,” and then move on to the next thing. But instead, her head swung around, and she frowned. “Which friend?”

I couldn’t lie to her then. She always knew when I was lying, so I reluctantly told her that I was meeting with Marcus.

Instant disapproval. Her eyes widened, and her lips tightened. Then, she

shook her head and said, “I’m not going to tell you what to do, but I really hope you know what you’re doing.”

*Yeah, I hoped I did too.*

It wasn’t like I didn’t acknowledge her concerns about this situation. There were several reasons why I shouldn’t be dating right now. Between Caleb and the resort, I had enough on my plate without adding anything more.

But Caleb was also partially the reason why I agreed to go on the date in the first place.

Caleb was Marcus’ son.

However, neither of them knew this.

I hadn’t meant to keep his identity a secret from Marcus. I found out I was pregnant after he left town, and there was no way to reach him.

He didn’t leave a phone number, and his mother wasn’t forthcoming with any details about his whereabouts either. I was pretty sure the woman hated me, but that was beside the point. Bottom line, I couldn’t find Marcus, so I never told him that the night we shared produced one of the most beautiful treasures in my life.

But now that Marcus was back in town, he had a right to know that he’d fathered a child. And Caleb should know his real father too.

And this was a perfect opportunity to tell him, right here on this date.

I tried to tell myself that was the reason I agreed to see Marcus again, not for the fact that my heart was racing a mile a minute at the residual feeling of that spontaneous hug.

Jeez, I must be a giant pervert because just having him press his strong, hard body against mine was enough to send my libido through the roof. My nipples had hardened, and I was glad that there were several layers of fabric shielding them. Not to mention the slight tingling between my legs.

All from a hug.

It was probably because it’d been a long time since I slept with or even been sexually attracted to a man. The last time I attempted sex was the disastrous night with Ken—my ex-husband—when I tried to see if our marriage of convenience could be turned into something more.

But while I loved Ken with all my heart, and we got along well in most aspects of life, kissing him felt like kissing my brother. We’d immediately called it off altogether and decided to dissolve the marriage.

That was two years ago, and it was the last sexual encounter I could

remember.

Ken's hesitant touch hadn't made me feel even half of what Marcus did today with just a hug and a dark look.

And as much as I tried to tell myself that everything today was for Caleb, it didn't explain why I had changed my outfit three times already with butterflies in my stomach.

"I need to tell him about Caleb," I told Athena. "But before I do that, I want to make sure he understands that I never tried to purposefully hide it from him."

"You also need to make sure that *you* understand what kind of man he is," Athena warned, her eyes knowing. "Because once you let that cat out of the bag, it can't be reined back in."

"I know that, Athena. But Marcus is not the kind of guy you think he is."

Athena was the only other person besides Ken who knew about Caleb's true paternity. She was against me telling Marcus the truth, though. Unlike some people in town, she didn't necessarily think he was a murderer, but she hadn't approved of our friendship, believing he was far too old for me. It was funny because Marcus had pushed me away for the very same reason. He'd told me that due to our age difference, we could never be anything more than friends.

I had a feeling that Marcus and my sister would get along if they ever got to actually talk.

But Athena also didn't like that Marcus was the silent, mysterious type who stayed away from people as much as possible, never attending any town meetings or events. She thought his reclusive nature was suspicious. I understood that, but she didn't know him the way I did. His gruff exterior was simply a defense mechanism against how everyone treated him. On the inside, he was just a gentle soul who couldn't hurt a fly. But some people believed that since he was big and bulky, he was capable of beating a man to death.

Ridiculous.

As I had that thought, we both heard the low hum of a truck pulling into the driveway.

We glanced out at the same time to see the rust-brown RAM parking. My heartbeat accelerated. *He's here.*

I glanced at myself in the mirror, figuring the black number would have to do. I felt ridiculous for changing so many times, but I was nervous. This

would be our first official date...or at least our first date-like event.

I didn't want to look bad.

I smoothed out the skirt of the dress, my stomach in knots.

Then I awkwardly patted my dress down, pulled off some imaginary lint, and took a deep breath.

"Be careful," Athena warned, following me down the stairs toward the door. "Watch out for his behavior traits. Make sure he's exactly who you think he is. If you're wrong, it won't just be you who suffers. It will be Caleb as well. You'll be ripping away his knowledge of the only father he knew, Ken, and replacing it with Marcus."

"No one is replacing anyone," I assured her. I would never think to tell my son to forget his love for his stepfather. I knew Ken loved Caleb even though he'd been kind of awkward with the whole fatherhood thing. He never knew his dad, either. "I'll be careful," I added, even though her lack of trust in me slightly stung. I knew it came from a good place. Athena was trying to look out for Caleb and me as well. I reached out and hugged her.

"Thank you," I told her. "For everything."

Athena got a little teary-eyed as she pulled back and smiled. "Of course. Anything for my Allie bear."

"You said you'd stop calling me that when I grew up."

"I lied." She smiled and kissed me on the cheek. I also looked in on Caleb, who was currently taking a nap on the couch, and kissed him on the forehead before I strode through the hallway to the door.

I was standing in front of it when the knock came.

I took a deep breath before I opened it.

Marcus looked at me, his eyes running down my form. When they came back up to meet mine, they were filled with palpable heat.

"You look good," he drawled. His rumbling baritone made me want to shiver and soak in the compliment.

"Thanks," I said, and my voice was a lot deeper than I intended, almost sultry. *Come on, Allie, get a hold of yourself. This is not the time to get flirty.*

But it was hard. He looked so damn good, dressed casually in his button-up shirt and slacks. It was the most dressed up I'd ever seen him.

"You don't look bad yourself," I said, coughing as I felt the heat crawl into my face at his little smirk.

His hazel gaze shifted behind me, and he raised a hand in a silent salute. I glanced back to see Athena standing on the steps, looking on disapprovingly.



She nodded once, and that was it.

If Marcus noted her coldness, he didn't say anything about it, gesturing instead for me to lead the way out. I walked in front of him to his truck. When I moved to put my hand on the handle, he came forward, tutting his disapproval. As he pulled open the door for me, I turned and smiled at him.

"Thank you kindly, gentleman," I said, and he winked.

"So, where are we going?" I asked when he slipped into the driver's seat and put his car in gear.

"I thought we could smash lobsters at Keke's Lobster House."

I gaped at him, joy zapping through me. "You remembered?"

"Of course." Mischief glinted in his eyes. Back in the day, I had told him how much I liked the lobster place, and he promised to take me there one day. Of course, he'd left town two days later, but it seemed "one day" had finally arrived.

It took us about an hour to get to the restaurant as it was in the next town over. During that time, we maintained small talk. Marcus mostly asked me about how I'd been doing, what I'd been doing, and all the usual stuff. I told him I quit waitressing to work in my family's resort.

"How's that been going?" he inquired.

"It's been going well," I lied, mostly because I didn't want to get into the doom and gloom of it right now. Tonight, I just wanted to be happy. "Real well."

When we arrived at the restaurant, we were shown to a table tucked into an intimate corner of the room and decorated with red origami napkins and a bottle of wine. There was candlelight in the corner that basked a romantic orange glow over the setup.

"This is nice," I commented appreciatively, trying to sound casual even though my heart was racing. I knew all about the lover's package here at Keke's, being a massive fan of the restaurant, and this had all the makings of it, down to the little dove figurines and Cupid's arrows in the middle of the table.

*So this was a date.*

The little girl inside me jumped around giddily, but on the outside, I tried to keep my cool.

The menus were already laid out, and I felt a little anxious, glancing at the prices.

"Are you sure this is okay?" I asked him as he pulled out a chair for me.

“This place is pretty expensive.”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Alright,” I replied, even though I made a note to pay a little of the bill at the end. I knew money was probably still tight for him, and I didn’t want to add to any stress he might be feeling.

We didn’t talk a lot as we waited for the lobsters to come. Mostly, we just stared at each other and basked in each other’s company. He was looking at me with a fathomless expression on his face. I couldn’t look away from his gaze, something in them ensnaring me and drawing me deeper into them, making me imagine things that were probably not decent to be imagining in public. I couldn’t help myself, though, and I thought about it until there was a rhythmic pump in my chest and a flutter in my stomach.

*He’s really here, I thought in awe. This is really happening.*

And then his phone rang.

“Excuse me,” he said as he picked it up.

I watched his expression change immediately.

“What the fuck do you mean by that?” he snapped.

I nearly jumped at the barked-out words, frowning at him. I wasn’t a prude, but I could do without the swear words. And his tone was so...harsh. So cold.

And then it got worse.

“You tell that fucking piece of shit that if he keeps bothering me, I’ll snap his little twig neck and stuff it up his ass.” His growl sent fear arcing through me. Violence trembled in his tone.

My heart froze, the flutters turning into an anxious twisting as apprehension prickled my skin. That didn’t sound like the Marcus I knew. None of this did.

*Make sure he’s exactly who you think he is. If you’re wrong, it won’t just be you who suffers.*

It seemed that, once again, my sister was right.

FOUR

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## MARCUS

Annoyance trickled through me, and I internally cursed at Sean's horrible fucking timing.

As I listened to my PA ramble on in my ears, I met Allie's eyes. They were wide with shock before quickly looking away from mine.

Damn.

I probably just startled her. I forgot I never used to swear so much until I got to New York. Even before I left, I made painstaking efforts to only show Allie the good, gentle parts of me.

And now Sean had ruined it.

It was my fault for answering the phone in her presence in the first place.

I should have excused myself and gone to take the call outside like a gentleman.

But I'd never claimed to be one of those.

Besides, I didn't want to leave her by herself, not even for a second. She looked far too tempting in that black dress. Combined with her innocent gaze and unconscious sex appeal, she was a bar fight waiting to happen.

And with the possessive heat currently running through me, I would deck any guy who even so much as looked at her.

"Deal with it," I said to Sean, ready to hang up, but he began speaking faster before I could.

"You're not listening, Marcus," Sean said. "Either that or you're not taking this seriously enough. I'm going to repeat myself. Darryl, Leverman's son, is threatening to take you to court, and he's already talking to stakeholders to deny your legitimacy as inheritor of Leverman Construction."

"He has no right to do that." The boy had abandoned his father and gone

off to tour the world with whatever little cash he'd stolen from him. That was why, on his deathbed, Leverman awarded me full control of the company, and his son was only a blip on the will.

"I know that," Sean continued. "And *you* know that. And Darryl probably knows that as well. But the bad press is affecting our clients. Jackson Pharmaceuticals is now trying to pull out of our deal because of the controversy."

"And that's where you tell Walter Jackson to take his business and shove it up his ass," I said, sick and tired of these fucking assholes who thought they could throw their weight around just because they owned a billion-dollar pharmaceutical company. They'd already tried to pull out of our deal multiple times, citing everything from creative differences to corporate disagreement.

It was all bullshit. The real reason was that they simply didn't want to pay for the work already done.

We didn't need their business anyway, but I didn't take kindly to being scammed. They needed to know that. "Teach them a lesson, Sean. I don't care who you have to hire to do it, but they're not making off with my money. You understand that?"

"But Darryl—"

"The Darryl thing will blow over. It's business as usual until it does. But if he keeps yapping, then hit him where it hurts." The will stipulated that we give Darryl a stipend of money each month, but we were allowed to withhold it if he started showing delinquent tendencies. His current actions sounded like they fit the bill. And if it didn't, well, Sean and the lawyers could make sure it did.

Sean sighed tiredly. "You don't pay me nearly enough for this."

"Yes, I do." I hung up without saying anything further, turning my attention back to Allie, who was staring at me, still wide-eyed.

Shit.

I didn't realize how all that would sound without context.

I *really* should have fucking left before taking the call, but I was too lost in her to make that rational choice.

Since the moment I saw her in that dress, it'd been hard to concentrate on much else. Desire had swum inside me, so thick and heady that I felt it in my throat. As it is, I was barely able to speak above a growl.

Fuck, she'd filled out over the years.

While she still maintained her youthful, petite frame, there was now a

pleasant layer of flesh padding her curves. Curves I wanted to sink my teeth into, to sink my entire self in.

Only self-control had kept me from kissing her right there on her doorstep, as I wanted to be on my best behavior. This wasn't one of the faceless women in New York whose company I kept simply for sex. This was Allie. The woman was innocent as the sunrise. I didn't want to scare her, so I kept my hands to myself all the way here.

*Stop staring at her like that if you don't want to scare her,* I scolded myself.

She'd already looked away from me, studying the room. It was a sign of nerves, probably because I hadn't said anything in the past minute and was just staring at her like an idiot.

I cleared my throat, burying my desire once more under social mores.

"Sorry about that," I apologized. "Some guys from work are just throwing a tantrum."

"It's okay," she said in a voice that sounded distinctly tenser than it had been earlier. I cursed Sean again. If he ruined this for me, I was going to take it out on him during our next boxing session.

Allie smiled weakly, gesturing to her lobster. "This is good."

"Is it?" I had yet to take a bite. But rather than take one off my plate, I reached over and snagged one of her pieces with my hand.

Her eyes went to my lips as I popped the fleshy meat into my mouth, the taste exploding on my tongue. She was right. It did taste good.

But nothing was as good as seeing her eyes flare and go slightly darker when I licked my fingers after, taking my time to suck the juices off each finger.

She bit her lip, and I watched her squirm ever so slightly in her seat. And just like that, I was rock hard.

Fuck, calm down.

"So," I said, trying to wrack my brain for conversation starters. I wasn't very good at making conversation, and with most people, I didn't care to try. But with Allie...I didn't want to just sit here watching her like a creep, either. What would be the polite thing to say right now? "What are you doing these days?"

*Good question. Not too invasive. General enough so she can talk about anything, and I can hear that soft melodic voice of hers go on and on for hours.*

She shrugged. "Not much."

I cocked my eyebrow.

"That's it?" The woman I remembered could expound on even the simplest topics and would usually not let the conversation end with just two words.

"Yeah," she said, and there was a hint of anxiety in her voice. I could also sense she was twisting her fingers in her lap and, once again, avoiding my gaze. "I haven't been up to anything since you've been gone. Except I'm not a waitress anymore and now work for my family's resort. But I told you that already. I don't do much apart from that, and nothing else has changed."

"You got married," I said, proud that I kept most of the jealousy out of my voice. It was irrational to be jealous. After all, I was the one who left her, and I didn't expect her to wait for me or anything like that.

I was never even expecting to come back.

Still, the thought of any other man being with her, touching her, holding her made me feel slightly psychotic. And if I were truly honest, I wanted to find this ex-husband of hers and demand what right he had to touch something that was mine.

*You're losing it. Calm down.*

Allie looked a little uncomfortable at the statement and bit her lip. Of course, that dragged my attention to her plump lower lip, which made my cock throb with the memory of the heated kiss we had eight years ago.

*And I can't believe you're getting hard at dinner because of an eight-year-old kiss.*

But to be fair, it wasn't just the kiss. Everything about her made me hard.

Allie was still silent as if she didn't know what to say to that.

I tried to smile at her to let her know that it was okay, I wasn't mad about her marriage, but it might have come out as a grimace instead.

"Um, yeah," she finally said. "We got married a few years ago, but as I said, it didn't work out."

"Who was it to?"

"Um...to my friend Ken. I don't know if you remember him."

I did, and I also knew for sure that a scowl was appearing on my face now. Ken was a preppy kid like her, and according to Allie, they'd been friends since they were children.

I didn't know much about him except seeing him occasionally around town, and that one time I'd dropped Allie at her house. He'd stood there

watching me with a possessive gleam in his eyes.

I'd wanted to deck the kid then but didn't want to do it in front of Allie. I was also way too old to be involving myself in juvenile fights anyway, especially with a man who was about half my size and ten years my junior.

But it didn't mean I wanted him anywhere around Allie, either.

*They're divorced*, I told myself to calm the heat. He's no longer in the picture.

"Was it a rough marriage?" I asked. "Did he do something?" *Give me an excuse to go find him.*

Allie shrugged. "Not really. As I said, the divorce was mutual and amicable. We just weren't right for each other. We've remained friends regardless, even though he stays in Minnesota now because of his job."

*Good, he's far away from her.*

"Oh," I said.

After that, the conversation was stifled. It might partially be from my lack of conversation skills or the fact that she seemed visibly uneasy about something. She kept glancing around like she was looking for something or paying attention to everything else but me.

And then it hit me.

God, I was such a dumbass.

She probably didn't want to be seen with me.

I couldn't blame her. Even though it was eight years ago, a lot of people in town still only saw me as the guy who murdered an innocent old man. It would damage her reputation if she were seen with me. It was why I left her in the first place.

The restaurant was out of town, but it was also a popular spot for people to go on dates. There was a high likelihood that someone here would be from Summit, and they might recognize her or me.

I was an idiot. *Why did you bring her here where anyone could see you together?*

Well, simply put, it was arrogance. I wanted to show off a little, to give her the one thing she told me she wished for, her dream date experience that began at Keke's Lobster House.

The date I should have given her all those years ago before I was dubbed a murderer.

Her eyes went wide as I shifted my chair back, getting up.

"Let's go," I said.



“Where?” she asked as I walked behind her and pulled out her chair. I held out my hand, and she took it, getting to her feet. I ignored the frisson of electricity that sparked from the contact, reaching in and throwing a few hundred dollars on the table, enough to leave a very generous tip. Her eyes widened as she glanced at it, but she said nothing as I grabbed our coats on the way out.

“Where are we going?” she asked again when we got to the car.

“You’ll see,” I answered as I helped her into the car.

The drive was even quieter than the ride here. I got the feeling she was thinking about something intensely, something much deeper than this date. However, when we got closer to our destination, her eyes perked up, her entire expression aglow with wonder.

“Hold on, are we going to...”

“Yup,” I said. “Leeroy’s mountainside.”

She gaped at me. Leeroy’s mountainside was one of the great undiscovered wonders of Montana, a road that led up a hill and ended right at the base of a mountain. One could see the entire town of Summit from there, like a little gingerbread town. It was a popular spot for tourists and hikers, but it would likely be abandoned around this time due to the weather.

Which made it the perfect time for us to go.

The truck moved ruggedly through the few inches of snow, getting closer and closer until we reached the base of the mountain.

“Oh my gosh, I can’t believe we made it,” Allie exclaimed. I glanced at her in time to see her beaming at me, and it made me all soft in my chest.

*Ha, if Sean could see me now, he’d make fun of me for an eternity.*

*If he believed his eyes, that is.*

When we got out of the car at the base of the mountain, her face held even more wonder as she looked around.

“It’s beautiful,” she said, looking out and admiring the view.

“Yes,” I agreed, although I wasn’t looking at Summit. I was looking at her.

She was bundled up in her coat, and the tips of her ears were pink from the weather, but her delighted expression was doing something to me. There was a possessive heat in my chest that demanded I go to her right now, that I hold her, that I make her mine.

She finally turned and looked at me.

“Thank you,” she said with a smile. And that was it for me.

I couldn't help it anymore. Without thinking about it, I wrapped my hands around her waist, pulling her body to mine and watching as her mouth fell open slightly in a gasp.

Her eyes met mine, surprise and desire fighting for dominance.

I couldn't wait any longer.

It had been eight years of waiting.

"I'm going to kiss you now," I told her.

She hesitated. Then she nodded.

I went slowly, giving her ample time to pull away if she didn't want this or if she had changed her mind.

She didn't.

The first taste of her lips had me groaning, my cock hardening beyond belief. Fuck, she tasted so sweet.

I could taste some of the lobster we just had and traces of wine on her. But what had me going deeper, seeking her tongue, was that quintessential Allie flavor, which I could only describe as daisies and sunshine.

I teased her tongue with mine and felt more than hear her moan in my mouth. Fucking heaven and hell at the same damn time. Desire ripped through me, tearing at my senses, and I melded her lips with mine, breathing deeply like I wanted to inhale her.

I felt her hands grip my shoulders. Her body pressed harder against mine, and I lost it.

Like a crazed man, I couldn't get enough. Every part of her tasted so good, so sultry. Exactly as I remembered. After all these years, I'd never been with a woman who affected me half this much.

Her hands went around my neck, and I lost even more of my senses, folding my palm in her hair. She was so small that her neck was getting a crick, so I lifted her with my other arm while her legs wrapped around my waist instinctively.

That quickly kicked everything into high gear.

And I knew that if we kept on like this, I was going to drag her to the floor and fuck her.

*No, don't do that. She deserves better than that.* The thoughts were a warning, but I couldn't help myself.

God, it had been too long without her, too long without this. I didn't know how I thought I would only be with her once, and it would be enough.

Once would never be enough.

An unexpected clanging blare had her tearing away from me. Her face was still dazed and confused before she suddenly realized what the sound was.

“My phone,” she murmured, her voice husky. She tapped my shoulder lightly to be let down. Lust had short-circuited my brain, so it took me a little while to understand and oblige. Once I did, she reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out her cell phone.

“Hello?” she answered, glancing at me out of the corners of her eyes. She still looked lust-shocked and good enough to eat.

But then, her entire demeanor changed.

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FIVE

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# ALLIE

Panic quickly drove out any stray desire trembling through my body.

The drastic change gave me whiplash, and I tried to get my emotions to settle so I could understand what was happening.

“What did you say?” I asked, trying to get my brain to work again.

“It’s Caleb,” Athena’s voice sounded like she was at her wit’s end. Like she was barely holding it together. In the background, I could hear loud sobbing that sounded almost like a wail.

I instantly knew who it was, and sharp pain spread through me.

“What’s wrong, Athena?” I asked.

“He’s not reacting well,” she said, sounding as panicked as I’d ever heard my sister sound. “He’s refusing to eat. Ever since he woke up and found you gone, he’s been crying and holding himself and rocking. No matter how much I tried to get him to calm down and tell him you’ll be back soon, he wouldn’t listen. I don’t know what to do.”

“Poor baby.” I felt the tears pool behind my eyes as guilt and heartache ate at me. This was all my fault. I was a bad, selfish mother. Here I was, enjoying myself on a date while my son was suffering at home.

And I’d been ready to possibly spend the night with Marcus, too, forgetting how much Caleb needed me.

It didn’t matter that he’d never reacted like this before whenever I left him. I should have anticipated something was wrong when he regressed. I should have known something was seriously wrong.

“I’m so sorry, Athena,” I said, feeling bad that I left her to deal with all this. It wasn’t her responsibility, and as much as she liked to help me out, I shouldn’t take advantage of her. “I’ll be home soon. I’m on my way.”

After I hung up the phone, I finally glanced up at Marcus' concerned face.

"What's wrong?" he asked, but I shook my head. I couldn't explain it right now, and it wasn't the time to explain who Caleb was anyway.

"Could you take me home, please?" I asked. His lips tightened, and he gave me a quick nod before we began heading back to the car.

The ride back was once again silent and even more awkward.

A fitting end to a confusing date.

The confusion was likely my fault as much as his.

While I didn't date much, I knew I hadn't exactly behaved appropriately during it. I was quieter than normal and didn't continue conversations, allowing it to die off. At first, it had been the nerves. It wasn't every day you told a man that you bore him a son he didn't know about for eight years. I didn't even know how to approach the topic or how to segue. Was there even a proper segue for that?

And then my worry for that, combined with his reaction to that phone call, and...well, it all just got to me.

But the date wasn't all bad.

The kiss had been pure magic. Even thinking about it made my toes tingle and my heart race again, but I put it out of my mind, trying to focus all my attention on my son, who needed me.

I glanced at Marcus surreptitiously. I couldn't read the expression on his face, and he wasn't saying anything. I wasn't either.

What a night.

It was not what I'd imagined when I agreed to come here.

Maybe I was naïve, but I had hopes that Marcus and I would settle into the easy camaraderie we'd always had—talk a little and maybe even deepen our friendship. Then I would tell him about Caleb, and while he would be a little upset, he would eventually understand, and we could discuss co-parenting our little boy together.

But then the phone call Marcus received earlier gave me doubts.

I glanced at Marcus again out of the corner of my eye. He likely knew I was watching him, but he said nothing. His signature 'resting irritated face' was on, but it was nothing compared to the dark, mean expression he wore when he answered the phone earlier during dinner.

I hadn't seen him with that expression before, except when he'd been locked up in jail. At that time, his anger was understandable, but the way he

was on that phone call...

While Marcus had always been a stern sort who hardly smiled, I'd never heard him be so harsh and intense. And he'd made threats to someone. I didn't know what the guy at the other end of the phone said, but surely it didn't justify that.

But then again, maybe I didn't know him as well as I thought. Athena warned me. Eight years could change a lot of people.

Especially someone who had already been through the kind of crap he went through.

And that was the major reason why I hesitated to tell him about Caleb.

I thought maybe he'd changed for the worse, had become ruthless and cruel. But then he'd taken me to the mountains and even remembered I liked Keke's lobsters. Throughout the date, he was so attentive.

And attractive.

Which is why, the minute he'd taken me in his arms, I'd lost all sense.

The kiss would likely feature in my dreams later on, but for now, I brushed it out of my mind, pondering instead on the inner confusion I felt. Who was Marcus? The man I knew, or the one I feared?

*You can figure it out later*, I told myself as Marcus merged onto Athena's street. Right now, you have a little boy to take care of.

The minute Marcus pulled into the parking lot, I rushed out of the car and hurriedly trudged through the snow toward the door. I barely got it open and rushed inside before my little boy was running to me, feet sliding on the semi-wet floor before he slammed into me, his hands tightening around my waist.

He wasn't sobbing, but he was letting out little quiet cries, tears streaming from his eyes as he stared up at me. There was palpable fear in his expression that only eased slightly when I ran my hand over his head.

"I'm here, baby," I said, smiling at him. "I'm here."

He nodded and put his head down again, burying his face in my abdomen.

I glanced out the window to see that Marcus was heading up the driveway. I caught Athena's eye, shaking my head. I didn't want him to see Caleb. Not yet.

Athena nodded, immediately understanding. She hurried outside determinedly, not bothering to put on her coat. Through the window, I saw her catch Marcus on his way up and saw them talk. Marcus frowned like he didn't agree with whatever she was saying, but my sister crossed her arms

and had that stubborn look on her face. There was no way she was letting him in here.

Marcus' face turned stormy for a brief second, and then he nodded, turning around and heading back to his car.

When I saw him get in and drive off, I felt a distant ache in my heart.

I was so conflicted.

My rapid departure without a goodbye was rude. I should have at least thanked him for the date or told him that nothing that happened after was his fault. I could have made up some excuse or something, but the truth was that the minute I heard Caleb wasn't doing well, all thought of that left my head, and all I could think of was getting to my son.

But as Marcus drove off, I couldn't help feeling like a bit of a jerk.

Later that night, as Caleb napped with his head in my lap, I finally asked Athena exactly what happened to set him off.

"Nothing," she said. "Nothing special anyway. He woke up from his nap, and I tried to give him dinner. Then he asked where you were—"

"Wait, he talked?" I couldn't keep the hope out of my voice.

"No," she said apologetically, dashing my excitement. "Wrong choice of words. He asked without saying anything, just kind of pointing at the picture of you in the corner. And then, when I told him you might be out late today, he refused to eat. I tried everything, begging him and even telling him to watch TV for a full hour after he was done." Athena was typically stricter than I was, so that was a huge give for her. "And then I tried playing hardball with him too, but he simply wouldn't eat. And as time went on, he started crying and pointing at your picture."

My heart ached. This was a new reaction for him. He hadn't been like this before. While I never made it a habit to stay out late, I'd left him with Athena plenty of times before, and there had never been an issue. What happened this time? What changed?

"How was the date?" Athena asked, and her tone was more curious than disapproving, which allowed me to be honest with her.

"Horrible," I said.

Her face went dark. "What did he do?"

"Nothing. He didn't do anything to me. It was just...." I hesitated but then decided to just come clean with it anyway. "Okay, so he got a call from this person, and he sounded very...weird. Different from how I remembered."



“I don’t understand.” Athena frowned.

I sighed, then explained to her what he’d said during the phone call.

When I finished, Athena raised an eyebrow. “It could have been a business thing,” she said. “Dad used to get frustrated and say stuff like that sometimes too.”

“Yeah, but just the way he said it...it gave me bad feelings.”

She nodded. “It’s always good to go with your gut in any case. Anyway, it’s a good thing you figured it out before Caleb got involved.”

“Yeah,” I muttered in response, although if it was a good thing, why did I feel so bad about it?

Later that night, I finally allowed my mind to drift back, drawing on the stolen moment of pleasure at the base of the mountain.

I remembered the kiss, the way his lips had gently coaxed mine and completely dominated me in a way only he knew how to do.

When I was in his arms, I felt safe. I felt like he would take care of me.

And now, I felt unbearably horny.

Seven years without sex would do that to a woman, but it had gotten worse since I saw Marcus. My clit was pulsating between my legs, and no amount of tossing and turning would allow me to get rest.

I huffed, throwing myself onto my back. It seemed I would need to take care of this the old-fashioned way.

I tried not to look as I let my hand begin its path down my stomach.

*I’m not going to do much*, I told myself, slightly embarrassed. Just to settle the heat a little, so I could sleep. But as my fingers were about to reach my panties, my phone dinged.

I sighed. *Great timing.*

I grabbed the phone from the nightstand, glancing at the flashing notification. It was from an unknown number, but from the text, I could tell who it was.

*Hey. Is everything okay?*

My heart melted. He was checking in on me. How sweet.

That was what made it even more difficult for me to type out: *Yes, everything’s fine. But I don’t think it’s a good idea for us to date right now.*

There was no response, and my heart ached. I felt like I was making a mistake, but it was a choice I had to make.

For Caleb.

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SIX

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## MARCUS

Initially, I wasn't too bothered by the lack of a goodbye, as well as the fact that the date had ended suddenly without any explanation.

I got the sense that she had an emergency to take care of as everything from her body language to the way she bit her nails in the car spoke of her sense of urgency.

But then again, her body language had been off the entire date. She was visibly quiet and uncomfortable, and it wasn't just when we were in the restaurant. It was on the way to the mountain as well. That, combined with the fact that she didn't even want me in her home after, made me wonder if there wasn't something simpler going on here.

Perhaps she just didn't want to date me.

Of course, back in the day, she may not have cared that I was the son of the man who defrauded half the town. But on top of that, I was also an alleged murderer. I wouldn't blame her if she finally buckled under the pressure of all the bad press I received.

So, by the time I received her text, I couldn't even be disappointed.

Much.

*Plus, there's the fact that she thinks you're just a construction worker,* my inner voice taunted as insecurity reared its ugly little head.

I'd taken her to the Keke's because it was her favorite restaurant, but perhaps I should have taken her somewhere nicer. She was a woman, after all, and in my experience, women wanted to be wined and dined. Back when I just had two cents to my name, I knew several women who desired me well enough, but at the end of the day, they couldn't see themselves settling down with a regular construction worker, so they offered only sex in secret.

It was disappointing to think that Allie was the same.

She hadn't been when I first met her. Back then, I knew her as a sweet, bubbly girl, a welcome balm from the rest of the population who grated on my nerves.

She always had a smile for everyone onsite when she came, never treating anyone like they were less than her, no matter their education level. Hector, one of our hardest workers, barely spoke English, and Allie made an effort to learn rudimentary Spanish just so she could tell him hello every day and ask how his day was going.

I always saw his entire face brighten up whenever she came around, and it made me feel a little jealous. Not because anything was going on—he'd been happily married to his wife for thirty years—but because I selfishly wanted to keep her light to myself, to hoard it and never let anyone else have it.

But then she would come over to me with that light blush on her cheek and make the ugly feelings disappear.

The first time she'd asked me out, it had come as a complete shock.

I knew she had a crush on me, but it was bolder than I expected from her, and at that point, we'd only spoken a few times. Most of it was her asking me questions and me giving her one-worded answers. I had nothing against her personally, but I'd never really been much of a talker and especially didn't know how to talk to a girl who was eleven years my junior.

I knew I could be a scary motherfucker sometimes, even when I tried my best to be gentle with her.

So it was surprising when she looked me right in the eyes and suggested that we maybe grab coffee sometime. Her eyes had been bright with nerves and hope, her fingers wringing in front of her, and I felt genuine regret when I shook my head and saw the light die in her eyes.

"Oh," she said, biting her lips as her shoulders fell. "Do you mind telling me why?"

I thought about how to explain it, then decided to say it plainly. "How old are you?"

"Nineteen," she responded.

"I'm thirty."

She blinked at me. "And?"

I couldn't help smiling at the dismissiveness in her tone. "That's quite the age gap."

“It doesn’t matter. I’m legal.”

“It does,” I told her. “You’re far too young, and you got your whole life ahead of you. I’d feel like a pedophile if I did anything with you.” Okay, maybe the pedophile part was pushing it too far, but I’d certainly have felt like one of those creeps who chased after much younger girls.

“Well, that’s a bummer,” she said, and the extremely put-out way she said it made me want to laugh.

“The most we can do is a friendship,” I told her, even though I knew it was a bad idea. I shouldn’t be around her at all. With the way she already made me feel in those few short weeks...her addictive light was dangerous to a man like me who knew only darkness.

But I couldn’t regret it as her eyes brightened back up, and a smile appeared on her lips.

“In that case, we can be friends,” I said. It was something I only said to soften the blow of rejection, but she took it seriously, showing up nearly every other day after that with food and conversation. And to this day, I can’t tell you exactly what we talked about. It was everything and nothing, from books to our lives to what we wanted to do in the future. Though I probably only contributed maybe five percent to the conversation, she never got annoyed.

She was a chatterbox, but I liked it. I liked hearing her talk, and it never felt like she talked just for the sake of it. She always said seemingly simple things that turned out to be secretly profound. And when I did speak, she listened with rapt attention even though I didn’t think I was saying anything all that compelling.

All in all, I remembered her as one of the few people in this fucking town who was worth knowing.

So I couldn’t say I didn’t regret the decision to leave.

I knew a brush-off when I saw one, and I wasn’t necessarily hurt by the rejection.

Just disappointed.

“MA,” I called out when I walked into my mother’s house. “I’m here.”

I dropped the bag of groceries I bought on the way home and walked

toward the garden, where my mother had probably wheeled off to. I'd gotten her the electric wheelchair when it became clear that she had difficulty ambulating. She was also supposed to have a home nurse 24/7, but more often than not, she traumatized the poor girl into leaving early. My mother was not an easy woman to live with, but life made her that way. It caused her to be jaded against most strangers.

There was only one person she trusted in this world. Me.

Which was why I was here with her instead of taking care of and putting out fires that needed me in New York. I was hoping to finally convince her to move to New York with me, where I could keep an eye on her, but my mother was still very much in denial of her disease, insisting she could take care of herself. I already decided that by the end of the week, if I couldn't convince her to go, I would simply carry her to New York with me whether she liked it or not.

I finally got to the garden to find her staring off morosely.

"You're not supposed to be out here," I told her. The wheelchair could get stuck in the mud, and she could tip over onto the ground. Our closest neighbor was about a mile away, so no one would be able to hear her scream. "And it's cold."

I fetched her jacket from the hook by the window, throwing it over her shoulders. Luckily, it wasn't too cold today, but her immune system also wasn't at its best. "Let's go back inside."

"He used to come here sometimes," she stated, her voice rough from years of smoking cigarettes. "Sometimes, he would just sit here for hours, staring into the sky. I would ask him what he was thinking about, and he would always say, 'Nothing, darling. Just thinking about you and my boy. The two of you are the proudest things in my life.'"

My body tightened. I knew what was coming. She'd told this story so many times that I barely had a visceral reaction to it anymore. She'd gotten more pensive as of late.

As I rolled her back indoors, she continued, "The lying bastard. He wasn't thinking about us at all. If he had been, he wouldn't have stolen all that money from those people and then left us to deal with it. He wouldn't have left me behind."

I could hear the pain in her voice even after all these years. Sometimes, I thought my father's absence hurt her more than anything else he did.

"What do you think was running through his mind when he did that?" she

asked in a much quieter voice.

“Don’t know and don’t care,” I told her. I had much better things to think about than what my deadbeat old man wondered.

“I think they did it to him,” she continued. “They ran him out of town without even giving him a chance to explain. The Bestons and all of them can go to hell.”

My mother’s animosity toward the Bestons was misplaced. While the family, like most others, had been angry at my father for scamming them, they hadn’t been the loudest voices, nor had they demanded we pay them back like most other families. They’d understood that it was not our fault it happened, and as far as reactions go, I couldn’t blame them for theirs. I would be pissed, too, if someone stole a bunch of money from me.

“It’s a good thing that resort of theirs is falling apart,” my mother continued. “Must be some kind of karma.”

I glanced at her. “What do you mean their resort is falling apart?”

“Just what I said. They can’t find people to fill the place.” Then she glanced at me. “Where were you yesterday? You didn’t answer my calls.”

I didn’t say anything. I wasn’t at the age where I needed to answer to her anymore.

“It’s fine.” She sighed. “I don’t really care anyway, as long as it wasn’t with the Beston girl. I told you the Bestons are all bad news. Even her strange son.”

Shock slammed into me at the statement. I blinked at my mother, digesting it. “Allie has a son?”

“Yeah, with that ex-husband of hers. She married him not too long after you left town.” My mother gave me a sympathetic look. “She didn’t even wait before moving on from you.”

I didn’t listen to the rest of what she said after that part because my head was flying with thoughts. So Allie had a son? She never mentioned it, even at dinner. I wondered if that had to do with the emergency she had.

*Why didn’t she say anything?*

Because she probably didn’t want me to know.

I really should let it go, but I couldn’t. I needed to know more.

“You said that their resort was struggling?” I asked. An idea started forming in my head.



SEVEN

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# ALLIE

I should have steeled myself for it when Athena called to tell me that Dad was calling a family meeting.

I left Caleb at home with my neighbor—who also happened to be his second favorite babysitter—because I could tell from my sister’s voice that the meeting was going to get potentially contentious. I made Caleb promise not to throw a tantrum while I was gone, letting him know that I would be back within an hour or so. I didn’t know if he understood, but he nodded, and I gave him some more kisses before I left.

The snow started falling again today, and there was a brisk wind, so I bundled up in about three coats before I stepped out, starting the fifteen-minute walk to the resort.

When I arrived, Jeremy, the front desk guy, wasn’t there. The place looked almost abandoned, but that was to be expected. We hadn’t had any guests for a good few months now, so I didn’t blame him for taking off. I sighed, continuing up the stairs until I got to the meeting room.

Everyone looked up when I arrived. I froze.

It was like someone had died.

From the minute I walked into the informal resort conference room, which used to be my dad’s office, I could feel the doom and gloom in the atmosphere. Athena, my parents, and my brother, Adam, were sitting around in a circle, so I knew it was going to be bad news.

“Who died?”

My dad’s lip twitched, and he gestured for me to come in. I went over and hugged him, wrapping my hand around his slender frame before letting go.

“How are you doing, sweetie?” he asked.

“Good,” I said. “How are you?” I noticed the eyebags under his eyes and had to bite back the urge to lecture him once again about stressing himself out. My father had been a workaholic his whole life, and even though he’d promised to take a back seat from running the resort, he was still very much involved in the everyday activities most of the time.

“I’m doing great, all things considering,” he said. “Your mother still won’t let me touch any of the egg-nogs I specifically saved for Christmas time.”

“You know what the doctor said,” my mother reminded him as I came over to hug her.

“Who cares about the doctor?” my dad stubbornly countered. “I’m halfway sure that man is a quack anyway.”

“I’m sure the Harvard-educated cardiologist is a quack, and you’re the one who knows what they’re talking about.” Adam winked at me conspiratorially as I went to hug him. He pulled me close and asked, “How are you doing, Allie bear?”

“Don’t call me that,” I said but smiled anyway when he tweaked my nose.

I sat at the empty spot beside my father, and he held my hand for a few seconds before looking around the table. Then, he began to speak slowly and very deliberately.

“Okay, now that everyone’s here, we can start.” My dad took a deep breath, shut his eyes for a few seconds, and then opened them again. “It is with a very heavy heart that I’m announcing to you all that I’ve decided to make the hard choice to sell Valley Heart Resort.”

There was a punctuating hush in the room, and no one said anything for the longest time. It wasn’t necessary to mark the utter devastation of the moment. We all knew it was coming, and we knew my dad wouldn’t have made the decision if he had had a choice.

Still, it was a monumental loss.

The resort had been in his family for generations. It was his father’s business. It was where we came every Christmas and where we had some of our fondest memories as children. It was also what the town knew us for. They respected my father to a large extent because the resort had pulled in a lot of tourists, which ultimately made the town some money.

To lose it just like that was a blow to everyone.

“Are you sure there’s nothing that can be done?” Adam asked, and it was

one of the few times my brother's tone didn't have the tell-tale joking effect.

My father shook his head. "We've tried everything. Short of another bank loan, there is nothing else that can be done."

"How long do we have with the place?" I asked, trying to see if I could maybe figure out something in that length of time that would allow us to keep the place.

But my dad knew what I was thinking, and he gave me a sad look as he crushed my hopes. "It's already been bought."

"What? You didn't mention you put it on the market yet."

"I had to. It was the only way to get an extension from the bank. I told Larry to hold off on selling it, but he said they got a buyer yesterday, and they couldn't refuse the offer." My father's face looked so sorrowful that I felt bad for lashing out at him.

"I'm sorry, Dad," I muttered then. "I didn't mean it like that. I know this is hard for you."

"Yes. And I understand this is hard for you too. Which is why I called this meeting today." He took a deep breath. "We're meeting the new buyer here in a few minutes. He wanted to see the place and look at the potential. If you could show him around, Allie, I'd appreciate it."

I nodded even though I felt some misplaced animosity toward this stranger that I'd never met.

"Show him what this resort is," my dad said. "And try to convince him to keep it as the town resort. We can compete with the Holiday Inn, I know it. The place is just a fixer-upper, is all. If you can't convince him, then just know that we tried our best. But I hope you'll continue working for him to make his transition easier."

"When is he coming?" I asked.

My father checked his watch.

"He should be here...." Just then, we heard heavy footsteps leading up the stairs. "That should be him right now."

We all waited, watching the doorway in anticipation of the stranger who was taking away our family resort.

But when he finally walked through the door, I felt my jaw drop to the ground.

Marcus walked into the room confidently, his face squeezed in its trademark scowl. His eyes ran over everyone in the room until they landed on me. And then he went right back around.

“You!” my brother gasped, expressing the stunned shock we were all feeling. “You’re the new owner.”

“Impossible.” My father shot up to his feet, agitation bouncing off every line in his body. He pointed a finger at Marcus. “Absolutely not! I didn’t sell this place to you. I know I didn’t.”

“Calm down, Abe,” my mother admonished. “Your blood pressure....”

“Screw my blood pressure. I know I didn’t sell it to this....”

*Murderer.* I knew that was what went through his mind even though he didn’t come out and say it.

Marcus’ expression didn’t show any type of reaction to the insult. It was like he barely heard it.

This was going to be a disaster.

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EIGHT

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## MARCUS

I could see the unbridled resentment emanating from everyone in the room, and frankly, I didn't give a damn.

I was already used to people hating me, and the truth was that no one's opinion of me mattered anymore.

No one but her.

Allie's face was alive with surprise. She was gaping at me, still shocked by my presence, even as she held her father's arm, trying to calm him down. The old man was practically steaming at the ears, furious at the thought that he'd possibly been had.

I had to admit it was amusing and a little satisfying to see the entire family up in arms.

Unfortunately for them, everything was already on the dotted line, and there was nothing they could do about it at this point, even if they did have several million dollars lying around.

Which they didn't.

And while I could sympathize with them—it had to be hard seeing the son of the man who stole from them seemingly doing it again—I couldn't regret what I did.

Yet, I found myself telling a huge lie anyway.

"I'm not the true owner of the resort," I said, looking at Allie when I spoke. I wanted to see her expression and know if I was right about how she'd changed. "I only work for the company. They sent me over here to check on the place, make sure the place is still standing."

"I thought you were a construction worker," Allie's sister said.

"Construction supervisor, actually," I lied smoothly. "That's why I'm

here. To begin any renovations needed.”

“Still.” The old man didn’t seem to want to let go of his anger, still wagging his finger in my face. “I don’t like this at all. I don’t want the likes of you moving through my building as if you own the place.”

“You don’t have a choice,” I informed him. “You can either cooperate, or I can have you evicted. Either is fine by me.”

Her father gawped in outrage, and the whole family began talking all at once. The gist of it was that they couldn’t believe I said that to their father and also how I should not be here. I stood there watching them, bored with the whole display. It was a courtesy that I came to meet them today. I could have simply booted them all out the minute they signed away the resort and been done with it. But I’d agreed to the owner’s request for a meeting for common ground, even though it was not at all required to own the place.

They had no right to kick me out, but I had every right to remove them from the premises.

I whistled to get their attention, and they all fell silent like trained dogs.

I didn’t say anything, waiting for one of them to realize the obvious.

I didn’t have to wait long.

It dawned on Allie first, and she turned to her father. “Dad, he’s right. Let’s not cause a scene now.”

“But...but...” he sputtered.

“But nothing, Dad.” Her brother came forward, glaring at me fiercely. “We sold the resort to them, and that’s that. To renege it, you’d probably have to talk to a lawyer.” He said it with emphasis, as though hinting that his dad should do exactly that.

My smile widened even more. They were welcome to get as many lawyers as they wanted, but I could assure them that mine would win.

“I don’t think that’s necessary.” A woman who looked like an older version of Allie said, and she was the only one who didn’t have clear animosity in her eyes when she looked at me. “He said he doesn’t own the place. He’s merely looking over it for his company.”

Still, Allie’s father didn’t seem like he wanted to budge.

Then suddenly, he deflated as if someone had taken the wind out of his sails, collapsing back on the chair.

“Dad!” His children and wife fussed over him for a few seconds, but he waved them off, glaring at me.

“Fine,” he said, and I supposed that was the end of it.



“Just how did you come to be working at this company of yours?” Allie’s brother questioned, eyeing me suspiciously as I studiously ignored him. I didn’t come here for a third degree.

“I assume this meeting is over?” I commented and turned around to leave when I heard a soft voice call out behind me.

“Wait.”

I turned to watch Allie walking determinedly toward me.

Her lips were pressed together, and she met my eyes, nodding decidedly.

“I’ll show you around.” She didn’t sound like she was giving me a choice.

“I’ll do it,” her brother countered, getting to his feet. But Allie shook her head, holding out her hand and sending him a warning look.

“I can handle it,” she said. “I know this place like the back of my hand and know every important detail. You stay here and make sure Dad doesn’t have a conniption.”

Clear reluctance showed on her brother’s face as he glanced between her and me.

“We’ll be back in ten minutes,” Allie announced, turning to leave. But before she could, her brother came forward a little closer to me. He was about Allie’s height, so he only came up to the middle of my chest, but there was a fierceness in his expression despite his diminutive size.

“You do anything to my sister, and you’ll regret it,” he spat out.

I merely cocked an eyebrow at him.

“Adam, stop,” Allie said, sounding tired. “Come on, Marcus, I’ll show you around.”

I said nothing to Adam and turned to follow her, feeling daggers at my back as I did.

The first few seconds of the walk were spent in tense silence. I could see her stewing, her strides quick and angry. I couldn’t help but smile.

She was bouncing around like an angry bunny, her ponytail bobbing in emphasis. I knew she would spit it out in no time at all. The girl never knew how to hold a grudge to save her life.

Right as we reached the staircase, she turned around and crossed her hands over her chest.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were in town to buy the resort?”

“Why didn’t you tell me you had a kid?”

Her eyes widened at my counter, her mouth dropping open. There was a

flash of caution in her expression that I didn't fully understand.

"I didn't...I mean, I didn't...." She sighed in frustration. "Well, you didn't exactly leave me any good ways to contact you."

"True," I said unrepentantly. When I sent the letter telling her I was leaving, I didn't leave a contact address because I didn't trust myself not to come running back to town if she told me to, no matter how pathetic that sounded. She had quickly become one of the few things that mattered to me in this world.

I was also pretty possessive over her and would have come back to claim her at the slightest provocation.

Especially if I heard she was getting married.

"Still, you could have told me yesterday at dinner," I mentioned. "Or after, when I had my tongue in your mouth."

Her face flushed red, and she gaped again. She anxiously glanced around as if someone would walk by and hear us. Then, she bounced into action, grabbing my hand and pulling me into the corner before hissing at me.

"Did you have to be so crude?"

"Crude?" I raised my eyebrow at her. "Crude would have been if I said that I want to press you against the wall right now and taste you again. And maybe put my hand under your skirt and see if you're still as hot and soft as I remembered." I leaned closer, watching her eyes darken and her breath catch in her throat. "I could also tell you how much I want your pussy in my mouth, but I think that would be too much."

I nearly laughed at the incredulous look that filled her face. She sputtered, but nothing sensible came out of her mouth. I had no idea why I was provoking her so much. Maybe because it was fun to see her mad. Maybe I was a sadist or a masochist and wanted to see if she would slap me.

Or maybe just because it got me hard as hell.

Her face was red and flushed, her chest showing that her breathing had become deeper.

She didn't resist when I wrapped my hand around her waist and pulled her to me.

There were no more protests as we kissed.

NINE

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# ALLIE

My head was swimming, and nothing made any sense.

The sensations tearing through my body were sharp and dizzying, quickly ripping at my sanity, my sense of time and place. It was impossible to fight back, and soon enough, I stopped trying. Before I knew what was happening, my hands were grasping his shoulders, holding on for dear life and subtly pulling him closer even though my sanity demanded that I tell him to stop.

But I wanted him closer. I wanted his body flush on mine, even though I could already feel the hint of it on me, could feel his shirt nearly brushing against my heated skin. It took me a while to realize that my legs were not on the floor anymore but hanging in the air as he had his hands cupped around my butt.

God. *This is so depraved*, I thought. The naughtiest thing I'd ever done.

We were making out while I let this man feel me up, his sure fingers molding against my ass as if he owned it.

Perhaps it was the thrill of it that had my heart racing about a million miles a minute and my pussy clenching on nothing.

Or maybe it was the man who was currently holding me up and moaning as he tore into my mouth, controlling, demanding everything I had to give.

Oh, God.

Marcus was kissing me. More than that, he was completely possessing me and making it impossible to think about anything else but him.

The giddy little teen in me was jumping around excitedly while the rational side of me told me to put an end to this immediately.

*This isn't appropriate at all*, she scolded herself.

But a huge part of me—the woman who hadn't felt these sensations in so

long—was crying out, wanting more, demanding more.

The cries became physical when his hands squeezed my ass, the move eliciting a similar visceral response in the pit of my belly. Desire was quickly building to a crescendo, and the headiness of it all had me spinning. Instinctively, I rubbed my body against his, and he groaned again, stepping closer and pressing me against the wall. I gasped into his mouth when I felt the sizeable bulge in the middle of his legs, throwing me back to the time when we had sex. I could almost feel it inside me again, filling me up painfully as he moved slowly, gyrating inside me.

“Marcus,” I gasped.

“Right fucking here,” he groaned, and he undulated once, twice, essentially dry humping against the wall. I was pressing myself closer, even though I should have been trying to escape to get away from this. But I was thrusting back. A mindless hunger started within me, aching to be filled, and it was all I could do not to sob from the pained pleasure in my pussy.

“Fuck,” he swore darkly, tearing his mouth away and breathing harshly into my ears.

“I want you so bad.” His hands went under my skirt, brushing against my panties. Anticipation tightened my core so strongly that I felt like I was about ready to burst. “Honey, I want to be inside you.”

My core clenched at the hoarse tone, his baritone singing all over my nerve endings. I felt the dampness leak out, and I shut my eyes, ready to give in and beg him to take me.

“Allison?” It was my brother’s concerned voice that tore through the haze and brought me crashing back down to earth. “Where on earth has that girl gone?”

I tore my mouth away, gasping for air.

“Oh God, it’s Adam.” Horror washed over me, and I was sure it showed on my face. But Marcus didn’t reflect that back. He wasn’t scared or startled at all. Instead, his face still carried a pained desire glowing in his dark eyes.

He allowed me to slide back down to my feet but didn’t step away from me until the last minute when Adam was right about to turn the corner. He just continued staring down at me, feverish heat in his gaze.

Heat I couldn’t look away from as the footsteps got closer and closer.

Just when my brother was about to show his face, Marcus finally stepped back and glanced at Adam as he arrived.

My brother pulled to a stop, eyeing both of us suspiciously.

“What’s happening?” he asked, then glared at Marcus. “What did you do to her?”

But once again, Marcus ignored Adam, pushing past him without another word.

I was about to follow him when Adam took my arm and shook his head. “Nope. You’re not going anywhere with him. And you have a lot of explaining to do.”

I sighed. For the most part, my brother still saw me as his baby sister who didn’t know much about life, and usually, I indulged his protectiveness, but today it was just annoying. He couldn’t boss me around like I was a little girl, and I didn’t need him telling me what to do.

*Are you sure? Because a few minutes ago, you had your legs wrapped around Marcus and were probably about to beg him to have sex with you right there and then if Adam hadn’t shown up.*

My face heated. It was especially mortifying that my brother nearly walked in on us and could most likely tell what we were up to.

“I need to show him around, Adam,” I said cautiously, clearing my throat from the hoarseness. “Dad asked me to, remember?”

“Maybe,” my brother said. “But this time, you’re going with me.”

There was no use arguing. I could tell by the stubborn set on my brother’s chin that I wasn’t going anywhere without him, so I simply sighed in resignation and started after Marcus, who was already down the stairs and about to turn left.

The rest of the tour was one of the most awkward things I could imagine. Between Adam glaring at Marcus, Marcus studiously ignoring him, and me trying to play peacemaker between the two testosterone-filled beings, I was just about ready for it to be over. Still, I showed Marcus all the important places, and we even trudged around the compound to show him the dude ranch we often utilized for activities when it wasn’t too cold.

We also discussed a little bit about how the holiday resort worked, including how profitable it was...or, well, how it used to be. Secretly, I was hoping he could use that information to convince his boss to continue the resort rather than tear it down and turn it into a strip mall or something, but Marcus’ words at the end of the tour yanked down that illusion.

“Most of it is pretty bad,” he said. “The walls are unsalvageable. It would be better if we broke down the building.”

“No!” Marcus’ words left me in despair, and his shrewd eyes swung to

me. "I mean...I thought you said you were just renovating."

"I thought so, too, until I saw just how much of a wreck this place is."

"It isn't that bad," Adam piped up defensively. "The foundation's pretty solid. It just needs some work."

"It would take way more money to renovate it, and even with that, there's no guarantee it will be safe even then. Better to rip it all up and try again."

I shared a panicked look with Adam, but he was still glaring at Marcus.

"You're just doing this as revenge, aren't you?" he said, and I turned to frown at my brother. What on earth was he talking about?

"Believe what you want," Marcus said, then turned around easily. "I think we're done here. I'll come in tomorrow and meet the staff, give them a low-down of what we can start getting done."

And with that, he walked off.

After Marcus left, Adam lectured me about him all the way to the office, where Athena took over, lecturing me all the way home.

"What were you even thinking going with him? Did you forget how dangerous he was? Do you know what he could have done to you?"

I didn't bother to correct her assumptions, knowing it would be a waste of breath. Convincing any of my siblings against their preconceived notions was like moving the earth. The only thing I could do was sit there and tune her out. And remember the feeling of his lips against mine, the way his body felt.

I still wanted him, and even now, my body was weeping for him.

But I probably couldn't have him again.

Because while Athena may be wrong that he was dangerous for me, I couldn't be certain yet whether or not he was dangerous for Caleb. And until I figured that out, I wasn't dipping my finger in it.

Which meant no more kissing Marcus for now.

The thought depressed me more than I thought it would.

I tried to keep busy to prevent myself from thinking about it as I picked Caleb up.

The next day was his psychologist appointment, and I took note to mention Caleb's recent behavior to her.

When we got to her office, Caleb ignored her greeting, sitting in his favorite chair and squeezing his fish figurine as he stared at the wall.

Dr. Rowanna glanced at me instead. "How is he doing?"

I sighed. "Well, he was doing better and then worse. I'm not sure what it is I'm doing wrong, but it has to be something because one moment, he's on

the verge of speaking to me again, and the next minute, he goes radio silent.”

“I doubt it’s anything you’re doing,” the psychologist said comfortingly. “Some kids are more difficult than others.”

“Yes, but doctor, you should have seen his reaction the other night when I went out late. He kept crying and wouldn’t let up until I came back.”

She frowned. “Tell me about that.”

I recited the entire incident to her, telling her everything Athena had told me about what Caleb did.

Caleb didn’t show any physical reaction to the words. It was as though he couldn’t hear me at all.

“Hmm.” Dr. Rowanna looked thoughtful and concerned. “And this has never happened before?”

“No, it has never happened like this,” I said. “I’ve been out before, although not necessarily that late. And Athena has watched him plenty of times without anything happening. But this time, it was like he was terrified. When I got home, he kept hugging me and wouldn’t let go.”

“And you’re sure nothing happened to him in his past to trigger all this?”

I shook my head. “Not that I know of.”

“Because his reaction to you being gone sounds like you’re his safety net. And he was scared that since you didn’t come back, it would be taken from him. That’s a typical trait of children who have been abandoned or traumatized in one way or another.”

“Abandoned?” Oh God, I had not even thought of that. “Could it be my divorce that caused all this?”

“I’m not sure, but that’s a good place to start. I would also try to find out if he had gone through any traumatic events, maybe without your knowledge.” She glanced at Caleb, who still wasn’t looking at her. “Because something must have recently triggered him.”



TEN

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# MARCUS

Restless energy bounced around inside me, and my hands clenched around the steering wheel to keep it at bay.

I should have been satisfied.

After I learned about the Beston's problem, I moved quickly to snatch up the resort before the banks got tired of waiting and gave it to someone else. It had also been a stroke of genius to place the purchase under the company's name and have Sean handle the transaction.

No bank in town would sell the resort to me if they knew I was the buyer.

It didn't matter that I'd been cleared of all charges. In most people's eyes, I was still a murderer.

Or, at the very least, the son of the man who stole millions of dollars from them.

It no longer phased me—this town's attitude toward me or the fact that I could still feel their stares when I entered certain places. They still turned up their nose at me when I went to their department stores or anywhere that wasn't the uglier part of town.

I ignored them all.

They may not want me there, but they couldn't touch me.

None of them knew yet, but I was no longer the powerless man they drove away. I was now the owner of a billion-dollar construction company, a man who'd learned ruthlessness to garner success.

I wasn't sure knowing would change their attitude either way. Their hatred for me and my mother went deep, and they fought against everyone who even happened to be associated with me.

Which was why I needed to get my stubborn mother to move.

I didn't know why she was so stuck on staying in this place, so determined to hold on to the few good memories we had amidst the ugly. Left to me, I would have sold the house and never come back.

*Oh really?* A doubtful voice in my mind commented. *Are you sure about that?*

An image of Allie flashed in my head, but I brushed it aside as I slowed to a stop at the red light, releasing a breath. I'd achieved everything I set out to do today. I now owned the Beston's resort. I ignored the voice mocking me that the only reason I got it was to have a reason to be close to Allie. It wasn't entirely true. The place may be a dump now, but it had been one of the most profitable businesses in town. And it sat on a prime piece of land.

Most importantly, I'd confirmed what I already knew.

Allie Beston still wanted me.

*Wanted?* I thought humorously as I put the car into drive again. The girl had been practically burning up as I pressed her against the wall, her legs splayed open. I doubted she knew that she was subtly rubbing against me, silently asking for something that she couldn't describe. Her eyes had been stormy with desire, her lips plump and parted for my kisses. And her scent...

God, I could still remember it. When I leaned in and sniffed her neck, the light earthy scent of her drove hunger punching in my gut, demanding that I hike her up higher and higher until her legs were around my neck and I was lapping at her center.

"Shit." I veered around the car in front of me that braked suddenly—my dexterity the only thing that saved me from a near accident.

I needed to keep my mind on the road better and stop thinking about Allie Beston before I got myself killed.

Still, it was her stormy eyes in my mind and her soft gasps resounding in my ear when I opened the door to my mother's home later that day. I instantly found a gun pointed at my face.

"Jesus." I ducked to the side, grabbing the gun from her hand in one fell swoop.

"What did you do that for?" my mother demanded, glaring at me.

"What did *I* do that for?" I stared at her incredulously. "Are you trying to get us both killed?"

"Oh, please." My mother rolled her eyes. "My daddy taught me to shoot. I could also hit you and unbuckle your belt if I wanted to."

“Ma, why the hell are you holding a gun to the door?” I asked tiredly.

“To get the asshole who’s been snooping around this place.”

Immediately, alarm shot through my system. “You saw someone?”

“Well, not really saw,” she admitted. “More like heard. It was larger than a squirrel, and he was creeping around my rose bushes out in front.”

The alarm within me immediately died down.

“Not this again.” I rubbed my hands over my face.

Back in the day, strangers used to show up at our home at odd hours, either to let us know what they thought of our family or, more often than not, to yell expletives at us. One of the things my mother developed, as a result, was a distinct paranoia bordering on delusions. No one ever harmed her physically, but our house had been desecrated on more than one occasion, and the scene had been pretty traumatic for her. I couldn’t count the number of times she made me search around the whole house because she thought she heard someone open the door and come in.

Conversely, she would sometimes ask me to leave the door unlocked because she was sure my dad was coming back that day.

It was kind of sad that we’d gotten to this point. I tried to indulge her delusions as much as I could, but if she was now holding guns, it might be time to have her see somebody.

“Don’t look at me like that,” my mother snapped. “I’m not crazy. I know what I heard.”

“I’ll check it out for you,” I said, heading outside toward the rose bushes.

“Wait.” I could hear my mother wheeling behind me, but I ignored her. I knew from personal experience that she wouldn’t calm down until I made sure there were absolutely no monsters in the shadows.

The monster seemed to be everywhere else.

I thoroughly picked through the rosebushes, making sure they didn’t look disturbed. Everything looked in place, with no tracks on the half-inch of snow that covered the ground. I turned around to tell my mother, who had a concerned look on her face, “All clear.”

The stubbornness still lined her face. “I know what I heard.”

“Well, whatever you heard, it’s not here anymore,” I told her. “Come on, get inside. It’s freezing out.”

After a quiet dinner and getting my mother settled in bed, I returned to my apartment.

As I lay in bed, I finally let my mind wander back to where it craved, not

that I could help it anyway. Allie filled my thoughts, and when I eventually dropped off into sleep, she came to me in my dreams.

It was more memories than dreams. It was a recollection of our first time together.

I couldn't tell the number of times I'd had the dream, but every single instance still felt like the first.

*My entire body was tense with desire, even though I tried not to show it. I'd somehow fit my large body on the couch, and I watched as Allie threw her head back in laughter one more time, slapping her knee in her exuberance. I couldn't remember the joke, and I didn't try. I was trying too hard not to show how fucking hard her laugh got me.*

*Who was I kidding?*

*Everything about her got me hard. The way she smiled, the way she bounced up and down in her excitement, making all her soft parts jiggle even though she didn't know it. The innocence that shone in her eyes and the way she treated people like they mattered even when they weren't worth shit.*

*I had no business making eyes at this girl. She was far too young for me, but it didn't stop me from wanting her anyway.*

*And it all culminated in this one night when my body was strung tight with so much desire that I thought I would explode.*

*Her laughter eventually subsided, giving away to a thoughtful look and a slightly dreamy look in her eyes as she stared at me. She was drunk. I knew she was drunk, and if I were even half a gentleman, I would call a halt to this night right now and get out of there. She'd had an awful night, nearly getting attacked in an alley until I fought the bastard off her. I nearly killed the asshole, and the only thing that stopped me from going after him when he ran off was the fact that I didn't want to leave Allie alone.*

*And so, when she'd requested to go home with me, I said yes because I could still see the terror in her eyes and knew that the incident still haunted her.*

*And when she wanted a drink, I gave it to her because she needed it to suppress the shakes.*

*I should have done something else, maybe given her comforting words, but I'd never really been good at those or with words in general. All I could do was hang around her and make sure she knew I would protect her from the world if need be.*

*What I didn't count on was the fact that she would get drunk off of just*

one beer.

*Or that the alcohol would loosen the reins of the desire I usually saw in her eyes and have her reaching for me and putting her hand on my thigh.*

*Fuck.*

*I should have moved her hand, but I couldn't think much past the blood pounding in my ears. Plus, if I touched her, would I truly be able to follow through and take her hands off me, or would I pull her forward, finally putting those lips on mine and tasting her once and for all?*

*I didn't know for sure, so I simply froze, stiffening every muscle because I didn't dare move.*

*Maybe she didn't know what she was doing. Maybe she was too innocent to truly tell that her touch was starting a riot in my body that could have dangerous consequences for both of us.*

*But then, she got closer and closer, her eyes losing their uncertainty, the alcohol making her fearless. Her scent swam around me as she did, and I caught her wrist.*

*"Stop," I ordered. I could barely recognize the roughness of my tone.*

*She hesitated for only a minute before shifting her other hand onto my lap, going higher and higher until I jerked. Fuck, she'd gotten close.*

*"You don't know what you're doing," I practically growled, lust crowding my senses. "You're drunk."*

*"I'm not that drunk," she purred, and her voice was the sexiest thing I'd ever heard. All light and raspy. "Kiss me, Marcus."*

*Say no. Fuck. My body practically jerked with the amount of desire that poured into it. I should say no. I should get up and leave right now, sleep outside. I should do anything and everything to avoid what was happening.*

*But instead, I did the absolute worst thing for both of us. I looked into her eyes and lost my fucking mind.*

*"Fuck," I snarled, dragging her forward and finally giving her the trouble she was asking for.*

*Back in the present, I woke up with a hard-on from hell. It was still dark out, and my hand was wrapped around my erection, squeezing it tightly to keep it from spilling over.*

*Before I could even gather my bearings, I began to pump slowly and determinedly until the feeling made my back arch and my spine sing. I started going faster, ready for it to be over. This wasn't for titillation. I simply needed to take the edge off.*

Pleasure zipped up my spine, and I squeezed my erection, pumping it into my own hands, trying to imagine it was hers. I threw the covers off my heated skin and gave myself into the memories, letting the past mingle with the present until I was finally screaming my release into the air.

Fuck.

I'd been with lots of women over the years, but none of them ever affected me as much as even just thinking about Allie. Which told me one thing I already knew.

The woman was going to be the death of me.

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ELEVEN

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# ALLIE

I didn't know what to expect the next day when I went to work.

Mostly, I was determined to make the best of the situation. Although the resort being sold to Marcus' company wasn't ideal in many ways, it might have been the best we could have hoped for. At least I knew Marcus and could probably convince him not to tear down the place and turn it into a strip mall or a parking lot. Or even worse, another dude ranch. I shuddered at the thought.

There were already more than enough in the area.

And since Marcus and I had some history, he might be more understanding in that sense.

And so what if just being in his presence sent my heart racing and my pulse pounding?

I was an adult, and I'd learned early on to handle my feelings. Marcus and I couldn't date, no matter how much I couldn't stop thinking about that kiss yesterday.

I remembered it again, and as always, I wavered between embarrassment and desire for a repeat performance. After all these years, I still had a crush on Marcus.

But I couldn't have him because I had my son to think about.

Regardless, it didn't mean we couldn't be friends.

After all, we'd been friends in the past despite my massive crush on him. I thought I'd done a good job of keeping it hidden—until the night I made a move on him, that is. I thought back to it with equal parts mortification and shock.

I usually wasn't that bold, but I guessed the alcohol made me brave.

But the results had been...explosive, to say the least.

I shook my head, refusing to let my mind get drawn back there.

The first step to hiding or getting over my feelings for Marcus was to stop remembering moments like that. Instead, I needed to face the fact that it probably wouldn't happen again.

Which depressed me to heck, but such was life.

There were plenty more things I had to be grateful for, like my great family, who was all healthy, and my son, who seemed much better this morning. Of course, it was too early to tell for the most part, but this morning, when I told him I would be going to work and he would spend some time with his aunt, he nodded.

"I won't be back late, okay?" I assured him. "I'll only be gone till maybe four at the latest. You remember how to count time, right?"

He nodded and held up his wrist, which had a watch wrapped around it. He seemed much calmer today, but I knew there was still some anxiety brimming under the surface, especially when he clutched me close as I hugged him.

My heart ached, and I felt sick to my stomach.

Something very bad had happened to my little boy, and I didn't know what it was. Something made him lose his innocence, made him very scared. And I hadn't protected him.

A part of me wanted to just break down and cry, but I couldn't. I needed to be strong.

I'd spent last night after our therapist visit trying to ask him if anyone had hurt him, going through a list of names to see if he would show any physical reaction to them, but he remained silent, looking off at the wall as though he barely heard me. I wanted to get to the bottom of it, but I couldn't do it if I didn't even know what was going on. The thought hurt me.

When I dropped him off at Athena's house, I asked her discreetly, "Hey, you don't know anyone who's come here while Caleb was over, right? You haven't left him alone with anyone?"

"Of course not." Athena frowned, seeming offended at the very thought. "You know I would never do something like that."

I sighed, letting the suspicion fall away. "I know, Athena. I'm sorry. It's just that Caleb's therapist said something yesterday that made me worry."

"What did she say?" Worry replaced the offense she initially expressed.

"She said that Caleb's reaction was similar to that of children who'd been

traumatized,” I told her, my voice stumbling on the last word. God, I didn’t even want to think about it, much less accept it. The whole idea of it made me feel ill again. “I’ve wracked my brain trying to think of anyone who could have hurt my son, but I’m drawing up blanks.”

“Well, traumatized doesn’t necessarily mean someone did something to him,” Athena said sympathetically. “It could have been something he saw or even heard that made him like that. You didn’t fight with Ken in front of him, did you?”

“No,” I said. Ken and I barely ever fought. In fact, we got along almost too well most of the time, being very similar types of people. It was the reason we both stuck in the marriage for so long, even way past the point when it was clear that the sexual attraction simply wasn’t there. We wanted to make it work out of sheer compatibility, and Ken loved Caleb like he was his son. Even now, they spoke every once in a while when Ken had the time to call, even though his job kept him relatively busy.

“Besides, whatever happened to him is recent,” I added. He’d never been like this when Ken and I lived together. He only became like this long after Ken went to Minnesota to accept the government job.

Athena shook her head, sympathy in her expression. “I’m sorry then. I have no clue what’s going on, but I’ll keep an eye out and see if I can bribe him into telling me something.”

“Thanks,” I responded. “But don’t push him too much. I don’t want to bring back any bad memories that might trigger him even more.”

“Roger,” Athena said, and after giving her a brief hug, I left for work.

I steeled myself before walking into the resort.

Marcus’ truck was parked out front, so I could tell he was already inside. I repeated the same little pep talk I’d given myself at home, telling myself that all we needed to do was reestablish the friendship we lost, and everything would be fine.

But then I walked in on him and some men in overalls talking in the lobby.

“Hi there,” I said cheerily, and they barely spared me a glance and a nod before they continued talking.

*Okay, that was rude*, I thought, but I didn’t let it bother me. They seemed like they were discussing something very serious, and I was likely interrupting them.

I decided to leave them to it and make myself useful instead by going on

to see which rooms would likely need the most work, making a note of all the things he likely needed to keep the same for the rustic decor.

I walked around, trying to record all the details, and by the time I came back, the men were gone, and Marcus was sitting on one of the worn couches at the entrance, typing something into his phone.

“Hey,” I said, walking up to him. “Who was that?”

He answered without even looking up. “Demolition crew.”

My heart went dead. “Wait, what?”

He didn’t answer. Instead, he held the phone to his mouth to record a voice note.

“What I’m saying, you bastard, is that you need to make them pay for trying to run off with our money.” Once again, his tone sent fear and annoyance spiraling through me. Did he have to talk so harshly all the time?

“I don’t care who you have to squeeze to get them to admit guilt,” he continued. “Make them bleed. Got it?”

I winced as he ended the voice note, and finally, his eyes went up to me.

“Did you need something?” he asked in a tone that wasn’t exactly friendly.

I swallowed. This was going to be a lot harder than I thought.

“You said you were speaking to the demolition crew,” I said. “What’s that about?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” he said snarkily. “We’re tearing the place down.”

My heart sank.

*No! No, no, no, no, no.* “You said you wouldn’t do that.”

“Did I? I don’t remember ever promising such a thing.”

“Yeah, but...” I thought back and realized that while I did make the request, he’d never agreed to it or even agreed to give me time to convince him.

My heart sank at the cold expression on his face, an immovable statue that told me he wouldn’t listen to anything I said.

*Why was he like this? Was it because of the kiss?*

What happened between yesterday and today turned him from the man who kissed me yesterday into this cruel, heartless man.

But no. It wasn’t just that. I sensed the difference the minute he came back, sensed that he was now a much harder man than he’d been.

Still, could I appeal to the gentle giant I once knew?

“You can’t tear it down, Marcus,” I pleaded, figuring I was down to my

last option. “This place...has been in my family for generations. It also makes this town a lot of money and attracts tourists.”

“Used to attract tourists,” Marcus corrected. “It doesn’t anymore, and even if I gave a damn about that, it would mean that this place hasn’t been at its peak for many years now. It’s now basically costing the city money with nothing to show for it.”

“Yes, but that’s only because my dad fell behind on the necessary renovations needed to keep this place intact,” I explained. “We still have tons of clients, most of whom would be happy to come back, but it’s just that they need this place to be up to par.”

“Again, not my problem.” He got up and then stretched, and I was momentarily distracted by the sight of his shirt riding up, exposing a hint of his ridged abdomen. Instantly, lust went flushing through me, and I lost my train of thought.

I didn’t know how long I stared, only that when I finally snapped out of it and looked up at his face, he was smirking.

And just like that, anger bubbled up inside me.

“You’ve turned into an asshole. You know that?” I spat out. I wasn’t the sort to swear, but his attitude was getting on my nerves.

Rather than look offended, his smirk widened. “Have I?”

“Yes, you have,” I bit out. “And I can’t figure out why. Why would you kiss me yesterday and be a complete jerk to me today?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged. “Why would you agree to go on a date with me and then completely blow me off after?”

He didn’t say it like he was particularly hurt at the thought, just curious. But I sensed that he might be more hurt than he put on.

“I’m sorry. I just—”

“Nice to know that I’m still good enough to desire, even though I’m not good enough to date.”

He walked away then, and it took a while for the full magnitude of his words to sink in.

*Wait, what does that mean?*

It sounded like he was accusing me of something, but I didn’t understand. I ran the words through my mind again.

*Not good enough to date?*

*Why wouldn’t he be good enough to date?*

Then I remembered the first time he’d said something similar to me a

long time ago.

*“I can’t offer you anything you deserve, Allie,” he’d said, his eyes numb. “I’m a thirty-year-old man caught in a dead-end job, and I’ll probably be here for the rest of my life. I’m not even done paying off my father’s debt yet, and there are my mother’s medical bills. I don’t have anything left for you.”*

At the time, I insisted none of it mattered, but he didn’t care.

Slowly, the meaning unfolded. I stormed after him, enraged.

“Did you just call me a gold digger?”

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TWELVE

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## MARCUS

Allie's eyes flashed with fury, and I nearly smiled despite myself.

"You just called me a gold digger," she said through tight lips. "Didn't you?"

"Calm down," I said, but it had the opposite effect as it fired her up even more.

"You just insulted my character. And I'm supposed to remain calm about that?" She sounded so outraged, so incensed by the very idea, that it was nearly impossible not to believe her.

I cocked my eyebrow at her, challenging and maybe just enjoying needling her a little bit. "Don't sound so offended by it. It's a part of nature. Most women don't want to date a man who can't afford much."

"Unbelievable," she snapped, barking out a burst of harsh laughter. "*You left me!* You were the one who didn't want to date me. I asked you out more than once, and you always gave all sorts of excuses that you were too old for me or you didn't deserve me and whatnot. Now *I'm* the gold digger?"

Well, it sounded unfair when she put it like that.

"And I still don't deserve you," I finally admitted as I watched her eyes flash with incense. Her reaction was too visceral to be anything but honest.

It proved to me what I already knew. That Allie Beston hadn't changed. She was still the same genuine girl who wore her heart on her sleeve.

Unfortunately for her, I had changed too much, and not in good ways too. If anything, age and riches only made me more jaded. Now, I was a bitter old man who should not taint her with my hardness. She deserved someone who was like her, all light and rainbows, and who would make her smile and laugh.



I reached out, caressing her cheek, watching her eyes shift from anger to disoriented confusion. I thought she would step back from my touch, but she stood still, her back ramrod straight, only reluctantly accepting my touch at first.

The atmosphere slowly but decidedly shifted.

I could feel the exact second when anger left her body and desire began to set in. Her eyes grew darker, and her lips lost their tight press. My eyes dropped to her cupid's bow, wanting it in my mouth. My body tightened in anticipation.

Fuck, I can't do this. Not again.

"Why did you decide to marry your husband?" I asked instead to distract myself from the lust growing in the pit of my stomach.

"None of your business," she retorted, but there was little heat in her words. She raised her jaw stubbornly, but I could sense she was weakening.

"I'm not asking to rub it in, Allie. I'm trying to make a point. You deserve someone who can give you the world, who can give you a clean soul the way you deserve."

"Ken *was* a good man," she said. "And he was always a gentleman with me."

"Good," I said with a firm nod. *Maybe I wouldn't have to track him down and make him pay for touching what was mine.*

*Ease up on that. Allie was never yours.*

"He was a good father to Caleb, too," she said, and the mention of her son made a distant part of me ache. I wasn't mad or sad that Allie had a son. What I felt was more of a distinct feeling of loss that I couldn't explain.

"But...we ultimately weren't compatible," Allie finished, looking a little regretful at the thought.

"Sounds like you guys were," I said.

"Yes, but not in the one way that mattered." At this, her eyes widened, and she bit her lips after she said it—as if she hadn't meant for the sentence to leave her mouth.

And once her meaning sank in, I realized why.

It took everything in me not to crow.

*He never had her*, I thought savagely, feeling the same possessive heat go through me. Not in the way that mattered. He might have touched her and conceived a child with her, but he could never make her soul sing the way I did, never inspire that heat inside her. He didn't make the wild child inside

her come out like I did when I had her dancing on my cock, moaning her head off.

“Ah, I see.” I forced out the words past the desire choking my throat. The dream I had was still in the back of my mind, and it was one of the reasons I tried so hard to ignore her today. I didn’t want to remember it, but the moment I looked up and saw her there, it was in the back of my mind, my cock hardening again. And it made me mad. God, here I was, pining like a pathetic teenage boy after a woman who was far too young and innocent for me.

My sexual tastes were also far too dark for her. That night we spent together proved it. I’d had to restrain my deepest desires, my need to dominate her. Because I didn’t want to hurt her and have her terrified of me for the rest of her life. I couldn’t let that happen. I would tear out my own heart before I let that happen.

“Has any other man made you feel like that?” I asked quietly. The scene was far too intimate that a raised voice just might shatter it. And I didn’t want it shattered.

I didn’t know why I was asking. I couldn’t take it if she said yes, but I especially couldn’t take it if she said no.

And when she held my gaze and slowly shook her head, the feeling exploded between us.

“God.” My head sank until it touched the top of her head. I could feel my heart pounding, my breath coming out heavy. “I don’t know what I’m going to do with you.”

“Save the resort, Marcus,” she whispered pleadingly, and I was truly sad that I had to shake my head.

“I can’t,” I said, moving even closer to her, drawn by the way her eyes darkened at my proximity, the way her lips parted slightly. As I licked my lips, I watched her gaze drop to them and then drag back up to my face. She felt the desire throbbing between us. I knew she did, and there was nothing she could do about it.

There was nothing I could do about it too.

Because as her tongue came out to lick her lips, mimicking my movement, a groan worked its way out of my chest.

*I was doomed*, I thought as I began inching closer and closer to her lips. There was nothing I could do. I was drawn to her like a moth to a flame, and I would die if I didn’t have her.

A rough clearing of the throat interrupted us and had Allie jumping, a fiery blush flooding her face. She looked at the intruder before I did, and her blush deepened.

I followed her gaze to find an elderly-looking man who was standing there, not even trying not to stare at us.

I could feel Allie's embarrassment radiating off her, but I didn't let her go, cocking an eyebrow at the man standing there.

"Can I help you?"

He had the decency to look away then. "Um, I'm the electrician. I was told there was some wiring that needed fixing."

Allie frowned at me, embarrassment forgotten. "Why are you working on the wiring when you're tearing down the place?"

I cocked my eyebrow at her. "The drillers need somewhere to plug in their equipment."

She gaped at me, then spun around and left the room. Politeness made her stop and nod at the man in greeting before continuing on her way.

I noticed the man watching her for far too long as she left. But my growl had him looking up in alarm.

*Don't fucking look at my woman*, I wanted to growl, but that was something savages did. And no matter how much I felt like one, I was still a civilized human being.

"I'll show you the place," I grouched instead. The sooner I did, the quicker he could leave.

As we walked, I noticed the man keeping a safe distance from me, and I didn't blame him. I knew I was probably radiating angry vibes, the possessive heat still churning around me.

And also the heat of another kind. Because part of the reason I was so pissed was that the asshole interrupted me before I could taste her again.

*Fuck, I needed to get a grip*. There must be something wrong with me because Allie was making me feel unhinged.

It was why I called the electrician in the first place, despite knowing that this place was likely beyond salvaging. Sure, the foundation was strong, but just about everything else was falling apart. And my biggest concern was the fact that several of the plugs didn't work, and it was a potential fire hazard.

Plus, even if I wanted to keep the resort, what on earth would I do with it? My options were to renovate it and keep it running, which would either require me to stay in town or relegate control back to the Bestons, who hated

my guts. I didn't mind the second part as much as the first. I wouldn't give myself any more attachment to this town than I needed. Besides, it would likely be a money sink.

I had no experience with owning resorts, and the Bestons couldn't be trusted with how they mismanaged their business the first time around.

I knew all this, had already run all the numbers in my head, and yet here I was, inviting the elderly electrician to take a look around the premises and run me a quote on how much it would take to fix it.

The same way that I had invited the consultant earlier to discuss how much all the repairs would cost.

It was in the millions, but it wasn't the money that bothered me. It was everything else.

It was Allie, and the fact that being this close to her was too much of a temptation. I should leave town.

Later, after the electrician was gone and Allie was presumably somewhere in the building, still seething, I relaxed in the office chair.

That was when the phone call came.

"What are you doing right now?" Sean asked the second I answered.

"Why?"

"Well, if you're standing, you better be sitting because what I'm about to say is going to piss you the fuck off."

I sighed. Lately, it seemed Sean only called when he had bad news.

"Not only is Darryl trying to drag this into a lengthy court process invoking all kinds of fucking clauses," Sean began without prompting, "but the bastard son of a bitch is also trying to pay someone to forge a criminal record of you."

"Hmm." That was at least original. "How's he managing that?"

"Turns out he's buddies with the police chief and lawyers. They're trying to use the murder case in the past as the cornerstone of their case and to also say that you may have tampered with the will."

"I see." I was quiet for a few moments, considering the predicament. It was unlikely they would be successful, but the bad press was bad for business, and that was all they needed. I knew the prick was trying to force me into negotiations, so I would give him a bigger share of the company.

But I would rather burn the whole thing to the ground.

"That's it?" Sean said after a few minutes of silence. "That's all you're going to say?"

“What else am I supposed to say?”

“I don’t know. I expected a whole dictionary of new swear words right about now.”

“I don’t have the energy,” I said, nor the inclination. It was strange. Even with everything that had happened, I wasn’t half as constantly annoyed here as I was back in New York. Maybe this town had a way of mellowing one out versus New York, where everything was designed to piss you off.

“You need to come home so we can fix this,” Sean said.

*Home?* I nearly laughed. *I may have lived there for the past eight years, but New York would never be my home.*

Then again, neither was Summit.

“What do you know about holiday resorts?” I asked Sean after a brief thought.

“Next to nothing. Why?”

“It’s nothing. Never mind.”

THIRTEEN

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# ALLIE

I was fucking mad.

At him and myself.

Also, mad at the confusion that still plagued me because, for the life of me, I couldn't figure out who Marcus was now. Was he the man who gently caressed my cheek, who looked at me with such heated desire in his eyes, who couldn't hide the tenderness in his touch?

Or was he the one who ignored me, who talked with an accusing tone and seemed like he deliberately wanted to hurt me? The one who didn't want to listen to me despite my pleas and seemed determined to tear down one of the best places in my life?

I stopped walking and took a deep breath, releasing it and letting go of most of my anger.

It wouldn't do me any good to storm off in a huff. Marcus didn't see the potential of the resort because he simply didn't like this town. I didn't blame him. Everyone here had been absolutely awful to him. I wouldn't blame him if he wanted to tear down every single building here or if he convinced his boss that there was nothing worth saving.

But maybe I could show him that it wasn't all bad.

That sometimes there was beauty even in the ugliest of places.

And maybe he could find peace despite everything that had happened to him.

*Or maybe I was just being a selfish cow.*

I sighed, guilt rattling through me. It was selfish of me to ask him to save the resort, knowing how he felt about it.

But I would do it anyway. Because holding on to the hatred and bitterness

couldn't be good for him either.

He didn't need to forgive them for what they had done, but perhaps he would allow me to show him a different side. Not everyone here hated him, and a lot of people would suffer if the resort fell, including our employees, who would be out of income. Tourism would crash, and it would have a ripple effect on every other business, especially those that predominantly made profits during Christmas time.

It was Christmas, after all, and this was a town that really came alive during the season.

Maybe I could show Marcus what Summit meant for the people of this town, what we offered during this time, and what it meant for my son. I would give him a taste of how good we could be, and maybe he would finally understand and convince his boss that this place was worth saving.

The alternative would be to go to his boss directly and try to reason with the man, but that idea held little appeal and even less chance of success. I would have to find out who this man was in the first place since I doubted Marcus would be forthcoming with the details. And then try to figure out exactly what he wanted since those New York types could be very utilitarian.

No, it was better to go through Marcus.

I agonized over this idea for some time as I heard the low rumbling of a truck pulling right up next to me.

I pulled to a stop, sensing who it was before I even glanced over to see the rust-brown truck.

"Get in."

I cocked my eyebrow, resisting the command in his tone. "Would it kill you to say please or be polite?"

"Would it make a difference?"

"Yes," I said, even though his presumptuous tone was annoying.

"It might storm," Marcus said. "You don't want to be caught out on the street when it does."

"What's it to you?" I asked, feeling very stubborn and vindictive, though it only made him smile more.

"I don't want to lose my brand-new employee."

Employee? That would imply he wouldn't be tearing down the resort yet, and I still had a job.

Just what game was he playing?



I didn't ask, not wanting to get my hopes up and be made a fool of again.

I crossed my arms but ultimately walked around the car. The news had said that there was a possibility of a snowstorm, and even my pride wouldn't let me get stuck with that. I opened the door and slipped into the seat. A gentleman would probably have gotten down and opened the door for me, but at this point, I didn't have any expectations when it came to Marcus.

I tried to suppress a shiver as the heat in the car somehow made the cold outdoors even sharper.

Marcus still caught it because he leaned forward to turn up the heat even though he'd taken off his jacket already and had a sheen of sweat on his neck.

"I'm fine," I told him, but he ignored me. Once I secured my seatbelt, he began pulling out onto the road.

"Where to?" he asked.

"Uhm, to Athena's," I responded.

He hummed something in response, tapping a finger on the wheel as he drove. I watched him, trying to get a read of his emotions, but there was nothing on his face. I couldn't tell if he was happy or mad or stressed. There was nothing there.

"How do you do that?" I blurted out before I could think better of it.

"Do what?" he asked.

"That. Completely shut down, not give anything away."

He glanced at me, and the side of his lips kicked up, but it wasn't a smile. Something that bitter and sardonic couldn't be born from happiness.

"When you're constantly being watched, people wait for a chance to use every expression against you," he said. "You learn a few things to shield."

Suddenly, shame washed through me. Because here I was, mad at him about a building and a dozen things that didn't matter when he'd faced far more than I could ever imagine. He'd faced the persecution of this town and seen the nastiest side of it as the gossip nearly destroyed his life.

I remember when I first heard the rumor about him killing someone, I laughed. I'd been in the hardware store at the time, and the woman who ran it, Mrs. Crawley, mentioned that she saw the police dragging Marcus out from his home, saying that he beat someone to death. The story was so ridiculous, and the woman was known for making up elaborate rumors, so I just chalked it up as one of her usual tales.

But then, Saxon, the old farmer, confirmed it.

And that was when my heart raced out of my chest.

I immediately ran to the police station and begged them to let me see him. Officer Evan was in my brother's class, and he always hung around my house, so I was able to eventually persuade him until he agreed to let me in to see Marcus for a few minutes.

I remembered how Marcus looked then, staring at the opposite wall while sitting in the cage. He didn't look up when we went in, not even when Evan smacked his hand across the cage to get his attention.

And then, when he finally turned to look at us, my heart caught in my chest.

Pure indignant rage shone from him.

His expression shifted slightly when he saw me there.

"What's she doing here?" he demanded, his low timbre cutting through the atmosphere like a knife.

"I came to see you," I said, walking forward, but he didn't even look at me.

"I didn't ask for any visitors," he said. "Get her out."

"You're not in any position to be making the rules around here," Evan replied, tapping the metal bars with his baton. "And I certainly don't take orders from murderers."

"He's not a murderer." I turned to glare at Evan, not believing he could believe this nonsense too. "What are you talking about? He's been in this town for years."

"Familiarity doesn't make someone less of a murderer," he said.

"When did it happen?" I asked, but Marcus moved then, drawing up to his full height. Even though there were metal bars between us, Evan reacted quickly, pulling me back and facing up the giant.

Marcus didn't spare me a glance, keeping his eyes on Evan.

"Get her out of here." Marcus' eyes were dark. "I mean it."

This time, Evan agreed, dragging my struggling body out of the room. But I wasn't ready to give up yet.

I immediately found out that he was accused of doing it on Friday night, which was the evening we usually had our long talks. He routinely went home late and passed by that alleyway on his way back from work. The only evidence they had against him was the receipt he left behind for something he had purchased.

Adam said that because of that, they assumed he was the last person to see the man alive, and since he was big and threatening-looking, they arrested

him.

I remember being so enraged at the time about the injustice. Everyone thought he did it. The court case was a sham because all the evidence was circumstantial, and a better lawyer could prove it. Unfortunately for Marcus, he couldn't afford a better lawyer, and neither could I on my restaurant salary. I asked my dad for an advance, but Adam ratted me out on what it was actually for, and they refused to give it to me. My whole family thought I was insane for siding with a potential murderer.

I thought they were insane if they couldn't see that he didn't do it.

Eventually, I had no choice.

I'd had to make the ultimate decision to go to the stand and tell the judge under oath that Marcus hadn't been the one to kill the poor man because he couldn't have been. He was walking me home on the night of the murder because he'd saved me from a maniac who attacked me, and then I asked him to stay over for a few more hours to make sure I was okay.

And all the details were true.

It was just the date that wasn't.

My attack happened a full week before the murder. Even though we had our usual talk while eating restaurant leftovers on the night of the murder, he hadn't walked me home that night. I'd left him much earlier too.

So I stood there under oath and lied. And when they asked me why I hadn't come forward with the information sooner, I'd said it was because I didn't want to give the town the wrong impression that anything was going on between Marcus and me. I acted like I was ashamed of being associated with him.

It hurt to do so even though I knew Marcus likely understood the need for the lie...at least, I thought he understood. It was kind of hard to understand his expression from the stand. It had turned stormy, like a cross between disbelief and some intense emotion. Not mad, just...intense.

And his lips had pulled into a tight line like he wanted to yell out something, but he didn't.

Because denying it would cost him his freedom.

So he had no choice but to go along with it.

His mother had never forgiven me since that day, believing that I almost let her son go to jail because I was too ashamed to tell the truth.

"She should have come forward sooner and saved us this whole farce," I remember her grouching as she glared at me. They both came over to talk to

me after the trial, finding me as I stood outside, trying not to throw up from anxiety and nerves.

Marcus' mother left us alone for a little bit per his request, and he took a second to collect his thoughts. He still didn't look happy.

"Thank you," he said. "But you shouldn't have done that."

"I had to," I responded. "They'll think you're a criminal if I didn't."

He smiled then. "Do you think they don't already think so? That you changed anyone's mind?"

"Maybe not," I admitted. "But at least you're not sitting in a cold cell somewhere."

He shook his head, looking far off in the distance. "The only reason I let you go through with it was that if everyone found out you were lying on oath, it would be a crime."

"I guess we're both in trouble with the law then." I smiled weakly. "You're welcome."

And it turned out Marcus was right.

The court's innocent verdict did nothing to change anyone's mind. If anything, they were even more bloodthirsty, and they sought vengeance. The next few weeks were disastrous. The citizens felt robbed of their revenge and likely dialed up the abuse on Marcus' family. I got some of it, too, with the looks and the gossip. I even lost out on a lucrative job opportunity because of my association with the town murderer.

I didn't care much, but my parents were mad that I'd gotten involved in the first place and demanded to know if Marcus had touched me. Everyone was up in arms until I assured them that he didn't.

And then Marcus left town, and everything calmed down again.

So, remembering all that, what right did I have to ask him to save us? To save this town? What beauty did I want to show him?

None.

FOURTEEN

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# MARCUS

The minute I stepped out of the airplane, I held my coat against the chill in the air and steeled myself for the vibrant, noisy, bustling sound that was New York City.

I hated it.

Nearly eight years in the city, and I still couldn't get used to the crowds, the lights, and the fucking sounds that were at every turn. I walked out of the jet, nodding to the pilot of the private airline, and took out my phone, immediately dialing Sean.

"Where are you?" I asked.

"Good morning to you, too," he responded tiredly. He sounded like he'd just woken up, even though I knew he wasn't a late riser. He was far too professional for that. That was why I hired him as my PA in the first place. The man could multitask like a beast and could be on three phone calls with top executives while making breakfast for his children and wife.

"Don't mess with me right now," I said. "I want to get out of here as soon as possible."

The city always crawled on my skin and made me feel dirty for some reason.

"Relax," he said. "I thought you would be in a much better mood flying on the fancy million-dollar jet I chartered. Wasn't that nice?"

I didn't dignify that statement with a response. Sean knew I hated flying even more than I hated this noisy irritating city. I'd much rather take a train if I had the time to. Call it what you want, but I thought that being suspended a couple hundred thousand feet in the air on a moving piece of metal was just about the dumbest idea humans came up with.

But Sean had assured me that this meeting was an emergency, which meant a lot coming from him. He'd been the late Leverman's secretary and knew the ins and outs of this business. He typically ran a smooth ship in my absence, so for him to suggest that there was something out of his control must have been monumental.

Which was why I dragged my ass out of Summit and got myself here this morning.

I gave in and allowed him to get me the private jet, not really for the luxury it afforded but simply because it made flying slightly more tolerable. At least, this way, I had some control over where we stopped if I couldn't take the claustrophobia and nausea anymore.

After I walked a short distance from the plane, I immediately got into a black Mercedes Benz, which was likely also Sean's doing. The man loved luxury cars and took every opportunity to hire one on the company's dollar.

"You have an image to keep up," he always said when I told him to get me something understated. "And I refuse to have you rolling up to meetings in a rust-brown truck, looking like a country bumpkin fresh off the farm."

I didn't push the issue more than I needed to. I truly didn't care all that much what car I drove. As much as I wasn't a car person, I appreciated the leather interiors and smooth ride.

As we drove, I pondered, letting my thoughts draw me in.

The last time I arrived in New York, I held only two hundred dollars in my pocket and the number of the man who owned the construction company. Leverman. My former employer gave it to me upon leaving. He was one of the few people who were unhappy to see me go.

"Hard workers like you don't come by easily these days," he groused on my last day, slapping his hand on my shoulder and shaking his head regretfully. Then, he slipped me the note. "A friend of mine owns a construction company in New York. I told him about you. You should reach out to him when you get there."

And that was exactly what I did when I got here.

I called him after I got off the subway, which was a mistake because one of the pickpockets swarming around managed to nab twenty dollars from me.

Still, we set up a meeting over the phone, and on the way to it, I gave a homeless man twenty dollars, which brought me down to a grand total of a hundred and sixty dollars to my name.

Still, I didn't regret giving it to him. It was cold, and the man's jacket

looked threadbare. Plus, it wasn't like the twenty dollars would make a difference to me anyway.

If I didn't get the job today, I would be screwed.

The meeting took place in downtown New York. The lady at the front desk led me to the owner's office through a thin narrow staircase that looked like it hadn't been fortified enough at the bottom.

The man eyed me shrewdly as I entered and sat down.

"How long have you been working in construction?" he asked, and I appreciated that he got right to the point without engaging in niceties.

"Fifteen years," I answered honestly, and his eyebrows shot up. I'd been working in construction since I was in high school. It was with Ferril, the same boss I had up until I left Summit. At the time, he paid me less than minimum wage under the table, but he was the only one willing to overlook my age and give me the job anyway.

"How old are you?" the man asked next.

"Old enough," I responded, and his lips kicked up in a smile. He dropped the folder he was holding, leaning forward with his hands folded together.

"So," he said. "Ferril tells me you were recently in trouble with the law."

My stomach tightened, both because I hated the reminder and because I was half sure this entire thing was a sham. He was going to mention my criminal record, and the whole thing would be off. I would have wasted my last two hundred dollars on this trip for nothing.

"Want to talk about it?" he asked.

"No," I said.

Rather than being offended, the man merely smiled a little.

"They said you killed someone," he continued with curiosity rather than accusation in his tone. "That you beat a man to death."

I said nothing in response, letting the silence stretch until it was insulting.

"That's not true, is it?" he asked, and again, I was quiet. There was nothing I could say to absolve myself even if I wanted to. And I didn't. This bullshit had been all I heard for the past few weeks, and I was officially tired of it being the title of my life.

I was right about to get up and walk out of the room, weary of whatever game the man was playing, when he finally held up both hands in surrender.

"Fine, fine, I get it. You don't want to talk about it. Fine."

I still got up and turned to leave when he suddenly yelled, "Don't go! You got the job!"



I turned to see that the man had gotten up with a semi-desperate look in his eyes and a sheepish smile. Unsure if he was still toying with me, I tried to look for the honesty in his facial features.

“You got it the minute you walked in, to be honest,” he said. “I’m just incurably nosy and almost let it run way ahead of myself.”

I narrowed my eyes suspiciously at him. “Why?”

“Why am I nosy? Well, I suppose it starts with my mother—”

“Why are you hiring me?” I clarified. Even with a recommendation from his friend, a criminal record was a criminal record. There was no reason why he should be this eager to get me on the team.

“There’s just something about you, something very...competent and dependable. And honest.” The man shrugged. “Also, most of my men don’t have half your experience. Whatever it is, I get the feeling you’re going to make me a lot of money.”

I still wasn’t sure I totally bought his excuse, but I didn’t have a choice. I needed the money.

So, I asked him, “What do I need to sign?”

He started pulling out a bunch of papers, and I skimmed through them, making sure I wasn’t selling my soul or something before I wrote my name on the dotted line.

He asked me to come back the next day to start, and as I was about to leave, he called out.

“I don’t think you did it, by the way,” he said. “Beat that man to death, I mean. You’re too in control for that, almost too much for your own good. Do you ever let loose?”

I didn’t answer before I walked away. I let loose once in my life, and it cost me.

I wasn’t about to do it again.

It turned out that the man, Deitrich Leverman, was right. I did end up making the company a lot of money.

It started with a few changes.

I first learned that Leverman was using sub-par materials that could cost him in the long run and compromise the safety of his buildings. I made him change his supplier, threatening to quit if he didn’t. They were short-staffed as it was and frankly couldn’t afford to lose me, so he reluctantly relented.

The next thing was increasing the workers’ salaries and enforcing stricter conditions. He couldn’t maintain good workers because his pay was far too

low and could only attract people who slacked off all the time and were otherwise wrong for the job. I told him that he needed to learn how to retain workers to increase their efficiency, and the first thing he needed to do was to raise their pay.

The cheap bastard fought me hard on that one. He protested, saying the company was barely breaking even as it was, competing for big government contracts. But I insisted, telling him that he would never even smell those government contracts until he had a solid team to work with. It took time and a lot more talking on my end than I would have liked, but eventually, after he lost out on yet another contract to our rival, I brought it up again.

And it finally struck a nerve.

“Fine, damn you,” he exploded that night in his office. “I’ll do it. Damn. Are you happy now?”

I merely nodded.

He shook his head like he didn’t know whether to laugh or yell.

“Rude bastard,” he muttered. “You know people would be less likely to think you murdered someone if you smiled every once in a while.”

*Not the people where I’m from, I thought. If they saw me smile, they’d probably think I turned full-on psycho.*

Except her.

Allie once told me I had a great smile after I cracked one in her presence. I brushed off the comment and pretended like it didn’t affect me, but it did.

Leverman Construction grew exponentially over those years, and as it did, so did my position. I went from Construction Worker to Construction Supervisor to Project Manager, and eventually, when the man died in a car crash, I was surprised to find that he left everything to me in his will.

*The company is yours, it said in a letter attached to the will. You were the one who built up the damn company in the first place. Just try to take care of my boy if you can. And don’t murder him, please.*

*JK. I know you don’t kill people.*

I cracked my final smile then and made sure he had a fitting funeral.

At that point, we were doing pretty well, raking in a few million dollars a year, but I wasn’t satisfied with that. I wanted more.

And so, I turned Leverman Construction into a billion-dollar success using the tricks I learned from all the titans of the industry. One of those tricks included learning how to be a ruthless bastard when need be.

Which was what brought us to today.

Because it turned out that the old man's estranged son was starting to claim ownership of the company and trying to contest the will or increase the percentage of his share. He wouldn't win, of course, but he was throwing his weight around and continuing to be more of a nuisance. Which just meant that I needed to teach him a lesson at this point.

By the time I got back into town, I was exhausted.

I went to the grocery store to pick up a meal only to be standing at the back of a long line where some asshole in front was giving the bagger a tough time.

"What's the matter, sweet cheeks?" he drawled, laughing. "Cat got your tongue?"

*Tacky, rude piece of shit.*

Irritated, I walked up the line to tell the man to get lost. But then I froze when I saw who he was talking to.

It was Allie.

FIFTEEN

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## ALLIE

“No improvement?” Dr. Rowanna asked, glancing at an unresponsive Caleb with concern.

I shook my head, feeling a little like a failure. “No. No matter how hard I try, he refuses to talk to me about whatever happened to him. I think I asked too many questions yesterday, and now he won’t talk at all.”

Caleb wasn’t looking at either of us, keeping his gaze fixed on the wall behind the therapist as if he couldn’t hear us. I knew he could hear us well and good, but he simply didn’t want to acknowledge the fact that we were talking about him.

Suddenly, a surge of anger filled me, not at my son but at whoever or whatever had done this to him to make him so scared and traumatized that he refused to speak to his own mother. Which monster drove my son to live in his world of silence rather than acknowledge our existence?

The psychologist sent Caleb a kind smile when she caught his gaze, but he quickly jerked his eyes away, studying the wall again.

She nodded and then noted down something on her notepad.

“What is it?” I asked, alarm racing through me.

She waited until she was done writing before she spoke. “It’s the name of a specialist I know. He stays two towns over, near Bozeman. It’s only a few hours on the freeway, and he’s very good. He specializes in cases like this.”

My heart sank. “Are you letting us go?”

She sighed with a sad nod. “I don’t want to do this, but it’s for the best. You know I love you and Caleb, but you’ve both been coming here for nearly a year already, and there hasn’t been much improvement if any. I really don’t think I’m much of a help in this case.”

“Oh, please don’t.” I wanted to cry. She was right, of course, but the thought of facing this alone without any help terrified me. Dr. Rowanna understood Caleb and had been the one to diagnose him in the first place. Caleb liked her, as stubborn as he was. What if he never got better without her? What if I never found out what happened to him? “Let’s keep going. I’m sure there’s just something we haven’t tried.”

Dr. Rowanna shook her head but gave me a comforting look as she shifted her hand over mine that rested on the desk.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “Dr. Hammond is very professional, and he handles cases like this all the time. He’s a little pricier, but I’m sure he’ll be more effective.”

That made me feel a little calm, although I had to ask, “How much pricier?”

She looked reluctant to tell me. “I would call over and ask,” she just said. Shit, that was what I was afraid of hearing.

I glanced at my son. Insurance didn’t cover these visits, and his treatment was largely coming out of my savings over the years. Ever since the resort started collapsing, money had become hard to come by, but I made it work, doing odd jobs here and there and selling some stuff on Etsy. But even that was drying up. We were very close to being in a hole, and I needed to find a solution fast since it seemed the resort would soon be history.

And I wanted Caleb to be able to see this new psychologist if he was as good as Dr. Rowanna said. So I would need to get some extra cash together, fast.

The minute I got home, I began brainstorming.

Marcus and I had been tiptoeing around each other for the past few days, and he hadn’t shown up to the resort today. I had all but given up asking him to save the resort, so that was out of the question.

My dad was also supposed to give each of us a cut from the sale of the resort, but I didn’t want to bug him for it, especially since he needed most of it for his medical bills.

I would need to get a job, but it was unlikely that I could get one or a pay advance this early.

I could ask Marcus to borrow some money and pay him back when I got a job, but even before the thought fully materialized, I rejected it.

I hated borrowing money from people, and with Marcus, it would be even worse. The memory of him basically implying I was a gold digger still stung,

and I doubted he would even give me the money in the first place. In the old days, he might have, but not now. I finally accepted that I didn't know the man anymore. Most likely, he would simply rub it in my face or laugh at me and then kiss me or do something equally as infuriating.

I couldn't ask him.

A girl had her pride.

But my pride brought me back to square one.

*Okay, first things first.* I had to find a job that either paid weekly or where I could collect a check at the end of the day. Preferably a job with unlimited hours so I could work more. I'd work all of them if need be. Anything to help my little boy.

Fortunately, the pay was hiked up everywhere during the holiday season.

But unfortunately, we were nearly in December, and it was late in the season to start looking for jobs. It seemed every business and store had already stocked up on extra workers in anticipation of the Christmas rush. Without the resort being in working order, there weren't many tourists passing through anymore, but still. The stores all had their greeters, Santa had his helpers, and there were no openings for me.

I had to practically beg one of my mother's old friends to give me a job bagging groceries at the grocery store. I also had to get her to swear not to tell any of my family members because I knew they would disapprove and promptly try to give me the money I needed. But I couldn't allow that. I wasn't a mooch, and Caleb was my responsibility.

The only downside to the job at the grocery store was that I would have to do a lot of nights, which wasn't ideal. Because it meant I would have to leave Caleb behind until late at night.

On my first shift, I tried to explain to him that I would be out a little later than normal, right as I dropped him off at Athena's.

I knew he understood because his face shifted into a pout that showed the child he really was inside. I made him promise not to freak out and gave him a large hug, my heart heavy when I left. For a second, I regretted divorcing Ken. As selfish as it was, things were much easier when he was around since there were two incomes to support Caleb with. But after we divorced, I didn't have the heart to continue to take child support from Ken, especially since Caleb wasn't his biological son. He'd helped me enough already.

But sometimes, I wondered. If he were here, I would not have to worry about it because I would have extra help for my son.

I tried not to let the thought keep me down, but it was hard.

Still, I fought to maintain a friendly demeanor at work, smiling and making conversation with every customer that passed my line. It helped boost my mood to see them smile in turn, although it wasn't all of them. In fact, given the late hour, most of the customers weren't in the mood, and for every sweet old lady who wanted to chat, telling me what a great job I was doing, there were ten more who tossed their wares at me and silently ignored my greetings.

And then, close to the middle of my shift, I met a customer from hell.

He tossed his bag of Doritos at me before beginning to unload some more groceries from his cart.

"How are you doing today?" I greeted, and he smirked at me.

"Didn't know they started hiring babes to work here," he said. "Did I accidentally take a turn and end up on the wrong strip?"

My cheeks burned at how loud he'd said it, but I said nothing, focusing on bagging his groceries as carefully and quickly as possible.

"Hurry it up, sweet cheeks," he groused.

Even though the term stung, I gave him an apologetic smile anyway. "Sorry. It's my first day, so I'm still getting the hang of this whole bagging business."

If I thought that was enough to soften his mood, I was wrong.

The man gave me a mean look. "Well, that's what happens when they give bimbos a job, isn't it? But y'all always want to do everything the men can do, right? Y'all don't know your place."

That one was a pointed insult, and the smile instantly slipped off my face, anger sparking right into my chest. *Okay, asshole.*

I bit back my temper and focused on bagging his stuff even faster.

But the man wasn't satisfied with that.

"What's the matter, sweet cheeks?" he drawled. "Cat got your tongue?"

I ignored him once again, praying there wouldn't be a scene on my first day.

But the last straw came when he leaned in closer to whisper, "You know you don't have to do this. I just bet girls like you can make a killing on the street corner. Isn't that right?" He turned behind him to laugh with his companion, who was the second guy in line. I felt tears sting my eyelids, not so much from sadness but from anger.

*Why the fuck was he such an asshole?*



“Listen, sir...” I backed up from him and pushed my hands in his chest, about to tell him off, but a low animalistic-sounding growl had me and everyone else in line jerking where they stood.

I didn’t even have to look around for the source. The source was right there in front of us, his fury swirling around his entire being.

And all of it was focused on the man who was still leaning down, his lips a few inches from my ear.

Marcus’ large hand landed on the guy’s shoulder with a heavy and painful-looking thud. We all winced.

“Move,” he growled. “Before I beat you into fucking pulp where you stand.”

Fear flashed across the man’s face, and he took a step back but hesitated. As if he wasn’t ready to abandon his manhood yet, but he really, *really* wanted to.

He was better than me. If someone were glaring at me the way Marcus was currently glaring at the man, I would have zoomed out of here so fast that you wouldn’t have even seen my dust.

But the man must have been brain-dead because he puffed his chest out instead, and I could see him ready to start something. “Or what motherfucker? You think you’re big and bad, and I’m just going to run away?”

There was a pause, and then a maniacal half-smile appeared on Marcus’ face.

He leaned down slowly, and I watched the man gulp.

“The only reason you’re still alive,” Marcus said in a deadly baritone, “is that I don’t want to fucking mess up her floor with your fucking blood.”

The menace in Marcus’ voice would have been enough, but the man’s friend tapped his shoulder, leaned forward, and whispered something in his ear. The man’s eyes widened then, and he swallowed loudly.

“Alright, man. I’m sorry about that,” he mumbled. “No hard feelings, right?”

Marcus was still glaring at them.

He gradually backed away from Marcus, but Marcus kept glaring at him.

I wasn’t sure Marcus wouldn’t go after him once he left here, so I quickly gestured over to another cashier who was about to leave and said, “Hey, could you watch my station for a few minutes? I’ll give you twenty bucks.”

The teenager nodded, disinterestedly moving to the front and continuing

to scan the groceries.

I grabbed Marcus' arm, somehow managing to pull him outside.

When we got outside, I turned around, holding out my hands. "Alright, calm down."

"Calm down?" he exploded, looking at me like I had lost my mind. "Did you fucking hear what he said to you?"

"Yes, I did. And while it was horrible, it's nothing to lose our heads over, okay?" I could practically still see the steam rising out of his head.

He wasn't looking at me. He was looking off into the distance to where the parking lot was. "I should find him. Take care of him once and for all. One less miserable bastard in the world."

He strode forward.

I blocked him, putting my hand up. He walked into my hands.

"No, definitely don't do that," I said firmly, but the sudden ringing of my phone interrupted us. With one hand still up against his chest, I used the other one to whip out my phone.

"Um, Athena, this is kind of not the best time."

"It's Caleb!" Her voice sounded frantic and panicky. "He's missing."

SIXTEEN

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## MARCUS

This was the second time I watched all the energy drain from her face.

Allie's reaction was the only thing that could distract me from the rage coursing through my body. It had started when I saw her standing at the end of that grocery line bagging groceries as the bastard talked down to her.

Shock was the first emotion that shot through me when I saw it.

Then fury quickly overtook it.

It surged through my entire body, so potent, so strong, that I had to hold myself completely still to keep from losing it entirely.

I had to take a breath before I approached because if I didn't, I would have killed him—straight up murdered him.

There was no chance I wouldn't.

Even now, after he'd scurried off, I regretted not at least punching him or getting my hands around his neck. The only reason why I hadn't was that I wasn't sure I would be able to make myself stop. The way he was talking to her, the crude laughter, leaning down to whisper in her ear, nearly touching her.

I couldn't hear what he was saying, but I saw the hurt look on her face, and from that moment on, he was a dead man.

*I could probably still find him, I thought, a thirst for violence tearing through me. If he'd just left the grocery store, I may be able to find him in the parking lot or on the route leading back to the main road.*

It was all I could think about as Allie tried to calm me down. I understood that she was probably worried I would get in trouble again due to my reputation, but I didn't care about that. They already pretty much thought I was a murderer anyway. This wouldn't change their mind.

*God, I should have hit that bastard.*

When she received the call, I thought about going to see if he was still hanging around somewhere in the parking lot. If not, I could always hunt him down somewhere and then maybe beat him within an inch of his life. I wanted to make him hurt for hurting her and torture him for everything he said to her.

But then her expression instantly changed, and thoughts of revenge flew out of my mind.

Something was wrong.

“What do you mean he’s missing?” I winced at the screech in her voice. Her hand, the one clutching the phone, began to shake as the other one came up to her mouth.

I saw the moment panic began setting in and instantly went to her. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

She turned to me, horror clear in her gaze. “It’s my son. He’s...he’s missing.”

Alarm sprung through me. I looked around. There was supposed to be heavy snow tonight, and there weren’t many walkable roads from her house. It was nowhere for a little boy to be wandering around.

“Fuck,” I muttered, then turned to her.

“I have to...I don’t know—” She turned in circles, seeming to not even know where to start or how to get her bearings. The shock was still settling in, and I knew her mind was in chaos.

I gently put my hands on her shoulders and looked her in the eyes, trying to get her to calm down.

“We’ll find him,” I told her confidently.

She shook her head, her gaze still swiveling around rapidly. “I don’t know...he can’t talk...he might...”

“Hey, listen to me.” I shook her until her eyes returned to me, then I said, “We’ll find him. I promise you.”

She swallowed, and fear was still highlighting her gaze, but she nodded.

“Do you live close by?” I asked.

“Not really,” she answered. “Athena does. She was watching him at her house. She went up to use the bathroom for a few minutes, and when she came down, he was gone. So was his coat.”

“Okay, so it meant he likely wasn’t taken,” I said. “Any ideas why would he leave home?”

“I don’t know.” She clutched her head. “I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know anything. My son is missing. Oh my God. What if something has happened to him? What if someone did take him?”

“It’s likely not a kidnapping, but call the police just in case. I’ll get a search party out.” Even if I had to fly in my own private search team from out of town.

Jesus. We needed to find her son.

I didn’t know the boy, but I already felt like he was a part of me, though I didn’t know why. All I knew was that I would find him.

We rushed toward my car as Allie got on the phone with the police. But just as we arrived at the parking lot, we both stopped in our steps as we saw a tiny figure rushing toward us from the sidewalk.

It was a little boy covered in snow.

“Caleb!” Allie screamed, and the boy instantly began running to her. She ran to him, too, and they met somewhere halfway. When he slammed into her, he wrapped his hands around her waist, burying his face in her stomach.

Allie dropped to her knees, shaking and clutching the little boy as her breaths came out in rough pants. “Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God.”

She was shaking hard, and I was about to walk toward them, but then the little boy looked up at me.

I froze.

I briefly remembered Allie’s friend—her ex, Ken. He was a blonde-haired fellow, tall but lean, with a toothy smile. We didn’t interact much in town, and it would be odd for me to remember exactly what he looked like, but I’d always been good with faces.

Ken looked nothing like Caleb.

In fact, the little boy had brown hair like his mother, but it was his hooked nose and dark eyes that told me something.

He looked like a younger version of my father.

My heart started beating hard in my chest, going at double time.

*God, it couldn’t be. It couldn’t fucking be.*

Allie was picking her son up in her arms while my mind went chaotic with the recent groundbreaking epiphany.

The thought that I was forming such a conclusion over arbitrary details seemed ridiculous. Lots of people had brown hair and noses like that. I was likely making a mountain out of a molehill. There was no way. There was no way I had a son I didn’t know about. Allie would tell me.

She wouldn't keep my son away from me.

Allie glanced at me as I stood there, and there was a flash of fear on her face as her gaze instantly skittered to her son and then back to me.

That was what convinced me that I was right.

Fuck.

*Fuck.*

What the actual fuck?

Allie tore her gaze away from me, turning her attention back to the little boy at her feet.

"Come on," she was saying. "Let's get you out of here."

"I'll drive you home," I said. Allie glanced at me, and it looked like she wanted to say no, but she ultimately nodded.

She must have known that the conversation was coming whether she wanted it or not.

"Let me go talk to Ronnie," she said, hoisting the child onto her hip. "See if I can pay him to cover the rest of my shift for me."

I nodded tightly and she headed back to the store. I followed behind her, but stopped at the entrance, watching her interact with the teenage boy. He didn't seem pleased at the request, not until Allie reached into her pocket and pulled out a hundred-dollar bill. The boy took it and nodded with a significantly brighter expression.

I frowned at the exchange. Something about it didn't sit well with me and I wasn't sure why.

*You know why. You don't like watching her spend her money. You want to be the one to take care of all her bills.*

I brushed the thought aside as she walked back to me, having retrieved her purse from under the cash register. She clutched the strap of her purse with one hand and supported our son against her body with the other.

"I'm ready," she said when she reached me. I turned, and we walked to my car in complete silence.

Throughout the long drive back to her place, she was quiet, holding her son tightly in her arms. The little boy didn't say a single word, and apart from his initial curious glance, he didn't look at me again. One hand was curled around his mother's sweater, clutching it like a lifeline, and he had a fish figurine in another hand.

The boy looked to be about seven or eight years old, but he acted even younger.

Seven, I amended. That would be how old he would be if he were my son.

And I was almost sure he was.

I studied him surreptitiously through the drive. The more I watched, the more the resemblance shone through. He had my eyes, and the little almost-dimple in his left cheek ran in my family too. Even the cautious way he watched his surroundings.

My heart threatened to beat out of my chest.

The boy was my son.

I had a son.

During the ride back, Allie called her sister and let her know that we'd found her son, Caleb. Athena sounded relieved. The two talked right up until I pulled into Allie's parking lot.

Then Allie shot me a fathomless look and said, "Athena, I'm going to have to call you back."

I could hear her sister telling her goodbye on the other end right as Allie hung up, still holding my gaze.

She took a deep breath, then glanced down at her son, who was fast asleep on her lap.

"I'll put him to bed," she said quietly. "And then we can talk."

I nodded, getting out of the car and going around to pull the door open for her.

"Thanks," she murmured as she hoisted Caleb up on her shoulder, walking with him to their home.

It was a small but tastefully decorated cottage full of color and flowers that just screamed Allie. While the building was compact, it had a pretty solid foundation.

I waited downstairs, hearing the tap of her feet as she ascended the stairs to the boy's room. Two minutes later, she was headed back down.

She stopped at the base of the stairs and held her hands in front of her. She looked around the room for a few seconds before she met my eyes with some difficulty, guilt radiating through her stance.

There was a beat of heavy silence.

"He's my son," I said, needing to hear it. Needing to confirm it. "Isn't he?"

She swallowed once. And then she nodded weakly.

With the confirmation, senseless, hot anger washed through me.



“You never told me.” My voice was a low accusatory growl that had her glancing up at me. “You kept my son from me all this time.”

Temper flashed through her eyes as well. “You didn’t leave me any way to reach you.”

“Bullshit.” My tone was low, but she jerked as if I’d slapped her. I didn’t care. The riot of emotions was making me vicious. “I’ve been in town for weeks. You could have told me at any point.”

Remorse was there in her gaze again, but it only made me angrier. She knew it was wrong, but she did it anyway. “Why?” Why the fuck had she kept him a secret from me?

She rubbed the side of her arm, clearly uncomfortable. “I didn’t know how you would react.”

“What the fuck do you mean?” I demanded.

“He’s very fragile, okay?” she exploded. “I didn’t want him around a mercurial man who is consistently angry and swears at people all the time! I didn’t want you to hurt him.”

The statement sent pain shooting straight through my heart. “You thought I would hurt my own son?” I shook my head, unable to believe it. “You fucking think that of me?”

She met my angry gaze then, and I saw emotion well in her eyes.

Then, she burst into tears.

SEVENTEEN

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## ALLIE

I tried to fight back the sobs tearing out of my throat, but it was impossible.

Too much emotion was running through me, and I was overwhelmed.

It was likely the combination of everything today—the stress from work, Caleb going missing and then reappearing in front of Marcus and me. And then I'd had to explain to Marcus that Caleb was his son.

He'd known the minute he set eyes on Caleb. I could tell from the shocked expression on his face as it was like someone had hit him with a cannon. At that moment, I felt instant regret.

This wasn't the way I meant for him to find out.

Then again, I wasn't sure exactly how I meant for him to find out.

I hadn't figured out the details and wasn't even sure if I was going to tell him either.

Ideally, it would have been after I made sure Marcus was the right man to be Caleb's father and that he was still the man I remembered. And after I found out what caused Caleb's trauma too. Then I would invite Marcus to a nice peaceful dinner and finally tell him that we'd conceived a son together, and his name was Caleb. I'd explain why I didn't tell him earlier too. The Marcus I knew wouldn't hold it against me. He would understand that I was just a mother trying to protect her son.

But he wasn't my Marcus anymore.

The enraged man in front of me was a stranger, and perhaps that was one of the things that made me cry even harder.

It didn't stop when he came forward and pulled me down the last step, dragging me against his chest with a muttered, "Fuck."

The tears continued even as his hands went to my head, running his

fingers through my hair as he whispered, “Shit, stop crying. I can’t fucking stand it when you cry.”

*Then why did you make me sad?* I wanted to say, but it came out in hiccups instead. I brought my fist to his chest, intending to push him away, but I just didn’t have the strength. I was so tired, so sick of holding it together even though everything was falling apart. I was tired of being strong.

Plus, the feeling of his fingers running through my hair was kind of relaxing, and it was melting all my bones to mush, stealing whatever was left of my strength.

I felt Marcus pick me up in his arms and carry me over to the living room, his steps heavy on the hardwood floor as we walked. Then, he settled on the couch, arranging me on his lap, and he calmly shushed me when I tried to move. His voice was now soothing, a complete contrast to how he’d been a few minutes ago, his large palm shifting to run down my back in long comforting strokes.

The tears continued, and I let the sadness take me, weeping with one hand curled into his chest.

I had no clue how long we sat there, but it was sometime after the sobs dissipated.

But the longer we sat there, the more surreal it appeared.

It was like the outside world was slowly disappearing, his aura shielding me from it. Pretty soon, there was nothing in my mind but the strong beat of his chest, the woodsy scent of his jacket, and his steady breath against my hair.

And, of course, his heavy hand on my back, still continuing its soothing rhythm.

It reminded me of the night we spent together all those years ago.

For days after, I’d felt humiliated at how I clumsily made a move on him. I wasn’t drunk enough for the shame not to impact me. But I never regretted it. Not once.

*I’d reached out to touch his thigh, and he’d held my hand and said, “Stop.”*

*His eyes were serious, his lips set in a stern line.*

*Shame instantly filled me. I was never a forward kind of girl, but right at that moment, I felt like the biggest hussy.*

*“S-sorry,” I had stammered, embarrassed, as I began to pull back. But he wouldn’t let me go. I tried to tug my hands out of his grip so I could go and*

*bury myself somewhere and get out of his apartment due to the mortification, but he stubbornly held on.*

*“Ah, Allie,” I heard him murmur, and I felt my skin burn even hotter. He must have noted my humiliation because he suddenly tugged me until I fell against his chest, then wrapped his arm around me.*

*“What the hell am I going to do with you?” he whispered into my ear, holding me. But I couldn’t really focus on his words. About a million butterflies were dancing in my stomach, and bells were clanging in my head.*

*Oh my God.*

*Marcus is hugging me. The reality was so much better than every fantasy I’d had up until that point, the feeling of his strong arms wrapped around my body.*

*My heart beat at an endless rhythm, and I barely knew my name at that point. All I could feel was the feeling of his body pressed against mine, his strong heartbeat under my ears, and his heated breath in my hair. The scent of him surrounded me, and I breathed it in, feeling it start things in my body, stirring me to my very core.*

*The same way it did now.*

*Despite everything that happened today, or maybe because of it, my body began to respond. I felt my heart begin to beat faster, pounding for a whole new reason. Awareness filled me, and I noted all the points of contact where my body touched his—my breasts, the back of my thighs, my butt.*

*I was also aware of the fact that he was feeling the same thing I was.*

*At least the blatant bulge under my thigh told me so.*

*It was the thing that set my heart racing because it felt impossibly huge under me.*

*And I knew from experience just how huge it was.*

*I shifted imperceptibly and felt him hiss subtly through his teeth.*

*Excitement raced through me, and I couldn’t resist the temptation to do it again.*

*“Stop,” he said, but his voice was hoarse. It was a plea and an order wrapped up in one.*

*I leaned back and smiled at him. “You said the same thing last time too.”*

*His expression revealed his torture, and he didn’t look pleased with the reminder.*

*I didn’t know why I brought it up. I also didn’t know why I was playing with him today or why the sexual tension that we’d been having seemed*

almost unbearable all of a sudden. Maybe it was just that the day had been so bad, and I needed to distract myself. I needed something good to mix in with the bad. I needed to feel the way he'd made me feel with that kiss when I was pressed up against the wall.

Or maybe there was no reason for it. Maybe I was just finally ready to give in to the madness because I was so tired of fighting it and everything around me.

I leaned forward and stopped with my lips only an inch away from his, the move a blatant dare. His eyes darkened as they dropped to my lips, but he didn't give in. His jaw tightened instead, and I felt the strain in his muscles, but he didn't move.

Embarrassment threatened at the back of my mind, but desire washed it out. He was just so strong all the time, so controlled. I wondered what happened when he broke that. When he just let himself act.

I'd gotten a hint of it that night when he'd entered me. His eyes had been blazing with ferocious desire, and his snarl was animalistic. Brutally instinctive.

And he'd needed to keep his hands around my neck to center himself, not quite choking me but close to it.

It was so deliciously depraved, and the mere thought of it made my core squeeze wantonly.

I knew the whole thing freaked him out the next morning. He didn't want to talk about it, even though I assured him that I wasn't scared and found it kind of hot. I might have been inexperienced, but I wasn't exactly naïve either. I knew Marcus was a dominant man and what that meant. Having sex with him was intense, and I got the feeling I had only scratched the surface so far.

But I wanted more.

I didn't know how to get him to do more now until he suddenly brought his hand up, ran it down my cheek, and then finally wrapped it around my neck. His expression was hard as he did it, but not in a seductive way.

This was a warning.

I knew what he was trying to do. He was trying to scare me, but it didn't work.

Instead, I felt my nipples pucker up painfully and felt a little tingle between my legs. I deliberately pushed my throat even deeper into his grasp, and his eyes flashed with something dark and dangerous.

“You should stop,” he said.

“I won’t,” I responded.

“You don’t know what you’re starting, little girl.”

*I’ll show him who’s a little girl.*

I stayed exactly where I was and then brought my other hand up, squeezing it around my throat harder.

With a snarl, he snapped.

But he didn’t do the predictable thing of falling on me like a sex-starved maniac. No, he was way too in control for that.

Instead, he used the hand he wrapped around my neck to bring me forward until my lips were a breath from his. But instead of kissing me the way I craved, he skimmed his nose against the side of my face until he got to my neck, inhaling deeply and nipping it slightly before going lower.

I trembled at the hint of danger, at the feeling of his breath as he whispered down my neck. One hand slipped up my uniform shirt, and I hissed as I felt his heated palm against my cool skin.

“God, your skin is so soft,” he whispered as his hands rubbed over my stomach a few times. I knew the exact moment they found my cesarean scar, and I twisted a little, attempting to remove his hand from the mark that made me insecure.

But he didn’t, insistently tracing his fingers over the line lifted against my skin.

“Beautiful,” he declared, and something in me cracked.

By the time his hands reached the edge of my bra, I nearly wept from how turned on I was. His fingers slipped around the back, and he expertly undid my bra with one hand before coming back around to strum my nipple.

I jumped at the contact.

“Easy,” he murmured as he continued to shift his thumb over the puckered numb, plucking and playing until I bit back a moan.

I noticed that I began moving slightly against his thigh, but he ignored it.

Instead, he caught my eye, leaning his face forward until his mouth hovered over my chest. My breath caught. I’ve always had incredibly sensitive nipples. It had gotten even worse after I gave birth, and Marcus’ touch was already taking me to the edge very quickly.

And then he turned it up a notch.

He rubbed his nose over my cotton shirt, right over where my puckered nipple, which he’d pinched between two fingers, would be. The slight touch,

almost like a breeze, had me gasping and shaking a little, the almost-there feeling somehow worse than if he had touched it outright.

And then he flashed his teeth, nipping.

I jumped in his lap, arousal arcing through me as violently.

Suddenly, he reversed our positions, so I was the one lying on the couch with him above me.

“Don’t move,” he ordered.

I swallowed, then nodded. It would take a lot, but I would try my best.

“Hurry,” I gasped as his hands started to trail up my side, lifting my shirt as they went.

“Hmm,” he purred but with a smile that said, “I’ve waited for this for a long time. I’m now going to take my time.”

And that was exactly what he did. He started by sensuously suckling my nipples, alternating between one and the other with his hand playing with whichever nipple he wasn’t sucking. It was then that I knew I would lose my mind.

My hand flew to his head, needing to hold something. He nipped my nipple in punishment, and I gasped.

“I said don’t move,” he growled, his eyes glinting with that same dangerous gleam. He took my hands out of his hair and brought them to the couch. “Here. Hold this. Move your hands again, and you’re going to regret it.”

Oh, God. I was probably soaked through my panties, and my clit was painfully rubbing against them, but I would do it.

I clutched the couch behind me for dear life, nodding.

And then he went back to it.

I had no idea how long the torture continued.

At some point, I felt the sensation of his fingers pushing aside my panties and folding over my slit, which made me start trembling.

“Fuck.” His voice was guttural. “You’re so fucking wet. You want this, huh? You want this so bad.”

I nodded vehemently, ready to sob. “Please. Please just...” *Fuck me.* I couldn’t say the vulgar words, but he knew exactly what I meant. His large finger penetrated my pussy just a little bit as his mouth left my nipple. I squirmed, the tortured heat rising within me. A breeze blew against my nipple, and then I felt a wet lick against my clit.

“You taste so good,” he murmured. “I’ve tasted you a thousand times in



my dreams, but nothing is as good as this.”

I bit back a scream, but I couldn't stop my hand from clutching his hair as he continued to lap at my center.

True to his word, he punished me.

I felt the sting as his hands slapped lightly against my pussy, but it just turned everything up a dial.

The pain mixed with the pleasure was so sharp that it sent me soaring unexpectedly into an orgasm that tore my sanity in two. I gasped, likely tearing out his hair.

By the time my mind came back down to earth, his cock was against my center, and he was pushing in. His lips pulled in a snarl, and his face was tense with concentration.

“Fuck, I have to go slow,” he muttered to himself. “Can't hurt you.”

He could never hurt me, and to prove it, I took one of his hands and put it against my throat.

Realization flashed through his eyes, as well as a lust so deep. He growled and then slammed into me.

I turned my face, muffling my screams into the pillow, and came again.

“Fuck!” He groaned and continued to power into me, clearly having lost control. His moves were forceful and maddened, and I could feel him hitting deep inside my womb, firing every nerve ending as the pleasure continued to leak out of me. His hands squeezed around my neck, but not enough to cut off my air. Just enough to let me know he was in control.

His eyes met mine.

He owned me.

He possessed me.

As his head fell beside me, and he shot his release deep into me while muffling his groans with the cushions, I knew I owned a little piece of him too.

EIGHTEEN

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## MARCUS

I lay on the couch with Allie against my chest, trying to stop my heart from pounding out of it.

Something significant had just happened here, something life-changing.

I could feel it in my heart because something inside me squeezed almost painfully when one of Allie's small palms came up to curl on my chest. There was a fierce possessiveness that washed over me.

*She's mine.*

The thought sank in and made way amongst all the other facts of the universe. She was mine, and whatever happened, that would remain true.

I would take care of her.

Everything she needed, she would get from me.

She would never fuck anyone else except me.

She was mine.

And as Neanderthal as the feeling was, there was nothing I could do about it now that it had taken hold of me.

I felt like a caveman when I took her and when I came with orgasms that nearly blinded me. I'd stared into her eyes then—as I held myself back and felt her clenching heat on me—and knew then that I was a goner.

There was no way of fighting this intense hold she had on me, no way of dissociating myself from her.

I'd had sex before. But never like this.

This was something that fucking owned my soul. *She* owned my soul.

The mother of my child.

An indescribable sensation went through me at the realization.

I had a child. With Allie. A little boy who should be about seven years

old now. I'd missed out on a lot of key moments in his life, and while I wanted to be mad about it, I really couldn't. How could I be mad at her when I was the one who'd cut off contact on the stupid thought that I was protecting her? How could I be mad when she did what she thought was best for him?

"What are you thinking about?" Allie's soft voice cut through the darkness. Her chest had been rising and falling with easy breaths for some time now, but I knew she wasn't asleep. She was as awake as I was, possibly wondering, like I was, what we would do next.

Where do we go from here?

"How?"

"How what?" she asked quizzically.

"How was he born?" I asked, then realized that the question didn't make too much sense. "I mean...was it...were you okay?"

I'd felt the surgical scar on her stomach and surmised what it was from. It couldn't have been pretty, but I wanted to hear it from her directly.

Allie was silent for a few minutes after the awkward question, and I got the sense she was laughing at me a little.

The humor was still there in her voice when she responded.

"It was fine," she said. "It was actually a pretty easy birth, all things considering. He came right on my due date, and my water broke while I was having breakfast with my family. Everyone knew what to do, and they got me to the hospital with an overnight bag. My doctor already let me know that due to my hips and Caleb's size, I would likely need a cesarean, so I knew that going in. I was awake throughout the entire procedure, and I barely felt it at all. Even after. It was only a few hours, and he popped right out of there."

My throat became thick with emotions as I tried to imagine it—that magical moment when she first held our son in her arms.

"Dad always said that Caleb must have wanted to get out of there real bad because he came out in no time at all," she continued, her voice sounding wistful. "And that was what he was like as a toddler too. We almost named him Speedy because the minute his little hands and legs touched the floor, off he went, toddling about into one trouble or the next. He was a handful then." She gave a dreamy sigh. "But I wouldn't change it for a thing. He was such a happy little baby, always smiling, always laughing. We took very good care of him."

"We?" I asked, and there was a bit of awkwardness because I knew what

was coming.

“Yeah,” she admitted. “Ken and I. Ken knew Caleb wasn’t his, obviously, but it didn’t change how he felt about the little boy. It was one of the reasons why we married, so Caleb could have his last name, and he wouldn’t be an outcast in town.”

Caleb definitely would have been an outcast if anyone knew he was my son, I thought bitterly.

That would have been traumatic for the little boy, especially since I wasn’t here to protect him. And the irony is that, even now, letting the town continue to believe that he was Ken’s son was most likely what would be best for him.

“They got along?” I asked instead, trying to keep the jealousy from my voice.

“Oh yeah,” Allie responded. “The two got on like two peas in a pod. They were...like father and son. Ken was awkward like me because he didn’t know what to expect from fatherhood. We were both pretty young, you see. But he adjusted pretty well to it. The two were pretty close until we divorced, and Ken had to take a job in another city. Caleb became pretty sad after that.”

“Oh,” I said.

“Yeah. I think that might be the first time I noticed he wasn’t talking much. The entire week, he only gave me one-word answers when I asked anything. I think he was mad at me for driving his only dad away.” I heard her swallow, noting the pain in her voice. “And then, after a few weeks, he was right back to normal. And then, nearly a year later, he started it up again. Whenever he got upset at something, he simply wouldn’t talk to anyone and would pretend like we weren’t there. And then it got worse and worse, until now. Now he doesn’t speak at all.”

“Hmm.” That was what worried me. Usually, when kids go through such a drastic personality change and suddenly become quiet like that, it isn’t for a good reason. I’d never been a particularly talkative kid, but after my father left, it got even worse.

“My father thinks it’s a discipline issue,” Allie said, and her voice sounded even sadder now. “He thinks I spoil Caleb, and that’s the way he gets what he wants out of me, but I don’t think so. I mean, you saw him today. He didn’t leave home because he wanted me to get him an Xbox or something. He looked terrified when he hugged me.”

“Yes,” I agreed. The boy’s eyes didn’t hold any trace of manipulateness

or stubbornness, and I'd met manipulative kids before. What I saw was fear, a terror that most people wouldn't understand, one that was only relieved when his mother wrapped her arms around him and lifted him into her embrace.

"We're seeing a child psychologist together," Allie noted. "She thinks that...she thinks that something possibly traumatized him when he was very young, and that's why he's like this now. But I have no clue what it might be. I swear he was a happy kid, and all this stuff is recent. I watch him most of the time, and when I can't, Athena does, or our neighbor, Mrs. Winchester, does. And neither of them has ever reported anything particularly traumatic happening to him."

"They both live alone?"

Allie nodded against my chest. "My sister is perpetually single and has no interest in dating, and Mrs. Winchester only sees her nephew every once in a while now after her husband died. The nephew is Scott Winchester. He has a job in Abilene. He only comes into town for the holidays and leaves right after."

"Hmm." I made a note to look into this nephew, feeling like something was shifting in my gut. If he'd touched my little boy or hurt him in any way, I was going to end him.

"What days do you go to the psychologist?" I asked.

"Used to be Tuesdays and Thursdays."

"Used to be?"

"Yeah." She sighed heavily. "The psychologist let us go because she felt like there was little improvement with her treatment plan."

"She just gave up?" Anger spiraled through me.

Allie shook her head, her soft hair tickling my skin.

"No," she said. "She just didn't want us to waste our money if the sessions weren't helping Caleb. She did recommend us to a psychologist a few towns over, but...he was way too expensive. I can't afford him on one salary."

"I'll take care of it," I told her.

"It's okay," she said. "I know you can't afford much either. I'm not expecting you to suddenly take over all the expenses."

"I said I'll take care of it," I enunciated, feeling the strain in my voice. Even if I only had two nickels to my name, there was no way I was letting Allie and my son suffer. I would always take care of my family.

But I didn't know how to mention that I was no longer the poor man she thought I was. It wasn't so much that I wanted to keep it a secret, but at this point, I'd kept it in for too long, and it was just awkward. And this wasn't the time to talk about it.

But she did need to know that now that I was back, she would never want for anything else in her life. Everything, even her littlest whim, I would give to her.

"I'll take care of all your needs from now on, you understand? Anything that has to do with you or Caleb, anything you want at all, you let me know, and I'll take care of it. You're mine the same way he's mine. Anything your heart desires, I'll give it to you, even if I have to move heaven and earth for it."

I couldn't offer her much before. But now that I had the means, I was going to spoil the hell out of her. And my son was going to receive the best of everything, including the best doctor money could buy.

Allie was quiet for a few seconds. "I thought if I asked, you'd call me a gold digger again."

Heavy regret sank into my gut. "I'm sorry I said that." She looked up at me then—as though surprised by my apology. "I didn't mean it. I was an idiot. I came back and didn't know how to face the fact that I had left you behind. So I took all my stupid insecurities out on you. I don't know if you noticed, but I'm not very good with people."

"That's an understatement," she muttered, and I laughed.

"I'm sorry," I said, and this time, I felt her amusement as she pushed up and stared at me incredulously.

"Did you just apologize to me again? Twice in one night?"

"Yeah," I said with a chuckle. "I'm told that's what you're supposed to do when you're wrong."

She shook her head. "Sure, I just never thought I'd see the day."

"Ha ha." Unable to bear to be apart from her any longer, I put my hand gently on the back of her neck and pulled her down for another scalding kiss.

I COULD SENSE Caleb's awkwardness the next morning at breakfast. I had insisted on staying despite Allie's protests because I wanted to make him get

used to me as quickly as possible. I was his father. And he wasn't going any longer without one, even if he didn't know it yet.

Besides, after having Sean look into the new doctor thoroughly last night, which he cursed me for, he managed to get us an appointment with him today. And I wasn't going to miss it for the world.

Ever since Caleb sat down to eat, I saw his eyes continuously travel to me.

I didn't acknowledge it.

I didn't attempt to talk to him either. I just sat there eating my food and existing as non-threateningly as possible. I didn't want to push him to talk and simply observed as he interacted with his mother, seemingly tuned to her even when she was at the stove cooking.

Once, I caught his gaze when he glanced at me.

I smiled.

And his eyes skittered away.

We had a long way to go.



NINETEEN

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## ALLIE

A tapping sound echoed throughout the pristine waiting room.

I glanced around, trying to take my mind off the nerves currently rattling through me.

The place was very upscale, more than anything I'd ever seen in little old Summit. They had ceiling-to-wall windows and a koi pond in the long hallway that was in the middle of two gardens. A cartoon played on the HD TV that hung on the wall.

The receptionist kept flashing us friendly smiles as if she could sense that we were a little anxious. She'd also offered to get us a glass of whatever wine we wanted, but I turned it down, feeling like my throat was tight.

But now I wished I had accepted the drink—if only to soothe my nerves a little.

It was the d-day, the day we'd come to see the specialist near Bozeman. The man seemed friendly enough, and he welcomed us at the entrance with a loud hello. He seemed like an average jolly old grandpa, perhaps a little eccentric with his suspenders and colorful polka-dotted socks, but nothing too bad.

The only problem was that he'd refused to take a history from me, insisting on seeing Caleb alone for the first time.

I nearly balked, but Marcus insisted that the man was a professional. His confidence was what made me reluctantly give in.

But even now, I couldn't relax.

I needed to be prepared for anything he would tell me about my little boy. I had to steel myself against the fact that I might not like the news he brought.

What on earth was taking them so long?

I glanced at the clock again as the tapping sound intensified. Okay, so maybe they'd only been in there for thirty minutes, but it felt like at least three hours.

Was Caleb okay?

A large, heavy hand slid on top of my knee, instantly halting the tapping. I glanced at Marcus, who was beside me.

"Calm," he said, and the one word alone was like a wave of serenity washing over me.

I sighed, leaning into his strength.

Unlike me, who was an emotional wreck, Marcus had been the pillar of serenity the entire time. He'd driven us in his truck, assuring me that he would take care of all the expenses and that if we didn't like this doctor, he had a few more on his list that we could call.

I was confused about the fact that he didn't even seem fussed about the money. The doctor charged easily about eight hundred a visit.

I wanted to ask where he got the list or the money from, but I didn't. I didn't want to insult him again by making assumptions. Besides, I was too damned grateful for the help, thankful that I didn't have to do it alone.

Thankful that he was here to be my rock when my entire world felt like it was falling apart.

He glanced down at my hands, and I followed his gaze, noticing that I was squeezing the life out of them. He frowned disapprovingly, and I managed to unlace my fingers.

"Good girl," he growled, and I would be lying if I said it didn't send a tiny thrill throughout my body.

This wasn't the time to be thinking about that, though.

Although that was a solid way to distract me, so I let the memory flow back.

After Marcus and I slept together, a part of me was scared that he would change his mind in the morning. Like the last time. I thought maybe that sense of whatever-it-was would kick in, and he would tell me that we couldn't do this again, that he wasn't right for me. He would give me all the other excuses he gave me last time for why we couldn't be together. I didn't know what I would have done then. Probably accepted it while having my heart broken.

Yes, I'd pretty much fallen in love with him again. But I never claimed to

be smart.

And had he rejected me, I would have been hurt, but I would have accepted it.

But he hadn't denied us.

Instead, he stuck around the next morning. He announced that he got us into an appointment with the psychiatrist, and I had no clue how he did it on such short notice because, according to what I knew, the guy was pretty much booked out for weeks. But he assured me he'd gotten it done and that we were going to see him together.

We. As a family.

It was a strange feeling. Even with Ken, I hadn't felt this supported, and I wasn't sure exactly why or how this felt different.

All I knew was that it did.

Although I still wasn't sure exactly where this was going or even who he was now. I didn't know what had changed him.

Because when I'd tried to ask him about what he did when he was in New York, he'd only said, "Work." He didn't talk much about his time there, but I got a feeling that it hadn't been pleasant. Like it jaded him.

And, of course, there was that phone call during our date that I couldn't forget.

I took a deep sigh, letting it out and clearing all the worrisome thoughts bouncing around my skull. I was going to make myself sick worrying about all this now.

In any case, we were here now.

There was nothing else to do but observe him and make sure he was still a good man.

I didn't *think* he was dangerous, but I couldn't be led around by just my feelings.

I would never be one of those mothers who exposed their children to dangerous men out of love. And while I mostly believed in Marcus, I had to make sure of it. Because Caleb couldn't afford more trauma on his plate.

I sighed and turned my head, startled to find that Marcus was still watching me.

While I tried not to show it, I got the sense that he knew all the thoughts running through my head. At the very least, he could sense my caution, but his expression didn't get defensive or even annoyed.

He didn't seem offended by the fact that I was still cautious around him.

*Maybe he understood*, I thought, even though I felt guilty because I was treating him with the same damn suspicion that everyone in this town treated him with.

I was just as bad as the rest of them.

I rubbed my temple, feeling an ache starting.

“Hey,” Marcus said softly, drawing my eyes back to him. “Don’t worry. It will be fine. Everything will be fine.”

I doubted it, but his soft tone made me feel like, at that moment, it just might be.

Just then, the door clicked open, and we both rose to our feet in unison as the doctor walked out with a somber-looking Caleb. My son walked straight to me and immediately buried his head in my thigh, wrapping his hand around my waist. Then, he turned to look at the doctor reproachfully.

The elderly man smiled at both of us.

“The both of you have quite the stubborn young man on your hands,” he said, looking like he was enjoying himself.

My stomach sank. “Does that mean you can’t tell us what’s wrong with him?”

“That’s not what it means at all,” he said.

“So you can tell us what it does mean?” Marcus asked.

The doctor shook his head. “Not at the moment, unfortunately.”

Annoyance sparked through me at the riddles. “Okay, so what *can* you tell us?”

His gaze went to Caleb’s again, and his smile widened. “I have a feeling we’re going to be very good friends.”

Caleb continued glaring at him, then tore his eyes away. He began tugging on my skirt, which was the standard sign that he wanted to go home.

“Your son has been through something,” Dr. Hammond said, and the confirmation sent a twist of pain through me. *God, I just might have a breakdown when I find out what it is.* “That bit is for sure. He’s also terrified about talking about whatever it is that he’s been through, but eventually, when he feels safe enough with us, he’ll let us know. In his own time. Isn’t that right, Caleb?”

And then Caleb did a weird thing. He shook his head at the doctor and tugged on my skirt even more.

I looked between the two of them, more confused than I’d ever been in my entire life.

“What is it?” Marcus said, his voice a low growl, glaring at Dr. Hammond.

The doctor glanced at Marcus. “All in due time.”

Caleb tugged on my skirt more urgently.

“Are you sure you’re not hurting him by triggering him so much?” I said, scared at seeing my son this distressed.

“A little,” he said, “but it’s necessary to get to the bottom of his problems.” Then he smiled at Caleb. “Your son is a very smart boy. We’ll see each other next week, won’t we, Caleb?”

Caleb shook his head again firmly.

I glanced between the two of them. The doctor gave me a friendly smile and waved.

“See you next week,” he said.

I wasn’t sure what to say next. Caleb had such an adverse reaction to this visit, but it seemed like Dr. Hammond knew what he was doing. I glanced at Marcus, and he was frowning at the doctor, looking just as conflicted as I was.

*Were we doing the right thing?*

But the alternative was leaving my son as he was, and that was simply unacceptable.

“Thanks for seeing us on such short notice,” I told the doctor, who smiled at me.

“Well, your husband didn’t exactly give me much of a choice,” he responded wryly.

I glanced at Marcus, who shrugged. I didn’t ask him exactly how he got Dr. Hammond to see us when his secretary initially told me that he was booked out for weeks.

Not that he would have volunteered the information anyway.

As we set off after making the next appointment, I finally broached it.

“Just what did you do so Dr. Hammond would see Caleb today?”

He shrugged. “Made him an offer he couldn’t refuse.”

“Money?” I asked.

“Something like that.” Before we got in the car, he turned and eyed Caleb, who was still clutching my hand as we walked. Marcus suddenly stopped and got to his knees in front of him. Caleb immediately jerked, turning to bury his face in my lap again.

“Look at me, son,” he said.

Caleb didn't, at first. He simply held his stance, but Marcus was patient, staying there for several seconds until my son finally, slowly, inched over to peek at him from the corner of his eye.

"Nothing will ever touch you again, you hear me?" Marcus uttered, a quiet menace in his tone. "I don't care who I have to take down or who I hurt. If anyone ever comes after you or your mom, I will destroy them. Do you understand?"

I jerked a little at the harshness of his tone and wanted to tell him not to talk to Caleb like that, but then something happened.

My son blinked once, then twice, and some of the fear slipped from his expression.

Then he nodded.

THE NEXT FEW days were a little rough, but then they got surprisingly better.

It seemed that in revenge for the doctor's visit, Caleb refused to talk much at all and started resolving to ignore us.

Marcus insisted on coming over every day and would have breakfast with us. I wanted to tell him to stop and give Caleb some space, but I noticed that Caleb didn't actively avoid Marcus the way he did with most strangers.

In fact, I once came out of the bathroom and saw them sitting together on the couch. There was a lot of space between them, but the fact that Caleb allowed Marcus to even be that close to him meant something.

It meant he was slowly trusting him.

Neither person was talking to the other, and they both seemed focused on the TV, where a pretty scintillating episode of Blue's Clue was playing.

It struck me how similar they were, how similar they looked. Even the way they sat, leaning a little to one side, and furrowed their eyebrows when they were concentrating hard.

It tugged at my heart.

Marcus saw me watching and winked.

I smiled back.

Maybe he was right. Maybe everything would be okay.

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TWENTY

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## MARCUS

After that day, we quickly fell into a pattern.

It started with me coming over every single day in the morning before I went to work. Allie was surprised to see me on her doorstep the day after the visit with Dr. Hammond.

Her eyes flashed with surprise when she opened the door.

“Wh-what are you doing here?” she asked, looking somewhat startled.

I raised an eyebrow at her. “Breakfast.” I knew she probably thought the fact that I left yesterday evening meant whatever we had was over, but it wasn’t.

And I wasn’t going to consider her ridiculous offer for co-parenting either. She’d texted it to me while I was on the way home.

*“Hey, I think it’s best if we keep our relationship strictly friendly and co-parent amicably. We can discuss the timetable when you get back.”*

I smirked when I saw it. Yeah right.

There was no way I was going to agree to see my son only on designated days, and neither was I going to let her go either.

From the day we slept together, she was mine, and both she and Caleb became my responsibility.

But I knew telling her would be difficult.

So, instead of replying to the text, I decided to just show her instead.

Now I pushed past her, walking into the kitchen and feeling her eyes on my back. Caleb was at the dining table, eating his pancakes. He glanced up when I came in, and his gaze skittered away.

“Hello, son,” I greeted, undisturbed by his silence. The boy was mercurial. Yesterday, he’d held my eyes for the first time. And I felt like we

were gaining ground on equal footing then.

But today, he was back to not looking at me again. After a few seconds, it was like I wasn't even there. Like I had ceased to exist to him.

"He's like that," Allie murmured, coming up behind me. I turned to catch her watching Caleb with a worried look on her face. "He does well for the first few days or even weeks, and then bam. With no explanation and no warning, it's like he regresses to how he was before. It's a constant uphill climb."

"Mm," I said, watching the food on his plate as he stared at his fork stubbornly.

"I still don't think you should come over every day," Allie said, concern on her face. "I told you we can work out some kind of timetable to start with."

I cocked an eyebrow at him. "I'm his father." I didn't say it loud enough for Caleb to hear, but Allie glanced at him anxiously anyway.

"I know that," she said exasperatedly. "But we need to ease him into this. We can't just uproot everything he knows so suddenly. We should take it gradually, one day at a time, and then slowly, you start showing up more and more. He'd get it then."

"Mmm." I considered the thought. I knew she had a point, but I didn't like it. The possessive beast inside me wanted to lay claim to my son immediately and didn't like the idea of him thinking someone else was his father, no matter how nice the damn bastard was.

"Just for now," Allie said, her eyes pleading. "I promise."

I nodded, but although I conceded, I secretly made a note to ask the doctor what he thought. We were easing the boy into a lot, but sometimes, a good shock was needed.

I went over to the table anyway, and Caleb cautiously watched me approach, our previous easy camaraderie too tentative to be permanent. But I only sat and gestured to his plate.

"You're not eating much, are you?" I said.

He didn't answer, blinking at a spot below my collarbones.

"Is it because of the eggs?"

He glanced at the plate and then back at me without answering. There was surprise in his features.

"Yeah, growing up, I wasn't much of a fan of eggs either," I said. "Hated the damn things. But they're good protein. You know what protein is, don't

you? It will help you grow up strong, so you're not so scrawny."

Caleb frowned, obviously displeased at the description, and I nearly smiled. At least the boy wasn't timid. Looked like he had a lot of heat inside him that he needed to get out.

I decided to prod him a little. "Hey, don't get mad at me. I don't make the rules. But I do know if you don't eat those, you're not gonna grow much. It's a scientific fact. Then you're never gonna get any stronger."

The change in his expression was comical. His eyes widened, and then he peered at me closely as if trying to decide whether or not he believed me.

He must have decided I was telling the truth because he speared some of the food on his fork and then stuck it in his mouth, chewing determinedly while glaring at me.

I nearly laughed. *Got ya.*

I looked up at Allie, and her expression was funny. She didn't seem to know whether to laugh or frown at the exchange, but she ended up with a resigned sigh, taking a seat right next to us.

And that was how we began eating breakfast together every morning.

Allie was reluctant at first, but after speaking with Dr. Hammond, who assured us that my slow but determined integration into the family might do good for the boy, she relaxed. I also began to show up more after work too.

It happened like this: I was there during breakfast, then Allie and I would go to work at the resort, and I would drive her home at the end of the night and spend some time with Caleb before I left.

I didn't sleep over after that first night, and we hadn't made love since then, either.

But it didn't mean I left her alone.

I no longer tried to hide my heated looks, watching her as she moved around. She was always aware of me, and sometimes her eyes would flare with desire, but she would always scurry away like she wasn't quite ready for it yet.

I knew she wasn't sure about me, that she still doubted everything I said. And to be honest, I didn't blame her. She had to take care of her son. She couldn't just let anyone into her life easily. And even though the fact that she didn't fully trust me stung a little, at the same time, I was proud of her for doing so.

I was willing to give her time to see who I was, to accept me.

Of course, all that changed about one week later.

I decided to hold off on destroying the resort as I wanted to run models and see if I could salvage it first. I told myself it was a business decision, but it was more for the way Allie lit up when I told her.

She immediately jumped into my arms, throwing her arms around my neck.

“Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you, Marcus!” she exclaimed, her voice so light that it brightened up the room. I loved it. “You won’t regret it, I swear!”

I wouldn’t, I knew. Even if I lost a million dollars on the place, I would do anything to see her as happy as she was.

Allie insisted on playing a role in planning the modeling, and I let her. Even though she knew very little about construction, she seemed to have a knack for design. So, more often than not, I sought her out in her little corner office to see what she thought about the changes I wanted to make.

It was while I was doing so that I walked in on her as she was laughing at something.

I stopped, drawn by the light and beautiful sound, and pushed the door open slowly.

She was standing by the windows, her expression far off, and she gave one of those laughs again.

“No, Ken, don’t worry about it,” she said, and my good humor died. “I bet it’s difficult to get cell service over there.”

*Ken. Her ex-husband.* Dark, heady jealousy overwhelmed me.

I knew it was irrational to feel how I felt, but that was beside the point.

He was the one she was smiling for, the one making her laugh. The thought burning in my gut made me furious.

“Yeah, and I really am sorry,” she continued, clearly oblivious to the menace she caused. “It was unprecedented.”

She went silent again, and the man was probably saying something. She turned in the process, and her eyes met mine.

The smile slipped from her lips.

I had no idea what expression was on my face, but it couldn’t be good.

To her credit, there was no fear in her expression. I saw her throat move as she swallowed, and her eyelids fluttered.

“Um, Ken, I’ll have to call you back.” She quickly hung up, her eyes tracking me as I moved. I was stalking her, and she watched me carefully like one would eye a dangerous animal.

“I was talking to Ken,” she said.

“I heard.” My voice was low and deceptively quiet, hiding the depth of the emotions coursing through me.

“I was just telling him that...that...” she stammered as I was right in her face, one finger moving to trail down her cheek.

“That what?” I asked, leaning down to drop a kiss on her head. Meanwhile, my other hand was under her skirt, running up her thighs and feeling the goosebumps that broke out over her skin.

“Marcus,” she whispered, and I responded with a hum, playing around with the edge of her panties. Her eyes suddenly went hazy. I held her gaze as I tore her panties off with a snap.

She didn't look away as they fluttered to the ground because my hands were already cupping her heated center.

I ran a single thumb down her slit, and she gasped, her mouth falling open and her hands flying to my shoulder.

“Yes,” I moaned, feeling the heady rush of desire. “You only hold onto me. You only say my name, and you only smile at me. Not to other fucking men.”

“Marcus,” she mewled as I breached her pussy lips with my thumb, strumming the little nub at the top. I felt it the minute it unfurled, her clit pushing out.

Her knees shook, and her eyes rolled back at the pleasure.

Fuck, I loved seeing her like this.

I spun her around, and she gasped as I crowded her back, trapping her against the table. My hands were still between her legs, my dick tucking itself between her ass.

“Only I can make you feel like this.” Even I heard the dark edge of my voice as I leaned in closer, letting her feel just how hard she made me. My other hand went up to her nipples, pinching them as I caressed her pussy.

Allie's back arched, and she went on her tiptoes. Her head flew back to my shoulder, the force of desire causing her entire body to shake.

But I didn't give it to her yet, not in the way she needed it.

I wanted to keep her begging and needy, keep her on the jagged edge of desire for long enough that she would never again doubt that she was mine.

“Whose pussy is this?” I whispered into her ear.

She shook her head at first, probably too lost in it that she didn't know her left from her right.

“Oh God, Marcus,” she gasped when I pinched her clit.

“You haven’t answered my question,” I told her, pinching harder. “Who owns this fucking pussy?”

“You do!” she finally exclaimed.

“You’re damn right.”

I thrust one finger harshly into her, sucking the side of her neck at the same time. I did it hard enough to leave a mark, needing visual proof of my ownership.

It was a depraved thought to have, but it was me. Allie brought out my batshit crazy possessive side, and I found it more and more difficult to pull back from it. I couldn’t hide it even if I tried.

With a scream, she exploded all over my fingers.

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TWENTY-ONE

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# ALLIE

I could hear him swearing from the hallway.

I smirked as I crossed into the room, watching him tug off the tie angrily.

“Issues?” I asked, leaning against the doorway. I smiled at him innocently when his head turned around to regard me darkly.

“No,” he said. “Just feel like I’m wearing a monkey suit.”

“I don’t know about the monkey part.” He was wearing *a* suit, the first time I’d ever seen him in one, and truthfully, the thing looked really good. Great, in fact. I didn’t know much about suits, but the material looked high quality and had a luxurious feel to it. And the fit was exact, as if it was tailor-made to his huge body, the outline molding to it like it was meant for him.

“You look good,” I said, coughing around the last word to bury how nervous he still made me. Even though we’d been doing this little dating dance for the past three weeks, I still got butterflies in my stomach just thinking about him.

And right now, as I admired him, he gave me a sardonic look like he didn’t quite believe me, although there was a slight naughty curve on his lips that had my heart jumping in my chest.

After that day in the office, we came home, and he made love to me pretty much the entire night. And then I finally told him about what Ken and I talked about, which was the fact that I couldn’t invite Ken to my family’s Christmas gathering this year.

“He always came with me when we were married. Even before that, sometimes, though just as friends,” I explained. “But I don’t think it would be fair for him to come this year.”

“Why not?” Marcus asked, and I glanced at him shyly.

“Well, you’re here, and I want you to strengthen your relationship with our son first, make sure he knows you’re now part of his family,” I said. “I don’t want there to be anything to jeopardize that. If Ken comes, then Caleb might use him as a crutch to avoid talking to you, and I don’t want that to happen.”

I felt Marcus’ eyes on me, and I shrugged uncomfortably. “He could always visit another time.”

After my speech, Marcus stared at me for a long time. Then he drew me closer, kissing the breath out of me. We’d made love once more after that, and then, for the second time, he slept over.

And so it went.

Since then, it seemed like we’d pretty much settled into a relationship.

It was strange. We hadn’t put a title on our relationship yet, but neither of us was in a rush to. It was like we already knew what we meant to each other and didn’t need to spell it out to the other person.

And if I were being honest, I could see Caleb warming up to Marcus as well. At first, I wasn’t sure Marcus’ style of addressing my son was the best. He was as direct as always, and I thought it would be too harsh for my little boy. But it seemed Caleb responded well to the treatment.

He wasn’t talking yet, but he was communicating with Marcus using hand gestures and facial expressions. Marcus did the same to him too. Sometimes, the two of them would have a silent argument that only they understood. And one time, I came home to see Marcus working on our leaky sink and Caleb watching him with rapt attention while Marcus explained some pointers to him.

While it warmed my heart, I told him not to do that. I didn’t want Caleb to hurt himself one day, thinking he could fix the sink.

Marcus merely smiled when I told him my concerns.

“He won’t be fixing the sink by himself,” Marcus said. “Trust me. The kid’s not stupid. He just wants to be treated like a little man, that’s all. He wants to feel like he knows, and he wants to be more useful.”

I didn’t understand how Marcus came to that conclusion, but I let it go, trusting that he was right. And he must have been because Caleb continued to grow closer to him.

It seemed like Marcus understood my son more than I did. It should have worried me some, but at the same time, I was very relieved that the two of them were getting along. It lifted one aspect of the burden off my shoulders,

removing a layer of resistance to our relationship.

The next layer would come with meeting my parents.

Which was likely why Marcus was in such a bad mood right now.

Because this family dinner was the first time that I would officially be introducing Marcus as my boyfriend and Caleb's father.

For their part, my parents weren't exactly thrilled about the visit either. And they didn't even know about the big news yet.

Athena and Adam were also coming over, so it was bound to be an experience.

I walked into the room then, smoothly removing Marcus' hands from his tie and looping it around his neck.

"You know, you don't have to do this," I murmured as I helped knot his tie the way my dad taught me. I knew Marcus didn't like my family, and I couldn't say I blamed him. I didn't want him putting himself through torture for my sake. We could wait to share the news.

"Yes, I do," he growled, looking at me like I had lost my mind.

"I know you don't want to," I said.

"That's not exactly true," he said, and I cocked an eyebrow at him. He sighed.

"I'm just nervous," he admitted, and it was the first vulnerability he'd offered to me. It sent a bolt to my heart. This man, this powerful alpha male, was nervous because of little old me.

I put my hand on his cheek, and he leaned slightly into my touch, sending another prick to my heart.

"Your folks hate me," he said.

"They don't hate you," I corrected, and he widened his eyes with a disbelieving stare.

"They just don't know you yet," I insisted. He smirked.

"And they won't like me even if they did," he insisted. "After all, they still think I'm a murderer."

I didn't know how to comfort him, so I simply stood there caressing his cheek.

"We'll figure it out," he said, pulling back. "We have to. You're my family now. They'll have to understand because I don't plan on letting you go. And I don't give a damn what anyone has to say. I just don't want to offend you or cause you any hurt in the long run."

"You won't," I assured him. "You can't."

Christmas was in full swing in my parents' front yard. The snowmen were out, and so was the Christmas tree that was smack dab in my parents' living room. As I walked in, I could see it, along with the row of plastic presents sitting under it.

"We're here!" I called out, walking into the spacious living room. I tossed my coat on the couch outside the kitchen, and Marcus followed, holding Caleb silently.

"Hi, sweetie." My mother was the first to respond, emerging from the kitchen with a warm smile. "I'm cooking up some more eggnog. Your father managed to find the one I hid."

"Of course he did," I commented as she came forward to hug me. Her eyes then traveled to Marcus, and she maintained her friendly smile. "Hi, Marcus. Welcome to our home."

"It's lovely, Mrs. Beston," he said politely, and she waved it off.

"Oh, please," she said airily. "Call me Gloria."

She patted him on the shoulder, and I saw him relax a little.

But he stiffened again once my father's voice called out, "Is that *boy* here?"

He spat the word *boy* out with utmost disgust.

"Yes, Dad," I yelled back, annoyed that he'd just ruined the good mood. "He's here, and he has a name."

My father's heavy steps echoed around the house as he descended the stairs. When he got to the bottom, his eyes went straight to Marcus, his face fixed in a glare.

I sighed. This was exactly what I was afraid of.

It seemed that my dad was determined to be antagonistic about this, no matter what. I was so tired of dealing with this.

So tired in general.

I'd been feeling a little weary the whole week, but I never mentioned it because I knew Marcus wouldn't let me help with the renovations if I complained. He'd announced a few days ago that he was going to attempt to renovate the resort instead of tearing it down, and I was so happy that I could burst.

I told my entire family, and I thought it would endear him to them a little. But I was wrong.

My father looked just as hostile as ever.

"So." He crossed his arms over his chest. "You got some real balls

coming over here after everything you've done."

"Dad, stop," I said, rubbing my forehead tiredly.

"No, he's right," Adam said as he emerged with Athena from another room. He looked like the spitting image of my dad. "You may be too young to understand what's going on, but we can tell this guy is no good for you."

"I'm not that young," I argued defensively, glaring at Adam. "And I know exactly what I'm doing, thank you very much."

But Adam wasn't looking at me. He kept his gaze on Marcus. "What did you tell her, huh? What do you want from my sister that you can't find with a woman your own age?"

"Adam—"

"Allie, be quiet," my father said. "Let the men handle this."

"That's a sexist thing to say, Dad," Athena pointed out, but my father ignored her, walking toward Marcus.

Marcus, who said nothing up until this point, simply placed Caleb down. The boy went behind Marcus' leg, holding onto it. I knew Marcus was holding himself back for Caleb's sake and mine, and I hated that my family was doing this to him.

I officially have had enough.

"Okay, that's enough." I walked over to grab my coat from the couch. "If you guys are going to keep being like this, we're obviously not welcome here. And as such, we're going to leave. Come on, Marcus."

But as I spun around to do just that, the world swam in my vision, and suddenly, it all went dark.

TWENTY-TWO

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## MARCUS

The minute I saw her body drop to the ground, my heart stopped.

I felt my body move at hyper-speed, but it still didn't feel fast enough.

I was terrified I wouldn't get to her in time.

But I did, reaching out my hands and grabbing her against my body at the last minute before she hit the ground.

All of a sudden, the room exploded with sound.

"Allie!" I heard Athena scream.

"Sweetie!" Her father sounded similarly hysterical, and suddenly, he was at my elbow. "What did you do to her?!"

I felt his hand grasp the back of my shirt, and I growled, shrugging him off.

"Let go of Allie," her brother spat, but I ignored him.

I ignored all of them, sweeping her up into my arms and charging right for the door. My heart thundered in my chest, fighting the sheer terror that was threatening to overwhelm me. I could see her chest moving up and down in slow breaths, and that was the only thing keeping panic at bay.

"What's wrong with her?" I heard them shouting as they ran after me. I reached my car but didn't want to move Allie to open the door.

"Where are you taking her, you bastard?" That one was from her brother, and I turned to glare at him. He backed away a few steps.

Whatever they saw in my face rendered them all silent.

"He's taking her to the hospital," Athena said, a voice of reason cutting through all the hysteria. She immediately opened the back door, so I could place Allie's body down on the seat, then slipped in beside her.

"I'll go with you," she said resolutely, and I nodded, not in the mood to

argue. I wasn't even sure I could form coherent words at this point. Besides, someone needed to hold Allie while I drove in case I hit a speed bump or something. Lord knew I was about to tear out of here like there was hell on my ass. I had to get her to the hospital as quickly as possible.

As I walked around to get into the driver's seat, I paused, catching sight of Caleb. He was standing there by Adam's legs, looking worried.

I squatted down and gestured to him. "Come here."

He didn't hesitate, and I noted the family's shock when the little boy ran into my arms. I picked him up and placed him in the back seat with Athena, making sure he buckled up.

Then I got in the driver's seat.

Adam moved first, getting into my passenger seat. "I'm coming with you too."

I didn't want the man's company, but neither could I kick him out either. Besides, it wasn't important whether he was here or not. All that was important was saving Allie.

"We'll follow you." I saw her dad and mother running back inside to grab their jacket before hustling toward the other car in the driveway. But I didn't wait around for them, pulling out of the parking lot after making sure the coast was clear.

We got to the hospital in record time, probably breaking a few laws to do it.

I carried Allie in, not able to stand the thought of any other person taking her from me at this point. I needed to see her, needed to feel that she was still breathing for me to keep my sanity. Already, all manner of torturous thoughts plagued me, but I held them back stubbornly.

Allie would be fine. I refused to even entertain any thought that said otherwise because then I just might tear the entire place apart.

She was fine this morning. She'd been fine the whole week, although more tired than usual. There was nothing wrong with her. Probably, she just worked too much and passed out from exhaustion.

Which was exactly why I wanted her to stop working entirely in the first place.

The damn woman would be the death of me. She insisted on working even though I told her that she didn't need to, even though I told her that I would take care of her and Caleb's expenses.

She said she was heavily interested in all the renovations we were doing



and too invested in the outcome not to show up every day.

*And now look where we are.*

“A doctor!” I barked out the minute I threw open the swinging doors with my foot. All the nurses looked at me. “Now!”

They galvanized into action, one of them grabbing a gurney and the other coming to attempt to take her from my arms. I refused them, laying her down on the gurney myself as they grabbed some equipment to begin reading her vitals. When they started transporting her into the room, I walked with them.

One nurse turned around to put her hands against my chest.

“You can’t go in there, sir,” she said, but I ignored her, ready to push past into the room anyway.

My Allie. My Allie was in there.

I didn’t even notice the growl coming out of my throat, but fear instantly jumped into the woman’s eyes. “If you don’t comply, we’re going to have to call security on you.”

*Try it and see.* They didn’t have enough security in this building to keep me from my woman.

“Stop.” It was Adam’s hands on my shoulders next. I whirled around to face him, ready to take my anger out on him but found that there was no animosity on his face. Only concern. “Just let them do their job.”

“He’s right,” Athena said, and there was even more sympathy in her expression. “You arguing with them is not going to help Allie right now.”

She was carrying Caleb, who still looked scared, and that was what knocked the voice of reason back into me.

Damn it, she was right. All of them were right. As much as I hated the idea, I had to let the doctors do their job and trust that they knew what the heck they were doing.

I nodded resignedly, and the nurse looked relieved as she dashed into the room, closing the curtains that separated us. I immediately began to pace, feeling the tension line my muscles.

I want to hit something.

Jesus, this was a nightmare. This was the worst form of torture, standing here and not knowing what was going on with her.

*Why did she pass out?*

I wracked my brain, trying to think of a good reason for anything that could be wrong.

Stress? Was she sick?

God no.

I flung the thought out of my mind, but the residual panic still ran through me. No. She couldn't be sick. I wouldn't allow it. I would make sure that whatever was wrong with her was figured out and treated because there was no way I would allow her to be sick on my watch.

"She'll be fine," Athena said, and I turned to see that there was also fear in her eyes, but she was trying to keep it back. She was remarkably calm amidst all this. "Allie has never known when to stop, and this is probably nothing. She's probably just stressed."

It was the same thing I was thinking, but for some reason, hearing her say it made me even less convinced. Like we were both lying to ourselves to avoid facing the unbearable truth.

I nodded, appreciating the words of comfort even though I didn't necessarily believe them.

I couldn't speak past the knot in my throat, so I turned and went back to pacing. Adam came and put his hand on my shoulder, and when I glanced at him, his eyes held cautious and unfamiliar compassion in them. And something else. A truce.

Ha.

It seemed he was finally ready to put aside his hatred of me for once. It would have been funny if it wasn't fucking annoying.

I nodded anyway to show there were no hard feelings. Everything was all in the past and seemed so unimportant now in the grand scheme of things. It wasn't like I could blame him for trying to protect his sister anyway.

It took nearly an hour before we heard anything. But it felt like an eternity. When Allie's parents arrived, her father immediately started throwing out questions before her mother scolded him and asked him to calm down. Good thing, too, because he was only adding to the growing tension tightening my gut.

The alternative, however, wasn't much better because once the old man was quiet, we waited there in uneasy silence. At one point, Caleb got down from Athena's lap and walked over to me. Without thinking about it, I swept the boy up into my arms and held him, praying like hell that his mother would be okay.

I didn't know what I would do without her.

*Do you hear that, Allie? If anything happens to you, I don't know what I would do with myself.*

*You're my entire world.*

Finally, after waiting for eons, the doctor emerged from the room and walked toward us. "Allie Beston's family?"

He jumped a little when we all stood in tandem to regard him.

"Erm..." He looked a little taken aback. "We've run some tests on her and are still waiting for most of the results, but she's awake now."

God. My entire body trembled with relief, and I nearly felt a little light-headed from it all. "Thank God."

"Can we go see her?" her mother asked anxiously.

"Yes, but not too many at once," he said.

I already walked forward determinedly, and Allie's father and Athena followed. Adam and Allie's mother were both close behind. The doctor looked doubtful at the number but then ultimately sighed, turning around and walking back into the room.

Allie was sitting up and chatting with the nurse when we entered. A beautiful smile highlighted her face, but it faded a little when she caught sight of us.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

As if she wasn't currently sitting in a hospital bed.

As if she hadn't passed out an hour ago.

But the concern on her features wasn't for herself. It was for us.

I felt a tremble go through my body, and I walked toward her, yanking her against my chest.

"Hey, not too hard," her father called out from behind me, and I softened my hold. But I needed to feel that she was alive because I wasn't sure I really believed it yet.

"Never do that to me again," I whispered in her ears, and she patted my back comfortingly.

Next came Caleb, who crawled onto his mother's lap and laid his head against her chest. She curled her hands comfortingly against him. It was as if Allie was assuring all of us that she was fine while she held my hand and stared at us. Just then, the doctor returned, holding a piece of paper.

The room immediately went deathly quiet.

He looked around. "Well, you all don't have to look so morose."

"Is it bad?" Allie asked, and I finally saw the anxiety creep into her face.

"It depends on how you look at it," he said. "Do you want to hear the result with everyone in here?"

She nodded. "They're my family."

He smiled. "Well, you can think of adding one more to that number. You're pregnant."

We all stood there in shock.

And then her father got up and slapped me on the back with a laugh. "Well, I'll be damned!"

As her mother whooped and clapped her hand in delight and everyone began offering me congratulations, I only had one dizzying thought.

I was going to be a father again.

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TWENTY-THREE

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# ALLIE

I didn't know if Marcus heard "deathly ill" when the doctor announced I was pregnant, but if he did, that would explain his behavior for the rest of the week.

The man was treating me like fine china. Like I would crack if my legs even touched the ground.

Literally.

On the day of the hospital visit, after he'd accepted all the congratulations from my family and had the doctor make sure everything was okay, he carried me out of the hospital, cinderella-style. I protested, a little embarrassed because we drew everyone's attention, but Marcus ignored all my protests. I finally relented, looking at Caleb being carried by Athena, who walked beside us.

I reached out to her to hold my little boy's hand, at least. I wasn't sure if he knew what was going on, and I wanted to make sure he was okay with everything.

It was still sinking in for me.

I guessed it made sense, although it was a little humiliating that the two times in my life I'd had unprotected sex, I became pregnant. It didn't say good things about my sexual education and sense of responsibility. Of course, it could simply be that Marcus had the effect of shutting down my thinking capabilities altogether. Both times, everything had happened way too fast for me to even consider condoms. I'd taken the morning-after pill, but then I must have been ovulating already because it hadn't helped.

*Oh well, I thought. There was nothing I could do about it now.*

To my surprise, I wasn't at all sad or mad about the fact that I was

pregnant with another child. I wasn't even anxious about it like I was when I found out I was pregnant with Caleb. I knew, whatever happened, we would be okay because I would make sure we were okay.

And now, I had Marcus on my side too.

As we stopped at the car, Marcus gently placed me down on the seat, carefully buckling me in.

Then, Athena placed Caleb on my lap, and he immediately tucked himself against my chest. My father came around to the side, holding out his hand to me.

"Hi, sweetie," he said, and there were tears in his eyes as he spoke.

"Hi, Daddy." I took his hand, feeling overwhelmed with emotion. My dad shook his head, and I knew he was feeling it too.

My dad got emotional when I was pregnant with Caleb. He'd doted on me then, too, always coming to visit and using the excuse that my mother wanted to check on me. Sometimes, he would call me at odd hours in the night just to reminisce about my childhood and remind me that I would always be his little girl and that he would love whatever came out of me regardless.

I always suspected he knew Caleb wasn't really Ken's son, but he hadn't given me the impression that he cared anyway. All he'd said was that he was very proud of me no matter what, and I loved him even more for that.

My mother was standing behind him, beaming as well. I smiled back at her while holding Marcus' hand with one hand and my father's with another. Caleb was on my lap, and the four of us shared a moment that was precious and tangible.

Adam broke it by clearing his throat and saying, "Uh, guys, we're kind of holding up the line here."

And then we all looked to the side to see a woman looking very annoyed because we blocked her from pulling out.

"Sorry, Mrs. Bennington!" I called out as we cleared out of her path, and she zoomed away.

"Bet she's going to bring that up in church," Adam mused, but he looked more amused by the prospect than anything.

"The sermon will be on being more considerate of others," I quipped, and we smiled at each other.

"Take care of her," Adam told Marcus, and Marcus gave him a get-real look. Adam smirked in response.

I didn't know what passed between them, but I think my brother and Marcus had come to a sort of understanding.

It seemed he'd come to an understanding with my entire family as well because they were smiling at him, too, congratulating him. There was none of the animosity or tension that was there in my parents' dining room. Just awkward acceptance and happiness.

Something had changed within the last few hours.

I glanced at Athena in question, and she only winked at me, not divulging. I supposed I could ask her later. Before Marcus got in the car, he carried Caleb from my lap to the back seat and then got into the driver's seat. After which, we were on our way with a final round of waving from my family.

The whole drive home was quiet. I guessed we were both lost in our thoughts.

It was suddenly sinking in that I was pregnant. There was no doubt I was keeping it, and excitement started to bubble in my gut.

I was having another baby. With Marcus.

I didn't know yet if it was a girl or a boy.

I put my hand on my stomach. I couldn't feel anything yet, but I knew I loved my child already, whoever the little guy or girl was.

But then the main problem came. How would I take care of him?

I currently didn't have a stable job, and my savings were quickly running out. Marcus said he would help with Caleb, but we never bargained for having an extra child this early. I didn't know if his salary could cover it, and I wouldn't blame him if he were feeling nervous about the whole prospect.

I felt his hand slip onto my lap, squeezing my thigh as I continued to think.

I glanced at him, and while his eyes were focused on the road, I got the impression that he was completely tuned to me, almost like he could read my thoughts.

"Don't worry," he said reassuringly. "I'll take care of you."

There was a determination in his tone, and I instantly believed him. I released the breath I was holding, feeling my tension go with it. I believed him. It meant that everything would be okay.

As the days rolled by, we started getting more and more into the Christmas spirit. It seemed, with the news of my pregnancy, there was a new lightness in the house that wasn't there before—an understanding between



the three of us.

Caleb felt it too. He started wanting to do more things with us, and whenever he saw us sitting somewhere, he would come and either sit next to Marcus or me.

When I decided it was time to start decorating the place, Marcus agreed to help out.

That was how we ended up under the Christmas tree my father brought over, working hand-in-hand to create the decorations. I was fashioning the cutouts as well while telling him stories of doing this with my family, and he'd chuckle and throw in some comments.

Caleb came down when we were both discussing, and he stood there, picking at his trousers.

"You wanna help, baby?" I asked, and he nodded, so I handed him some stickers for the cards under the tree.

He then proceeded to stick it on determinedly as if everything relied on it being there. We soon lapsed into a comfortable silence with Marcus hanging it up, me cutting it out, and Caleb sticking it on.

"What were some of your childhood Christmas traditions?" I asked Marcus.

He didn't look up from what he was doing when he answered.

"Didn't really do much," he said offhandedly.

My eyes widened. "For real?" My family was really big on Christmas, and it always surprised me whenever I met someone who didn't really celebrate the holiday.

"Are you Jewish?" I asked.

A smile tugged on his lips. "No. My mom was just never into holidays or celebrations of any kind."

"What about your dad?" I asked tentatively. Maybe it was insensitive of me to ask, but I wanted to know. I didn't want there to be any unspoken topics in our relationship. I noticed he never spoke much about the man, even back when we were friends.

His expression darkened slightly. "My old man was barely around even before he took off with stolen money. To be honest, I don't really remember him much."

"Oh." My heart ached for Marcus and everything he'd been through. "Well then, we're going to create our own Christmas traditions. Starting from today."

“Presents,” Caleb said in a voice that was so quiet, I thought I was hearing things at first. Only seeing my own shock reflected on Marcus’ face told me that I didn’t hear things.

Caleb just spoke. On his own. Unbidden.

“We should get presents,” Caleb said again. “For Dad.”

I saw Marcus’ expression shift with so much emotion that it was tangible. We hadn’t yet had the conversation with Caleb about who Marcus really was, but my little boy was apparently wiser than I thought. It seemed he got it anyway. *He got it.*

I was so moved, too, but Marcus shook his head, obviously telling me not to make a big deal out of it.

He was right. If I made a big deal, Caleb might freak out. Better to just go with it.

“Alright,” I said with a nod. “Let’s go get presents.”

We went to the largest mall in town first, but it seemed they were out of just about everything a little boy like Caleb would be interested in. So we decided to head to the toy store in the next town over to see what we could find.

We managed to find some fish toys and cars that Caleb was excited about. He also bought his dad some cars that they could both play with.

It was a happy day.

That was until we came out and saw the words scrawled across Marcus’ truck.

*Get out, murderer. Or else.*

TWENTY-FOUR

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# MARCUS

The words were spray-painted across the car in nasty black ink.

The jagged lines told me that whoever did it did not have steady hands. Either he was not a professional spray painter, or the emotion made his hands shake.

The person would have to have been here for some time to do all those letters. They either knew how long we would be in the store, or they didn't care about getting caught. Someone also could have seen him, but as I looked around the deserted parking lot, I realized there were not that many people in the store. And I hadn't taken note of the people who were around when I arrived either.

Damn.

I heard Allie gasp behind me and finally felt a delayed surge of anger. I had no emotion toward the words themselves, as being called a murderer didn't phase me anymore.

What made me mad was the fact that Allie was here to witness it.

I turned around and saw the horrified look on her face as she grabbed Caleb and pulled him to her body, hiding his face. Good. I didn't want him to see it either, even though he probably already had.

Fuck. My anger built into full-blown fury.

I hated the fact that my new family was witnessing this, that whoever it was had involved them in this bullshit.

I walked to the car, trailing my hands over the inked words. They didn't look like they'll wash off. Either I would have to do the 45-minute drive back home with that scrawled over the car, or I would need an alternate method of getting home.

I sighed, whipping out my phone and dialing Sean immediately.

“Yello,” my PA answered cheerily. The background rumbling and distant intercom announcement made it clear that he was on the subway. I paid the man nearly half a million dollars for his work, yet he still insisted on riding the subway everywhere.

“I need you to get a car to me right now,” I said.

“Buy or rent?” I could hear the excitement in his voice. Picking out cars was one of his favorite past times.

Which was weird because he hated driving.

“I don’t care. It just needs to get to me in the next five minutes.”

“Hmm, you know you can just call a car service there, right, in the town you’re currently in.”

“I don’t know who I can trust,” I told him, and there was a beat of silence. I knew he understood without me having to spell it out for him. Even though we’d never explicitly discussed it, he knew a little bit about my story.

“Roger,” he said. “I have a friend who owns a car company pretty close to you. I’ll give him a call.”

“I need to get my car towed too. And have someone look into the prints on the car. Someone spray painted it.”

Sean whistled. “Sure thing, boss.”

I hung up and turned to look at Allie.

“Who was that?” she asked.

“Sean.”

“Your boss?” Her eyes widened in surprise. “You talk to your boss like that?”

Shit. I forgot about the little misunderstanding that still had to be cleared up.

But I didn’t have time to get into Sean and my relationship. Right now, I needed to get my family home and get to the bottom of who was leaving fucking threats on my vehicle.

Within minutes, a car was pulling into the parking lot, and I instantly knew it was the car Sean got for me because he hadn’t gone for the understated option at all.

The car was a Mercedes S-Class, and it swerved right in front of us before coming to a stop. I could practically feel Allie’s surprise as she looked at the car.

The chauffeur came out and handed me the key. “He said you would want

to drive it yourself.”

“He’s damn right,” I said. I hated people driving me around. I only tolerated it in New York because the traffic gave me high blood pressure. I glanced at Allie, whose eyes were popping out of her skull, and said, “I’ll explain everything later.”

I opened the passenger’s door for her.

She nodded uncertainly and got in the car with Caleb while I went over to the driver’s side.

After I got in, I saw her eyeing the interior skeptically.

“This is a very nice car,” she commented as I set it to a low hum.

“I suppose,” I muttered. I was one of the rare men who weren’t really into cars. I liked trucks. They were more rugged and made me feel like I was driving a machine, not a pretty piece of plastic. “Sean is a bit of a show-off.”

“Sean being your boss....”

I didn’t want to lie, but now wasn’t the time to talk about it. “Sean is...a lot of things. Including a friend.” I found I could admit that easily. After the old man died, Sean was the closest thing to a friend I could remember having.

“Oh,” she said and seemed to accept the answer without much argument. And then she asked, “Who do you think wrote that on the car?”

“No clue,” I said. I wanted to say more, but not with Caleb in the car. When we got home, we would discuss it at length.

After we got home, Allie immediately took Caleb upstairs to get him into bed. Then, Sean called me once more to confirm that the car had been picked up and taken to the shop, where they could get fingerprints, if possible, and get the paint off. In addition, he told me that Darryl was making moves and meeting with some pretty sketchy people in New York.

“You still friends with that PI of yours?” I asked.

“Who? Con? Yes, I was just at his baby shower. Why?”

“Have him look into Darryl for real. Something tells me this has his shady fingerprints all over it. And it’s exactly the kind of bullshit that shifty bastard would do.”

“Roger,” he said and hung up.

Although the more I thought about it, I wasn’t so sure Darryl was involved. Why would he want to drive me out of town? If anything, it would be in his best interests for me to stay in town.

“Who was that?” Allie asked as she descended the stairs.

“Sean again,” I answered. “I need him to look into a business rival. He may be the person behind this.”

“May?” she asked, quirking an eyebrow.

“I’m not sure,” I admitted.

She nodded. “Why would he do this?”

“Because he’s a conniving, vindictive bastard,” I answered in a softer tone for her sake. I needed to tell her who I really was, but there never seemed to be a good enough time for it. I debated.

“If it’s not him?” she pondered, and her gaze was careful as they set upon me. “What if it’s someone else in town who’s targeting you because of... because of what happened last time?”

The thought had occurred to me, and it hung in the air between us—the crime I’d been accused of that always seemed to surface whenever I thought it was over and done.

“Could be,” I admitted.

She watched me carefully, shaking her head. “I can’t believe this is still happening.”

I couldn’t believe it either, but I should have expected it, coming back here. Nothing was ever that simple.

“They never caught the guy who did it, you know,” she said. “I think that’s why folks in town are still mad about it. Because it was like someone was beaten to death—Old Man Clancy, of all people, one of the nicest people in town. And no one went to jail for it.”

“That’s sad, but you’re deluding yourself if you think that’s the real reason people are mad,” I said.

She glanced at me in question.

“People are mad because they think *I* did it and got away with it,” I told her. “They already wanted my blood for what my father did. Then I got away with the crime too. Someone in town wants me to pay for it very dearly, and I won’t be surprised if it all escalates.”

She couldn’t deny it. She crossed her arms over her chest. “So what do we do now?”

“Easy,” I said. “We leave town.”

Her eyes widened. “Just like that?”

“Yeah,” I said. “There’s nothing for us here, and whoever it was has made it very clear that they want me out. So might as well give them what they want.”

“No.” Allie shook her head. “That’s not the answer. We can’t just leave. Everyone I know is here. My entire family, Caleb’s psychologist....”

“Caleb can get a much better psychologist in New York.”

Allie’s nose twitched. “You want us to go to New York?”

Not really, but it was the only other place I knew. “We could go anywhere else. Just not here.”

“But, Marcus, we can’t just leave. I know people here haven’t been the nicest to you—”

“This isn’t about me.”

“Isn’t it?” she said. “You hate everyone in this town.”

“I don’t deny it,” I told her. “But I’m not doing this for that. I’m doing this to protect you. And to protect my son.”

“No one is going to hurt us,” she said.

“You don’t know that.” I stood up, starting to get frustrated. “You don’t fucking know people until they show you their worst side. And I’ve seen it. When the mob descended on my mother and me, they didn’t fucking remember that we had nothing to do with my father’s crime. They barely remembered that I was still a child. They tore us apart anyway.”

Sympathy reflected in her gaze. “And I’m sorry that happened to you, Marcus, but the answer isn’t running away. I mean, we don’t know anyone in New York.”

“You know me,” I pointed out.

“Yes, but that’s not enough. What if something happens? We won’t have anywhere to run to.”

The statement slammed into me like a freight train. *We won’t have anywhere to run to.* As if I would hurt them.

The ache in my heart shouldn’t have surprised me, but I did. Even after all this time, she was still scared of me.

“Maybe you should think of the real reason you’re making the decision. And it isn’t because of Caleb,” I told her.

“We can’t just uproot ourselves and leave our support system behind. Then we would be relying only on you. And I can’t just do that.”

Because she didn’t trust me. The thought stung.

I took a step toward her, and she must have seen the anger in my eyes because she flinched.

She flinched from me.

*Fuck. She really was scared of me.*



Throat tight, I nodded. Then I turned around and left.

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TWENTY-FIVE

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# ALLIE

The door closed with a quiet click behind Marcus. The ensuing silence brought an almost instant regret.

I sat on the couch behind me, running my hands over my face. *Why did I just do that?*

I saw the way his face closed off the minute I flinched from him and saw the hurt flash through his eyes when I implied that I couldn't go with him to New York because then we wouldn't have anything to fall back on in case things didn't work out with him.

Like I didn't trust him.

I knew I had hurt him with my reaction, and it wasn't that I meant to flinch away from him. I wasn't scared of him. I knew he wouldn't hurt me.

It was just everything else that had me on edge.

As much as I brushed it off, the threat that was painted on his truck rattled me. I wasn't used to it and didn't know anyone in town who would do something like that to someone. Of course, I didn't think we were all saints either, but to spray paint a deliberate threat on someone's vehicle?

That was beyond me.

However, that wasn't the only thing that made me nervous. I was also confused and uncertain about Marcus and his friend, or maybe boss, who sent expensive cars to pick him up in under thirty minutes. People who had that much power and influence made me nervous. And it reminded me of the fact that I still didn't know much about Marcus' life in New York. He was so evasive about it.

It all had me on high alert, and I'd taken it out on him.

I sighed and went upstairs to check on Caleb, who was still sleeping

peacefully.

Luckily, he didn't seem as affected by what happened today, likely because he didn't fully understand. Or perhaps he was just feeling a lot more relaxed than usual. Normally, he would have caught the tension in the home and started reacting to it. But here he was, sleeping.

*Marcus did that.*

Of course, I didn't doubt that some of the improvements were because of Dr. Hammond, but I also knew Caleb likely felt a lot safer with his father around. Marcus had that effect on people.

*"Maybe you should think of the real reason you're making the decision. And it isn't because of Caleb."*

Unbidden, Marcus' words drifted back to me. Was he right? Was I the one being selfish here and putting Caleb in the position to be harmed all because I was too scared to trust him?

*No.* As his mother, I had the right to be cautious to protect my son. I was supposed to keep him out of harm's way no matter what.

But was my caution putting him in danger instead?

I swallowed, thoughts flying through my endless choices and fears intermingling until it was hard to form a coherent thought. The indecision was torture. *Gosh, what to do? Should I trust Marcus and leave behind everything and everyone I knew? Or stay in town where some maniac was threatening our lives?*

*Could it all have been a bad joke?*

It was hard to believe that someone in town meant those nasty things on Marcus' car. I'd grown up in this town and only received love from the people here. I knew most of them by face.

But Marcus was right. You didn't know a person until you saw their vicious side.

And he knew more than anyone how vicious they could be.

Shame washed through me.

We hadn't spoken of the future, but I'd assumed he would settle here with me even after the resort renovations were completed. It was indeed selfish of me to think that, to ask him to stay here with me in this town when it had shown him nothing but pain. This town may have been my safe zone, but to him, it was probably hell.

And I was asking him to stay in it.

Suddenly, the door downstairs clicked open, and I shot to my feet, alarm

spiraling. I heard footsteps as I crept to the staircase.

“Marcus?” I called out cautiously, then internally slapped myself for it. I was just like those girls in the horror movies. I should have grabbed a weapon before I went to the staircase. What if it wasn’t Marcus but someone who came to harm Caleb and me?

Did I even have a weapon to use?

*Jeez, what was I thinking?*

It was probably paranoia. I often left my door unlocked many times before I had Caleb, and nothing ever happened. It was probably Mrs. Winchester from next door who needed something.

“Yeah,” Marcus’ heavy voice answered after some time. “It’s me.”

I breathed out a sigh of relief.

I jogged down the stairs just in time to see him walk into the living room, shrugging off his jacket. He didn’t glance at me at first, and his face was carefully expressionless.

Guilt swam through me, and I couldn’t stand it. I walked toward him, immediately wrapping my arms around his waist.

“I’m sorry,” I said, resting my head against his chest and letting myself be comforted by his strong, steady heartbeat. “You were totally right. I’m not scared of you; I’m scared of letting myself trust you. Of being hurt. And scared of leaving my comfort zone.”

It took a second, and then one broad palm came up to rest against my head, caressing my hair. His voice was a rumble as he said, “There’s nothing wrong with being cautious.”

“Yes, there is when it turns me into a coward.” I leaned back and looked into his dark eyes, letting myself be comforted by the affection I saw there. Even though he’d never said it, I think Marcus loves me. He showed me enough times with the way he held me and treated me. He might be one of those men who were uncomfortable with saying the actual words, but I felt loved.

“Let’s go start somewhere else,” I said. “As a family. We can go anywhere. Even New York.”

I cringed internally, saying it. I’d never been to a big city, but everything I’d heard about it didn’t exactly make me happy to be going there.

But then again, those might just be stories. I might like it once I got there, as doubtful as that was.

Marcus smirked a little as if he knew the thoughts running through my

head. “We don’t have to go to New York.”

The visible relief must have been on my face because his smile widened.

“In fact,” he continued, “we don’t have to go anywhere. We’re staying here.”

I wrinkled my eyebrows. “I don’t understand.”

“We’re not leaving,” he said.

“You said—”

“I know what I said,” he suggested. “But you were right. I’m not going to have you leave your family behind.”

Emotion was thick in my throat, and I teared up with just how thoughtful he was. Or perhaps it was the hormones. Either way, my heart swelled with love.

“So what do we do now?” I asked.

“We find whoever is doing this,” he said. “And stop them.”

“How?”

“I’m not sure yet,” he said. “But I have an idea.”

I cocked my head. “Which is?” I asked when it was clear my look alone wasn’t convincing him.

He sighed. “We’re going to find whoever killed Old Man Clancy all those years ago. And bring them to justice.”

I COULD FEEL stares on my back.

It was possible I was just being paranoid. Ever since the spray painting incident happened a few days ago, it seemed I was always looking over my shoulders. Sometimes, it was almost eerie, like I could feel the prickling sensation beneath my skin.

The feeling of being watched.

But this time, I didn’t think it was simple paranoia.

I caught a few people’s eyes, and they’d clearly been staring at me before I glanced their way. Even worse, the second our eyes met, they looked away from my friendly smile without returning it. The first time it happened, I thought the person simply didn’t have manners. But then it happened again and again. It was at least three people in under a few minutes, and all were people I would usually say ‘Hi’ to at church.

Something was up.

“Is it just me, or is everyone staring at us?” Athena asked, her eyebrows furrowing.

“You noticed it too?” I replied, and she nodded. That meant it definitely wasn’t just in my head.

“Yeah. I felt eyeballs on me this entire shopping trip.”

I felt Caleb tug my hand, and when I looked down at him, he pointed to the box of cereals on the top shelf. He seemed oblivious to the looks.

*That was good, I thought. At least he’s not seeing it.*

My son’s general behavior surprised me. Dr. Hammond even noted he was doing a lot better, a lot faster than he anticipated. He was even talking more now, but sometimes he still preferred to point to get his intention across.

I picked up the cereal, placed it in the basket, and continued on my way.

“This is really weird,” Athena said as she caught an elderly man staring. She frowned at him, and he looked away.

“Uh-huh,” I responded. I hadn’t yet told her about the threat spray painted on Marcus’ car. I wanted to tell my family immediately, but Marcus wanted us to keep it lowkey first while he ran his private investigations. Eventually, I agreed with him. If I told my family, they would freak out and immediately go to the police station. Or they would demand I move in with one of them.

Marcus had pretty much moved into my place over the past weeks, and this incident made it official that we were living together. Yesterday, he spoke about us moving to a bigger house, but I just blinked at him.

“With what money?” I asked blankly.

He smirked at me. “You’ll see.”

And then later, as we discussed what we were going to do about the threat, he gave me the rundown of the plan.

“I want whoever did this to think we’re not taking his warning seriously,” Marcus said. “Maybe that will make him mad, and the madder he is, the more reckless he becomes. Maybe he’ll try and do it again and leave more clues behind.”

I nodded. It made sense when he explained it like that. Plus, he said he had a PI friend of his looking into the matter more closely, so I wasn’t as scared as I could have been.

Instead of telling Athena the true reason why people were watching, I said nothing as we went to the cashier and paid for our items.

On the way out, I told Athena that I needed to pick up some tools from the store for the renovations.

So we decided to make one more stop at the hardware store.

There was some buzz and conversation, but the minute we entered, the place became silent.

You could literally hear a pin drop.

Again, I could feel eyes on me.

Athena and I shared a look, and I shrugged at her. She frowned and then went straight to the counter.

“Hey, Cal,” she said, gesturing behind him. “We need some wrenches and a claw hammer. You got some of that?”

“Sure thing,” Cal said, but he was watching me closely when he said it.

Athena raised her eyebrow at Cal. “Is there a reason you’re staring at my sister like that?”

Cal wasn’t a shy man and didn’t have the decency to blush or even avert his gaze.

“You know, there have been some funny rumors about you going around town,” he said. “That you’ve been shacking up with that Peters kid. The one who killed Old Man Clancy.”

“He’s not a kid anymore,” I said, annoyed. “And he didn’t kill anyone. So what about it?”

“You testified for him all those years ago. People are saying you lied so he could get away with murder.”

Anxiety spiraled through me, and dread sank into my stomach.

I laughed, but even I could hear the nerves in it. “Wait, you think I lied on oath to get him off?” The fact that I did was beside the point.

“Well, he did get away with murder,” Cal said unrepentantly.

“He’s not a murderer,” I repeated firmly.

“I don’t know about that. Plenty of people here think he did.”

“Well, plenty of people are stupid,” Athena snapped, surprising me by coming to Marcus’ defense. “And maybe people should spend less time speculating and more time minding their own business. Or maybe, I dunno, trying to find the real killer. So, if you don’t mind, can you give us what we came for so we can get the heck out of here or what?”

My sister’s blatant abrasiveness was enough to cow Cal into silent compliance. We awkwardly finished up the shopping trip, but I couldn’t wipe the thought of what he said.



I told Marcus about the incident once I got home, but he didn't look surprised.

He held me for some time, and when he pulled back, I could see the anger burning in his eyes. "They're trying to shift the anger to you since they can't get to me."

His hand reached out to caress my cheek, and he murmured, "I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about me. I'm not hurt."

His gaze told me he knew I was lying, but he didn't say anything else about it.

"Dad?" It was Caleb's quiet voice coming from upstairs.

I saw joy instantly fill Marcus' face as he answered, "Yes?"

"Can you come?"

"Of course." Marcus headed up the stairs, and I decided to give them the moment together, even though I wanted to know what was going on too.

While he was gone, Marcus' phone began to ring.

I grabbed it, and the caller ID said Sean. I didn't want to interrupt whatever was going on between Marcus and my son, so I put the phone to my ear to ask if Sean could call back in five minutes.

But, of course, I didn't get the chance.

"Hey, boss. Just wanted to let you know that Darryl won't be a problem anymore. He's dead. The inheritance is all yours."

TWENTY-SIX

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## MARCUS

“The bad news is that we didn’t get anything off the car,” Sean let me know the next morning. It had been a few days since the incident, and I waited until Allie went out to the store with Athena to finally call him to discuss it. I didn’t want her around in case it was bad news.

“Either whoever it was was very careful,” Sean continued, “or the snow destroyed any evidence.”

“The latter is more likely,” I said, annoyed that we couldn’t get fingerprints. That would have made this whole ordeal a lot easier.

“What about that murder all those years ago?” I asked. “Any news on that?”

“Nothing as of now. The issue is that in small towns, the cops don’t exactly keep very good records and are typically behind on all the new technology, so the hackers can’t even get access. We would need the physical copies, and we’re working on getting that through less-than-ideal means.”

“Alright. Keep at it.” I didn’t know why, but I had a gut feeling that whoever was doing this was linked to the crime all those years ago. Someone angry enough to spray paint my car would likely be the family of the victim.

The problem was the old man had no known family.

He was, however, very well-liked, and that was a good enough place as any to start the search.

But wouldn’t someone who wanted revenge just try and kill me? Why on earth would they warn me first?

“Whoever it was is trying to drive you out of town for sure,” Sean said, confirming my thoughts.

“Might be the same person who drove me out the first time,” I said. Not

for the first time, I mused if someone had intentionally framed me for the murder. I'd thought it was simply a robbery gone wrong, and it was a coincidence that I just happened to be the last person who saw Old Man Clancy alive. But from what Sean said about what little information he got, nothing of value was stolen besides some cash taken from the cash register. A few hundred dollars at most.

A robber would have been more interested in the watches and trinkets that were locked behind the glass case.

Which made me think that someone was possibly framing me for the crime but didn't want to hold on to too much merchandise in case something was traced back to them.

"You said your old man pissed a lot of people off," Sean said.

"I never told you that," I responded wryly.

"You said, or I researched," he said offhandedly. "Same difference. Anyway, do you think it could be one of his victims doing this?"

I thought about it. "Maybe." I rubbed my face tiredly. If that was the case, the list of people who could be targeting me just got longer.

Even though we managed to pay off most of what we owed, I still knew people who'd gone out of business because of my father. People who lost their entire life savings.

And all of them probably wanted me gone.

I could ask my mother who the most likely culprits were the next time I went to visit her. She would know better than anyone who treated her the worst after the news came out. I just had to make sure I knew what was real and what was just her paranoia talking. The last time I'd gone to see her, she'd spoken at length about this imaginary person snooping around her house.

"We'll keep working on our end," Sean said. "Try to find out anything you think could help the research."

"Yes," I answered and then hung up the phone right as Allie was coming in through the front door. She had a troubled look on her face as she carried Caleb. She put him down, and he ran to me to hug me first. I returned the hug, then pulled his mother onto my lap, kissing the lines off her forehead. "What's the matter?"

"I'm not sure." She glanced over at where Caleb was running up the stairs, likely to take a shower. "I think people are spreading nasty rumors about us in town. Wherever I went today, people kept watching and staring at

us.”

“Oh.” I cocked my eyebrows. I knew this would happen eventually, but it was curious that it coincided with the threat. “What did they say?”

“Nothing.” She waited for a beat, then added, “Cal mentioned that I helped you get away with murder.”

I smirked at her, amused at the incense on her face. “Didn’t you?”

She gaped at me, then glanced over to the stairs to make sure Caleb wasn’t still there. She smacked me in the chest, and I laughed.

“I’m sorry.” I continued laughing. “But you did lie.”

“Only because I knew you didn’t do it.” She pouted, and the total assuredness in her tone warmed a long cold part of my soul, especially considering the fact that she never even suspected it was me, even though she had no idea where I was at the time of the crime. She’d come forward and lied for me anyway, knowing that she would probably go to jail for perjury if more evidence showed that I committed the crime.

I’d never had someone place their utter faith in me like that before, and it was completely dazzling.

It was one of the reasons I loved her.

“Do you want to know what I was doing that night?”

“What?” She looked at me, and curiosity lit her gaze.

“I was following you,” I said. “I stopped by Old Man Clancy’s to look at a necklace that I wanted to buy for you, the one with the pretty daisies. I never got the chance to give it to you. It was confiscated with evidence.” That part annoyed me more than anything, but I brushed off the thought. “Anyway, it was pretty late, and I knew you would be walking home alone, so I wanted to make sure you got there in one piece. I didn’t want anything to happen to you.”

Her eyes went all mushy, and I hesitated before I offered her the rest of the truth. “And then I stood there watching you turn on the lights and move around your kitchen for an embarrassing amount of time before I left.”

“Oh, Marcus.” She threw her arms around my neck and kissed me. It was the sweetest, most pure kiss I could think of.

When we broke apart, I stared into her beautiful eyes and wondered angrily how anyone could treat such a pure person badly.

“They’re trying to shift the anger to you since they can’t get to me.”

I ran my hand down her cheek and murmured, “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’m not hurt.”

All of a sudden, Caleb's soft voice rang out. "Dad?"

My heart sang, feeling all fluttery and mushy. And I didn't care to hide the smile on my face. Allie smiled at me too.

"Yes?" I answered, trying not to choke up.

"Can you come?"

"Of course."

I gave Allie a look, and she nodded, looking like she was going to cry tears of joy. I went up the stairs to find Caleb standing by his bed, holding a picture book in his hand.

"Can you read this to me?" he asked. "And wait till I fall asleep?"

"Of course," I told him, pulling up a chair, ready to do just that. He climbed into bed, and I made sure the covers were tucked securely around him before I started to read.

Caleb dropped off to sleep in no time at all, only about five minutes.

I spent a few more minutes just watching and feeling a tightening in my chest, the same possessive feeling I got when I was with Allie. Then I leaned over instinctively and kissed him on his forehead.

The little boy's eyes fluttered open for a little bit, and I leaned down on impulse, ruffling his head. "Don't worry about anything," I reassured him. "I'll keep you safe."

He nodded and then smiled as his eyes slid shut once more.

*He was mine. I would kill for this kid.*

I would kill for my family.

I heard the phone ringing in the distance and decided to make my way downstairs. By the time I came back to the living room, Allie was staring at the phone with a look of shocked horror on her face.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

She turned to me.

"Are you a hitman?" she blurted out.

I paused in my step. "What?"

"Your *friend* on the phone was just saying that he had someone killed. And that you received an inheritance. He also called you boss." Her voice sounded frantic. "Are you a hitman?" she repeated.

Confusion slammed into me for a few seconds before I put two and two together and finally realized the source of the misunderstanding.

It took everything for me not to burst out laughing, but I knew Allie wouldn't appreciate that. It might be funny to me, but she was probably

freaking out of her mind.

Instead, I went and took the phone out of her hands.

“Sean.”

“Yeah, boss.” His chagrined tone came through clearly on the phone. “I have a feeling I made a little bit of an oopsie with my phrasing.”

“You think?” I glanced at Allie, who still looked freaked out. “What did you actually say?”

“Well, I was trying to tell you what I forgot to mention earlier. That Darryl will no longer be a problem. He’s dead.”

“Hmmm.” Curiosity more than regret made me ask, “How did he die?”

“Well, those sketchy people he went to see? Turns out he owed them a lot of money, and they got tired of waiting for him to get the inheritance back from you. Anyway, they got their payment in blood, so to speak.”

“Damn.” That must have been brutal. And as much as I didn’t like the man, I didn’t take any satisfaction from his death either.

“So what now?” I voiced, still keeping my eyes on Allie in case she decided to bolt out of here without letting me explain.

“Well, there’s no one fighting you for the inheritance anymore, so you can rest easy on that. And you’re also not a suspect. Everyone knows you’re out of town, and the police caught one of the gang members, who confessed to everything.”

“That’s good,” I said, and then there was thoughtful silence for a few seconds.

“That your honey?” Sean asked, and I didn’t even bother asking how he knew I was dating someone.

“Yes,” I responded.

“Real sorry about the misunderstanding, boss.”

“Yes, I see that.” The genuine chagrin in his tone almost had me smiling. “I’ll talk to you later.”

“Alright,” he said, sounding happy to be off the phone.

“Tell me if you’re a hitman or a drug dealer,” Allie said, getting right to the point the moment I got off the phone.

“Neither,” I said, amused. “But I haven’t been entirely honest with you about who I am either.”

“Who are you then?”

I sighed. “It would be easier to just show you.”

I typed my company name on Google, clicked on the Wikipedia page,

and then held it out to her.

She frowned. "That's the company you work for?"

"Yes," I responded. "Except I don't just work for it. I own it."

"What?" She gaped at me, shock filling her features.

"Yes."

"How?" The question stumbled out.

"It's kind of a long story, but essentially, I worked my way up the ranks, and the owner left it to me after he died. It was only worth a million at that point. Now it's worth about ten billion dollars."

"But that would mean...you're worth...." She tried to do the math in her head but couldn't seem to figure it out.

"Worth at least ten billion dollars, yeah," I amended, and she gaped again.

"You're a billionaire?" she gasped, clearly stunned.

"Yes."

She was quiet for a long time, and then she smacked her forehead. "Everything makes so much sense right now."

"Doesn't it?"

She laughed and nodded, rubbing her hands over her face. "And all this time, I thought you were hiding some terrible secret of what happened in New York. Like maybe you joined a gang or something."

"Nope," I said, drawn to her because of the joy in her tone and the simple acceptance of what would have been a huge deal to many other women. "No gang, just filthy rich. And now I can spend it all on the woman I love."

And then I kissed her.



TWENTY-SEVEN

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## ALLIE

The kiss was tender and heated at the same time, seducing me with sultriness and emotion that I couldn't describe.

My heart was still thundering in my chest at his declaration, my spirit singing.

He loved me. He *really* loved me.

I mean, I suspected he did, but somehow, hearing him say it was something different. It made everything between us so real, especially since I finally deciphered what I needed to trust him.

My head was still spinning with the realization that he was a billionaire.

He still felt like Marcus to me, not some unattainable mogul. But now that I thought about it, he did have a certain something about him now...like an unspoken assuredness and control that he didn't have before. I couldn't even conceptualize it, but that wasn't truly important. It didn't change how I felt about him. I wasn't sure I could even understand anyone having that much money, much less Marcus. Still, I put it out of my mind, enjoying the feeling of his lips plucking mine slowly, sensuously, as he parted his legs and drew my body closer to his.

I immediately felt his hands on the skin underneath my sweater, and I shivered. They crept up to my chest, slipping under my bra, and my whole body grew tense from anticipation, practically trembling with it. I didn't know if sex was supposed to be like this, but Marcus always got me so heady with lust that I could barely stand it. It didn't matter how many times we did it. There was always this heart-pounding thrill, this forbidden lust—like it was the first time.

And it was so mindblowing.

By the time his fingers reached my nipple, the cool touch had me jerking in his arms, the sharpness of the pleasure jolting me out of my skin.

“Easy,” he murmured, his voice a syrupy drawl that made my body feel all loose and warm. “Just let me turn you on, sweetheart.”

The words seemed to run down my skin like feathers, and my nerves responded immediately. My hands immediately flew to his shoulder when he started strumming my nipple slowly. I knew I was probably digging my nails into them, but I needed to hold on to steady myself.

I could feel him watching me the entire time as he did it, too, his eyes dark and intense on my face. They grew darker as he watched my reaction, seeming to get even more turned on by it.

“God, I love watching you like this,” he groaned, his eyes glowing with his desire. “You know what else I love, sweetheart? I love watching you give in to your desire, watching the exact moment when you can’t take it anymore. I love watching your body tremble and sway, the way your body craves me. I can’t get enough of it.”

A moan escaped me, and I could do nothing, but I stood there as his words and consistent touch had me squeezing my thighs together, trying to contain the feeling. I was getting impossibly wet and achy. As if he could sense it, his other hand moved to unzip my heavy ankle-length skirt. It soon dropped to the ground.

Then he brought his hand to the top of my panties before running a finger down the damp center.

“You’re already wet for me, aren’t you, darling?” His words were a soothing drawl that was basically like a lick across my clit. “You want more of this, baby?”

“Yes,” I gasped, helpless to do anything but follow his lead. I wanted to give my entire body over to him to do as he wished, to bring it to the brink of trembling pleasure as only he knew how to.

His finger slipped in through the side of my panties, and I gasped as he found my slit wet and ready for him. With a murmur that sounded almost like a curse, he penetrated me, slowly spreading my lips with his hand.

“Fuck, you’re soaked.” His voice was satisfied, vindicated, and throbbing with hunger. “So fucking wet for me.”

I couldn’t answer. I could barely think as his hand continued its torture of my clit while simultaneously, his other hand teased my nipple. The pleasure was building inside me so quickly that it felt like I was spiraling into a

whirlwind of pleasure and gasping to catch up. There was nothing to ground me, so I held on to his shoulder for dear life, feeling my legs shake and like I was going to fall over if I came right here.

Then again, I also felt like I would fall over if I didn't.

He was just...going so slow. The pleasure built and became so intense that it was almost pain. It felt like wave after wave was building inside me, but they never crashed, just built upon each other. My mouth opened, and it became harder and harder to breathe and control the feelings trembling through me.

"Don't control it," he ordered as if he could read my mind. "Just go with it."

I didn't have a choice, and he began dropping gentle kisses on my neck, sucking on my skin. New sensations sprang out of me, and I nearly sobbed from the pained pleasure of it. But I still didn't go over. I couldn't.

"Please," I gasped, finally realizing what I needed to do. "Please let me come."

"Not yet," he whispered.

I could feel the pleasure radiating through him at the fact that I asked for permission.

"Good girl," he murmured a few moments later, sounding very satisfied. "Come for me."

It didn't take long after that. After a few more strokes and a light pinch to my nipple, I was flowing all over his fingers. He caught my cry with his mouth, swallowing it as he continued to devour me hungrily until the pressure built up in my chest.

When I couldn't breathe, he tore our mouths apart, pulling me to his chest and burying his head in my hair.

"Damn." His voice was tense, heated. "You're so fucking hot."

"I am," I agreed with a smirk, feeling more empowered than I've ever felt in my entire life. I touched the front of his jeans, where he was straining against his zipper. "Let me show you how much."

He caught my hand before I could do anything. "You don't have to."

"But I want to," I insisted, looking up and using my gaze to plead with him. It was something I'd never done before but had always been curious about. He frowned like he wasn't quite sure.

So I gave him my best submissive glance and purred, "Please, master, let me suck your cock."

He shut his eyes tightly, a tortured pleasure reflecting in his expression as he visibly swallowed.

I slowly went to my knees, unbuckling his belt and releasing the straining length.

As I leaned forward and took him in my mouth, he released a groan and finally unleashed the reins of his passion.

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TWENTY-EIGHT

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## MARCUS

The Summit sheriff's police station was a strange place to be on a Saturday morning.

Or just a strange place to be in general.

As usual, the place was the perfect balance of sleepy and chaotic. One sheriff lounged back, playing a game on his phone, while another sheriff was trying to soothe a farmer's ruffled feather, telling him that he couldn't arrest his competitor for horse stealing just based on a hunch.

"It's not just a hunch!" the old farmer was saying. "I'm telling you, I can feel it in my damn bones. I know that Clinton is a damn horse-thieving delinquent, and you can't tell me otherwise."

"Vernon," the sheriff sighed tiredly, but whatever he was about to say froze on his lips, his eyes widening in horror as he watched me stride in.

I ignored him, slipping my bulky frame into the seat opposite him.

His eyes widened even more, recognition flaring into them.

"You!"

"I need the documents for the Clancy murder," I ordered. "Yesterday."

"You have some nerve coming in here," he spat, and I grinned in the face of his animosity. I knew Officer Evan didn't like me even before he had to arrest me. As with most people, I didn't give a damn and wouldn't even be talking to the bastard if I could help it.

But since Sean had tried and failed to get much information from hacking their antiquated system, it seemed I would need to do things the old-fashioned way.

Good old bullying.

I tapped the table in front of him. "The documents, Evan."

“Hey, I was talking to him,” Vernon grumbled, sounding grouchy as he stood up. I spared him a cursory glance and watched fear flash across his features.

“Hey.” One scraggly finger reached out and pointed at me. “You’re that kid who murdered Old Man Clancy, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” I answered simply, giving him a sarcastic smile. “Do you want to be next?”

He gulped, shook his head, and then immediately turned around, heading to sit in the waiting area.

*Well, that was easy.*

With that taken care of, I turned back to Evan, who was still glaring at me.

“What do you want those documents for?” he questioned.

“Humor me.”

“I’m not in the business of humoring murderers,” he said in a tone he’d meant to be insulting. Unfortunately, I was too bored to rise in anger.

“You are today,” I responded.

There was a tense silence as we both engaged in the standoff. I knew everyone in the small station was now watching us, not that they bothered to hide it. A hush had befallen the place since I walked in, but I didn’t care. They could watch all they fucking wanted. They weren’t important. My family was.

Today, I was determined to retrieve information that could get us to the bottom of all the bullshit.

Evan cocked his brow. “I’m still waiting to hear why I should do anything you’re saying and not throw you in jail for disrupting the peace.”

“How about if you don’t show me the folder right now, I’ll have the governor descend on this place for all the pardons you’ve given the Mayor’s son over the years?”

Evan first gaped in shock, then grimaced in disbelief. “You’re bluffing.”

“Go ahead,” I said. “Call me out on it.”

He was silent for a few seconds, and I could see the battle on his face. He wanted to maintain his bravado and keep pushing me, but there was a distant sense of self-preservation that was telling him I was right and would do exactly what I said I would.

“He’s bluffing, Evan,” the other officer called out, alternating between eyeing me cautiously and going back to his phone screen. He never once met



my gaze. “Can’t you tell? It’s the Peters boy. Of course, he’s a born liar.”

It was strange that just a few years ago, a phrase like that was enough to spur a deep-seated rage from me, borne from the injustice of the situation. Now it barely even registered.

I leaned forward in the seat, letting Evan see the threat on my face. “Call the bluff then.” Subtly, I let the mask slip, letting him see the savage that truly lay beneath and just how far I was willing to go to protect my family.

I would turn this entire town upside down if I needed to.

Fear flashed on his face again.

“Because I can assure you that while I may have been Washington Peters’ son, I’m no longer still the same man who left this town.”

“He’s fucking Marcus Peters, the billionaire!” It was Sean’s exuberant voice that emerged from the doorway. I turned around to find his lean frame striding into the police station like he owned the place.

I frowned. I didn’t ask for him to come.

He smiled at me despite the frown.

“What are you doing here?”

He shrugged. “The thing with Darryl is over, and I didn’t have much to do. So I thought I would fly in and help you with your little investigation.”

“I didn’t ask for your help.”

“But I’m giving it anyway.”

“I’m not paying you for this,” I warned.

He rolled his eyes. “I was due some off time anyway,” he said, unbothered.

“Don’t you have some Christmas event to be at with your family?”

“I’m Jewish,” he said with a snort, and I blinked, not sure if he was telling the truth or not. With Sean, one never knew.

“Who are you?” Evan questioned, his eyes flying between us in a little bit of panic and annoyance. “What are you doing here?”

“Sean Goldman,” Sean said with his trademark charming grin. “And let’s just say I’m here to rectify the investigation you guys fucked up.”

“We fucked up?” Evan sounded incensed by the very idea. One would think he took pride in his job and didn’t accept bribes from wealthy people to turn the other eye to their indiscretions.

But I knew Evan only got the job as sheriff because there was nothing else for him to do, and he couldn’t hack it at college. After he dropped out, his father, the previous sheriff, let Evan take over his role.

I knew all this because Sean had presented me with an entire dissertation on the guy, including all the dirt he could find. And there was plenty.

“Just because you got away with murder because you got your little *girlfriend* to testify for you does not mean we fucked up,” Evan said, continuing his farce.

“Careful,” I warned, giving him a side eye that had him visibly paling. While he hadn’t said anything vulgar, I didn’t like the tone with which he referred to Allie.

“Yeah, you don’t wanna say anything about his honey,” Sean said. “I’ve never even met the girl, but I can already tell you that he’s pretty protective over our little miss.”

And seeing the gleam in his eyes, I then realized the real reason Sean was in town. He wanted to be his nosy little self and meet Allie himself in person.

“Damn it,” I swore, but the bastard, Sean, immediately dropped a folder in front of Evan.

“This is an order from the police commissioner, who I have on speed dial if you want to confirm it. Or I can also ring the governor if you would like.” He shrugged. “Either way, if you don’t open up those files in the next few seconds, we’re going to have a real problem.”

Disbelief flashed through him as it must have finally sunk in. Evan’s gaze swung between the paper, Sean, and me as he tried to figure out what to do. Eventually, his eyes went back to me, and whatever he saw in my expression was the deciding factor.

He probably saw that I would have no problem destroying him in order to get what I wanted.

Self-preservation won out over pride, and he got up, heading for the backroom where stacks of folders were probably stored.

During the minutes he was gone, I glared at Sean.

“I’m not going to let you meet her, you know,” I said, keeping my tone threateningly mild.

“I’d like to see you try to stop me,” he retorted in a tone that was just as mild.

“She doesn’t know who I was in New York,” I told him, hating the fact that I had to be vulnerable but knowing that it was the only way to make him understand. “She doesn’t know the ruthless man I became. She only knows me as Marcus, and I don’t want to scare her.”

At this, an understanding as well as amusement reflected in Sean’s gaze.

“Jeez, you’re really in love with this girl, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” I admitted.

“Well, don’t worry,” he promised. “Your secret is safe with me.”

The mischievous smile on his face said otherwise, but I let it go. I would simply pummel him into the ground if he said anything out of line.

Soon, the sheriff came back with a folder with papers haphazardly stuffed inside. He placed it down on the table and slid it over to us. “That’s everything we know.” His tone wasn’t at all happy with the recent turn of events.

Sean smiled at him regardless, probably just to antagonize him. “Thank you for your cooperation.”

I immediately pulled open the folder, and some stray papers fell to the floor. It was a very thin folder, meaning they knew very little.

We began sifting through it, glancing at pictures taken from the crime scene. It showed the old man lying behind the counter, his body in a straight line. Someone likely moved it. Sean immediately took out his cell phone and began taking pictures, probably to send over to his team back in New York.

“Pretty gruesome stuff,” Sean commented.

“Yeah,” I said, staring at it with distaste. I’d seen the pictures before. They’d shoved it under my face, hoping to spark some kind of reaction that would attest to my guilt, but all I felt was disgust. The man had been beaten within an inch of his life, his entire face swollen and unrecognizable.

How the fuck could a human being do that to an old man?

“Looks like a crime of passion to me,” Sean commented, and I had to agree, nodding.

“Someone was angry at him,” I concluded. “The stolen money was only a cover-up. Someone was definitely very angry at him, which then led them to do this.”

“Agreed,” Sean said.

“No pictures,” Evan said, and Sean and I both glanced at him. I cocked my eyebrow, and he backed down, staying quiet.

After staring at the picture for long enough, I noticed an odd piece of object at the edge of the picture. It looked shiny but barely identifiable.

“Sean, give me your phone for a second,” I requested. He had one of those fancy phones with cameras that took images in high definition.

Sean handed it over to me without a word. I took a picture and then zoomed in closer and closer. It was a pendant of some kind, an elephant

pendant. It seemed familiar, but I couldn't place where I'd seen it before.

I put it out of my mind, then continued reading through the files, trying to see if there was anything that would clue me in. At some point, Allie called to find out how things were going. I told her we were still at it, ignoring Sean's attempts to be heard over the phone. We continued for what felt like hours before rubbing our eyes tiredly.

"I don't know if we'll find anything else here, boss," Sean finally said, sounding exhausted.

Before I could answer, the phone rang again. I instantly picked it up because it was Allie.

"Marcus!" Allie's voice was in a panic. My heart instantly dropped. "Oh my God, Marcus!"

"What? What is it?"

"They have him!" she cried. "They took our son."

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TWENTY-NINE

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## ALLIE

“What we need to do,” my dad suggested, “is to make an announcement in the papers. Tell them that they had it all wrong those years ago!”

“That won’t help, Dad,” I said tiredly for the third time. I was starting to feel a little like a broken record. I glanced at my sister, who lounged on the couch, and she gave me an apologetic shrug.

Athena had been the one to tell my dad about the people in town’s strange treatment toward us. At first, he thought it was because of the resort. That they were mad it was shutting down. He thought perhaps the town would start freezing us out because he’d lost them their bestseller. My dad had looked so forlorn about the whole thing that I just had to tell him the truth, making him promise to keep it a secret.

Of course, that would be impossible, knowing my dad.

The news had him incensed so much that he’d instantly called a family meeting, inviting my brother over.

And now he was determined to go to the papers with it, to somehow change everyone’s minds by telling them how wrong they were. As if that has ever worked in the history of time.

I was only able to calm him down by telling him that Marcus didn’t want anyone to know yet. Still, my father was adamant. I instantly regretted telling him anything, but I didn’t want him to blame himself for the current situation. Lord knew there was already enough guilt resting on my shoulders.

“Your dad is right, hon,” my mom said, gently bouncing Caleb on her leg. He seemed to be enjoying the bit of fun. “If someone is spreading rumors about poor Marcus, shouldn’t we do the opposite and set them straight?”

“Or we can set them straight in another way,” Adam suggested, smiling

wickedly. “By just slugging whoever is starting the rumors up again in the first place.”

I sighed, rolling my eyes at my brother.

It was kind of ironic that every single one of my family had jumped in defense of Marcus. They all wanted to call him to let him know that they were on his side and that no one could accuse him of being a murderer on their watch.

Considering how their relationship was mere weeks ago, it was all very sweet and heartwarming.

But then it quickly got annoying.

Everyone was tossing out suggestions on what to do about the recent attack on Marcus’ character, but none of them wanted to hear that Marcus himself wanted to keep the whole thing quiet to run his investigation.

“We’re not going to do anything,” I announced for hopefully the final time. “We’re going to respect Marcus’ wishes and keep quiet about the whole thing. He’s handling it.”

Although I understood their feeling. A part of me felt restless doing nothing.

It was like before all over again. Someone was trying to incite the town against him, and they were succeeding. I wanted to go and start attempting to get to the root of the problem with Marcus, but he insisted he went alone because my presence might be a hindrance to what he had to do. I didn’t know what that meant, but I allowed him this time.

It didn’t mean I was going to stand aside doing nothing, either.

Whether he liked it or not, I was going to protect my man.

“Where’s Dad?” Caleb asked, and it startled everyone in the room.

My dad’s eyes flew to mine, delight shining in them. I smiled back at him. It wasn’t the first time Caleb talked to them, but it was the first time he instigated a conversation. We all shared smiles but tried very hard not to make it a big deal.

“Your father’s at the police station, sweetie,” I said, trying to hide the joy swelling in my heart. “He’s getting some things done, and then we’ll meet him at home for lunch.”

Caleb nodded and happily went back to bouncing.

“What’s he doing at the police station?” Athena asked. I told them that Marcus wanted to handle the investigation, but I hadn’t told them exactly what he would be doing.

“He’s trying to figure out who murdered Old Man Clancy,” I replied, figuring I might as well tell the whole story. “He figures that would help clear his name.”

“That’s a good idea.” My father nodded his approval.

“It might not work, though,” Adam pointed out. “People around town might think he’s only trying to cover up his tracks. It might make things worse. Plus, Evan hates him.”

“Why does Evan hate him?”

“Because Evan used to have a huge crush on you, didn’t you know?”

“He did?” That was news to me.

Adam nodded. “Yup. Used to talk about you all the time. Whenever he came over to our house, he would find reasons to bring your name up and see if you were dating anyone. I tried to tell him you weren’t interested, but I think he held out hope, even after all this time. The minute Marcus came back to town, it was like a honey badger was stuck in his craw.”

“Huh,” I said. I had no idea Evan felt that way about me. His harsh reaction when I went to jail to see Marcus made sense now.

I wondered if that was also the reason he didn’t look into the murder all that much after Marcus was caught. Maybe, deep down, he wanted Marcus to be guilty, even if he wasn’t the culprit.

God, I hated to think about people in that way, but with everything that happened recently, everyone became a suspect.

“Yeah,” Adam said. “You sure you don’t want us to go to the police station to back Marcus up? I really don’t know how helpful Evan will be.”

I thought about it, then shook my head. I had to trust that Marcus had it under control.

Just in case, I pulled out my phone to call him.

“Hey.” His voice sounded steady, and it sent a flutter to my chest.

“Hey yourself,” I replied. “How’s it going?”

“We’re finding out some information,” he answered simply, and I couldn’t decipher what I wanted from his tone. He had no gives.

“Is Evan giving you a tough time?” I asked more specifically.

“No, he’s being very cooperative,” he said, and he sounded distinctly amused. I got slightly worried then because, usually, Marcus only got amused when he was about to do something very bad.

“Evan’s not, erm...injured, is he?”

“No, he’s still able-bodied,” he said with a chuckle.



“Is that her?” I heard someone ask, and it didn’t sound like Evan’s voice. “I wanna talk to her.”

There were slight sounds of a scuffle, and I probed, “Who’s that?”

“No one important,” Marcus said, sounding annoyed. “I should be home for lunch.”

“Sounds good. I love you,” I added the last part shyly.

“Love you too,” he said, and I heard a loud ‘aww’ at the other end of the line before the call was clicked off.

My family was also eyeing me with various levels of happiness and disgust.

“You guys are sickening,” Athena commented, and I stuck my tongue out at her happily.

“I should be getting home,” I said. “I still have to pop the roast in the oven before Marcus gets back.”

I got up, and my mother brought Caleb over. I hugged her.

“Drive slowly, sweetheart,” my father cautioned. “The roads are supposed to be extra icy today.”

“Sure thing, Dad,” I said, and with a final round of hugs, Caleb and I were off.

With Caleb secured in the passenger seat, I drove unhurriedly on the roads while humming some Christmas carols on the radio.

I glanced at the rearview mirror halfway through, and that was when I first noticed the unassuming black sedan behind us.

At first, it was only a passing notice as I merged into an incoming traffic light. But the more I drove, the more I realized the car stayed behind me. Every time I glanced in the mirror, there it was, on my bumper.

Was it following me?

I couldn’t see the driver through the tinted windows, and anxiety spiked through me. So, instead of taking the direct route home, I turned onto another street, one that would give us backwoods access. Very, very few cars knew about this street, and even fewer drove on it. In all the years I’d lived here, only my neighbors drove here, and I knew what all their cars looked like. The car following me didn’t look like any of theirs. If the car turned with me, then there was a huge likelihood it was following me.

My heart pounded in my chest. What would I do then?

*Well, then, in that case, I would drive past my house back onto the main road and right down to the police station. I wasn’t letting this guy catch me*

*alone.*

But the minute I pulled onto the street, I saw the car ambling by.

It continued down the road to merge in on the highway, and I breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn't following me after all.

I waited a few minutes to calm my nerves and assure myself that the car wasn't going to double back before I continued my way home.

When we got inside, I locked the door behind us, instantly breathing another sigh of relief.

I then set to work putting the roast in as Caleb plopped down in front of the TV, turning it on.

"Sweetie," I called out to him. "I'm going to take a shower and be right down, okay?"

He nodded, and I headed upstairs. The cold plus the encounter had sent a chill into my bones, and there was nothing like a warm shower to get rid of it.

After the shower, I came right back downstairs, and Caleb was gone.

"Caleb?" I called out, but there was no response. I didn't hear the tell-tale pattering of feet either.

Plus, his coat wasn't hanging on the hook.

I frowned, trying to figure out if he maybe went outside.

When I checked the door and found it unlocked, all my anxiety came back in full blast. Caleb knew he wasn't supposed to go out without asking my permission first. Was there a reason he went? Was he acting up again? He'd been so good before.

Panic ratcheted through my chest, and I yanked open the door, going out into the snow without my coat.

"Caleb!" I screamed, but only my voice echoed out.

I rushed over to Mrs. Winchester's house and banged on her door like a madwoman. She came down looking concerned and a little annoyed.

"Hey, have you seen Caleb?"

She shook her head. "No. I was upstairs watching Jeopardy."

"Oh, God." I frantically turned back around, heading to the other side of the house. And that was when I noticed it. In my haste, I hadn't seen it before.

There were two sets of footprints on the ground.

One was smaller, obviously belonging to a child.

And the other was larger, digging deeper into the snow.

At the edge of the house, the smaller footsteps disappeared, like the child was being carried or snatched.

My entire world spun to a halt.

Someone had been here.

Someone had taken my little boy.

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THIRTY

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## MARCUS

There was blood roaring in my ears as I zoomed down the highway, merging and speeding like a fucking psycho.

I felt like a psycho.

I could sense Sean's concern from the passenger seat. He'd been eyeing me carefully ever since I received the panicked call from Allie. I knew he was worried I'd lost my grip and would get us both killed. And to be honest, he wasn't entirely off.

It wasn't an unreasonable fear to have because I certainly felt like I was skating on the edge of madness. The only thing that was keeping me somewhat grounded was the fact that I knew I couldn't find Caleb if I were dead. I couldn't trust the damned incompetent police who couldn't even investigate a murder case right. If anything happened to me, Caleb would be lost to us forever, and that was simply unacceptable.

If we lost Caleb, I wasn't sure Allie would ever recover.

"He's gone!" Allie had screeched, sounding hysterical on the phone. "They've taken him!"

"What do you mean they've taken him?" At the time, I was having difficulty digesting the news because it was hard to wrap my head around it. My son. My little boy, who looked at me like I hung the moon and had hugged me tightly this morning before I left...taken?

"What the fuck do you mean, Allie? Who took him?"

"I don't know." I heard her swallow and try to restrain the panic enough to give me the information. "We got home, and I locked the doors. I swear I did. Then Caleb was watching TV, and I went upstairs to take a quick shower. But when I came down, he was *gone*." Her voice choked on the last

word. “I thought maybe he went outside, even though I told him not to do that anymore. So I went out to yell for him. I even went over to Mrs. Winchester’s, and she said she hadn’t seen him. And then I saw it.”

“Saw what?” The sinking horror was making my chest tense, my voice harsh. Sean could sense the immediate change in the atmosphere because he stopped pretending to sift through the papers and turned his full attention to me.

“Footsteps. Footsteps other than Caleb’s. They were in my driveway,” she gasped. “His jacket was gone too. Someone came into the house and took our son!” And then she dissolved into loud hacking tears that tore at my sanity.

*That was the last straw.*

The chair I was sitting on flew back as I shot to my feet, and everyone jumped at the sudden movement. They all gave me a wide berth as I stormed to the entrance, a savage kind of fire roaring inside me. It was all their fault, whoever the fuck was doing this, and all the people who hadn’t caught this guy in the first place but had tried to pin it on me.

Well, they succeeded in one thing.

They were determined to turn me into a monster, and a monster was what they would get.

Because whoever took my son, I was going to tear them limb from limb.

“They won’t survive this,” I growled. I could hear Sean hurrying behind me, and he skidded to a stop when I did. A faint thread of rationality had me stopping to turn and glare at the older officer, who was no longer playing video games on his phone. He cowered before my gaze.

“My son is missing. I want every available officer you have looking for him. You’re not going to like what I do to you if you don’t find him. Do you understand?”

I must have looked like one scary motherfucker because he didn’t even give me any lip service. He simply nodded and grabbed the police radio on his table, barking out orders.

I had no recollection of storming into the parking lot and getting into my car, but suddenly, once I was there, I didn’t waste any time as I zipped out of the parking lot. Sean was in the seat beside me, but he was sensible enough to remain silent. I think he knew I was liable to bite anyone’s head off at this point.

And I still felt like that as I drove.

Thankfully, we arrived at Allie's home in one piece. The door tore open the minute we pulled in, and Allie ran out in a T-shirt and sweats, her hair a mass of wet curls around her head.

She flew into my arms, and I caught her, holding her as she sobbed into my neck. My heart squeezed so hard that it was painful.

"Our baby," she cried helplessly. "They took our baby, Marcus."

"Ssh," I consoled, running soothing hands down her back even as violence bubbled and stewed inside me. "We'll get him back, I swear."

I glanced at Sean, gesturing with my chin. He got my meaning, immediately whipping out his phone. I knew he would contact his PI friend to see if there was anything they could find out about the kidnapper. We needed all the information we could get.

As I held Allie, I refused to give in to the climbing despair. We still had no clues thus far, nothing to indicate who had fucking done this. Was it the same man who killed Old Man Clancy? Did he want me to leave town to hide his tracks?

Or was it one of the countless other townspeople who hated my guts?

The sudden ringing of my phone distracted my morose thoughts.

I pulled it out, frowning at the caller ID. It was my mother. I answered in case it was an emergency.

"It's not a good time," I said to her.

"I caught him," she announced smugly. "The bastard who's been sneaking around here."

I growled. "There is someone?"

"Yup. I told you, yet you didn't believe me. But I wasn't crazy. You should come over and see him. He says he has a message for you."

"He can get in line. I'll call the police first to get him for trespassing."

My mother was quiet for a little bit, too, before she said, "I think you should come. And bring your girlfriend too if you want. He insists that whatever he has to say is really important and pertinent to the murder all those years ago."

I frowned. I didn't have time to entertain any bullshit right now, but just in case he had information, I needed to know what it was. Plus, my mother didn't live too far away.

"We're on our way," I told her, relenting.

"Alright. Don't worry. I'll make sure he doesn't leave. I have him at gunpoint."

“Don’t shoot him till we get there,” I instructed, then hung up.

“Come on,” I said to Allie.

“Where are we going?”

“My mom’s house,” I answered. “There might be a clue there.”

We headed toward the car, and Sean came up to us. I saw him and Allie share a look, and then she eyed him curiously.

“Sean Goldman,” he said, smiling weakly. “I wish we were meeting under better circumstances.”

Allie managed a polite smile, but it didn’t meet her eyes. “Me too.”

I drove more carefully when going to my mother’s house, mostly because Allie was in the car. I didn’t want to scare her on top of all the trauma that was already happening.

True to my mother’s word, she did have the man at gunpoint. However, man may not have been the word for him. He was a pimply-faced kid who looked like he had just finished high school, and he was understandably scared out of his wits.

“Put the gun down, Ma,” I said upon entering the door.

She frowned at me but slowly lowered the weapon as I scanned the boy on the couch.

“Hi, Mrs. Peters,” Allie greeted weakly, ever the epitome of politeness.

Mom replied with a grudging nod, but there was none of the usual animosity behind it. Good. I wouldn’t allow her to be rude to Allie to her face too.

I returned my gaze to the boy, who didn’t seem to want to hold my gaze.

“Do I know you?” I interrogated.

He jumped as though startled.

“No,” he muttered instantly, then shook his head. “I mean, yes. Yes, I... I’m Norman. I used to sometimes work at the butcher shop during the summers, the one opposite Old Man Clancy’s trinket store.”

“Ah.” I vaguely remembered the kid. He’d been a teenager when I left, and while he still looked like one, he had to be around twenty-five by now. “What do you have to say to me?”

“Uhm.” His hands squeezed into fists as he gathered his nerve, and I could see the faintest tremble in his knees. Whatever this kid had to say, he was terrified of it. “I’ve been meaning...meaning to talk to you for a long time...for years. But then you left town, and I didn’t know how to get to you. I came around your mom’s place a couple of times, but I never could work up



to...you see, he threatened me. I swear I wanted to tell you, but he threatened my life.”

“Spit it out,” I groused, having no patience for his rambling. “And quickly.”

“Yes, well.” He cleared his throat. “I know you didn’t kill Old Man Clancy.”

“How?”

“I know. Because I saw who did it. I saw him walking away from the place with blood on his hands. He was frantic. Like he didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know he’d killed anyone at the time, but he threatened me, made me swear never to tell anyone I’d seen him.”

“Who was it?”

He hesitated.

“I swear to God, however scary you think this guy is, I promise you I’m a thousand times scarier. Tell me his name.”

“I don’t know his name,” he finally said. “He was average looking and about average height and everything. But his eyes were scary as fuck.”

“That’s not enough,” I snarled. “Tell me something, you bastard.”

“Um, I don’t know.” He started to get even more nervous. “I swear I don’t. Um, he was just bloody and weird and kept talking to himself while holding this broken necklace in his hand.”

“Wait, a necklace?” I ran my hand through my hair and remembered the pendant.

It was bugging me where I’d seen it before. I’d seen it around the same time too, and then suddenly, I remembered the context. Like a lightning bolt, it struck me.

Allie.

The necklace was one of those pairs that couples wore. She had shown me a necklace like that, one that had a similar elephant pendant.

I remembered her telling me who had given it to her.

And then, instantly, everything clicked.

I turned to glance at Allie to see if she had made the connection, but her eyes were blank. I would break the news to her later because right now, I had to find our son.

“Give me your phone.”

A COUPLE OF HOURS LATER, I walked up the stairs to Royal Heat Motel Room 105.

Sean's guy had managed to track the phone number we gave him from Allie's phone, and he told us that the guy was in town. He'd arrived a few nights ago, just a day before the spray painting incident.

Just in time to spread rumors about us.

And to kidnap my son.

It was Ken.

As I approached the door, there was sobbing on the other side, heard clearly through the thin walls.

"Shut up." I could hear Ken's voice through the door, and he sounded insane, his voice a savage calm. "I told you not to cry, didn't I? If you keep making that incessant sound, I'm going to find your mother, and I'm going to kill her. Remember our little deal? You don't say a word again, and I won't hurt your mom. Okay?"

The sobbing reduced, but I could still hear the pain in my son's voice.

And the more I listened, the more the murderous rage built in my chest.

"You were supposed to keep your trap shut after I left," Ken spat. "You were supposed to shut the fuck up so she'd eventually see that she couldn't do this shit without me. But you fucked that up. All of you did. Like Old Man Clancy. You know what he said to me that night when I asked him what that bastard was doing in his shop? He said he was buying Allie a necklace. Said that they made a cute couple. Far more than her and me. He deliberately provoked me, laughing when he did." There were footsteps on the ground as if he'd started pacing. "So what else could I do? I lost my mind and beat him up until he was dead. He shouldn't have told me that. In the same way, you shouldn't have talked. And now, here we are."

"Please don't hurt my mommy," Caleb begged in a soft voice that physically hurt me. Now we knew why he was always so terrified whenever Allie stayed out late.

Ken terrified him by telling him he would kill his mother.

The man was insane.

And on top of that, he was the one who traumatized my boy too.

There was no question about it. He was going to die.

I just needed Sean and his team to give me the go-ahead. They were flying a drone up to the window to see if he was armed. I didn't want Caleb to end up being shot because of my hastiness. So I waited, listening to the

disgusting words. Waited till my screen flashed.

*Clear.*

That was all I needed.

I broke down the door in one swift move and launched myself at Ken before he even registered the shock. My heart was an avalanche of rage when I saw the man who'd taken my son. The first hit had blood pouring from his nose. The second one popped out one of his teeth. And I still wasn't satisfied. I wouldn't be satisfied until he was dead.

His eyes were wide with fear. There were no words between us because it was not needed. All he needed to understand was violence. My fist automatically plowed into his face. I wanted to beat him to death.

And I had every intention of it, plowing my fist into his face again and again and again.

But somewhere through the haze of rage, I thought of my son.

*He was sitting there watching this.* I didn't want him to see me like that. I didn't want to be the same as this murdering psychopath.

So with every ounce of my control, I stopped.

Ken was already halfway passed out at my feet—his face a bleeding mess below me—when I turned to Caleb, afraid that I'd scared him.

He was staring at me, frozen.

“Come here, son,” I said, holding up my bloodied hands.

To my surprise, Caleb didn't hesitate.

He ran to me and sobbed his heart out. I held him tightly, feeling my heart break too.

Somewhere in the distance, I heard the police sirens. I also heard Sean coming in with Allie, both of them screaming for us. Allie fell to her knees, wrapping her arm around her son, her other hand clutching mine even though it was bloody.

I held both of them.

My family.

My world.

They were finally safe.

# EPILOGUE

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ALLIE

They were going to drive me nuts.

“Geronimo!” Caleb cried out before squealing in laughter as my dad tossed him high in the air.

“Not too high, Dad!” I called out nervously.

“Don’t forget about your heart, hon,” my mother cautioned.

“Y’all are a bunch of worry warts,” my father said, winking at Caleb, who was now sitting on his shoulders, his chest pounding with excitement. “We’re fine, aren’t we, buddy?”

Caleb nodded fervently, beaming from ear to ear.

My mother and I glanced at each other and rolled our eyes in unison before heading toward the kitchen, narrowly avoiding barreling into another little boy on the way.

The house was filled with noise, laughter, and chatter from every corner. People from around the town, family friends, and even some strangers who were staying at the resort had been stopping by all day, and some of them hadn’t left yet. Kids were making snowmen outside, there was eggnog cooking, and everyone was getting into the Christmas spirit.

“Never thought I would see your home get this full,” my mother commented, amused, and I had to agree.

When Marcus had shown me the new home he’d built for us to move into, I’d gasped.

“It’s too big,” I told him. It was a three-story mansion that was on the outskirts of town, right at the base of the hill that led to Leeroy’s mountainside. The house was large and charming, and the view was beautiful, but I was concerned the space would be too big for us.

But now I was glad for the extra room because, with my family, his mother, our kids, and various other well-wishers packed in, there was just enough space to move around.

My mom and I continued into the kitchen and filled up the snack bowl so that our guests had something to munch on. Marcus was currently outside, talking to Vernon, who needed advice on how to catch whoever was stealing his cows.

“When do you think we should go out there and rescue him?” I voiced in amusement.

My mother gave me a look. “You’re on your own with that, sweetie. Even I don’t have the boldness to take Vernon on once he starts his complaining.”

I laughed, feeling sorry for leaving Marcus with the old man.

Just about every weekend for the past few months, Vernon had become a steady visitor to our home. After Marcus solved the murder that the police couldn’t, the old man decided that Marcus was some kind of genius detective and brought him news of any crime that was occurring in town. Marcus didn’t do anything about it, but he surprisingly indulged the old man’s ramblings, as grumpy as he was about it.

Marcus’ popularity skyrocketed after he caught Old Man Clancy’s murderer. News about it reached several channels and trended on social media, and he gained the admiration of people around the world. There were even campaigns and petitions signed to make him the mayor of the town.

None of that interested Marcus, and he ignored his newfound celebrity.

Even a year later, I was still in shock about the whole thing. When I walked into the room to find Ken’s bloody body on the floor, I didn’t know whether to laugh at the joy that my son was safe or cry because of everything he’d been through.

After Marcus first told me that Ken was Old Man Clancy’s killer, I didn’t believe him.

It seemed like a ridiculous story.

Ken had been my friend since I was a child. We hadn’t been super close in high school, but then we’d reconnected after. He was a nice, well-adjusted man, to the best of my knowledge.

He wasn’t the type who would simply kill someone.

But it seemed I was wrong. I was a terrible judge of character, and I had allowed a murderer into my home. Around my son.

And even worse, I'd let him terrorize my little boy for God knew how long, to the point where he even refused to speak.

Shame and guilt nearly overwhelmed me at the thought. That night, as we took Caleb to the hospital to make sure everything was alright, I broke down in the hallway, weeping for everything Caleb had been through.

"It's all my fault!" I cried, clutching my chest as the pain pierced deeply. I felt Marcus' strong arms wrap around me, but even that wasn't much comfort. "He hurt my little boy. How could I have let that happen?"

"Shh," Marcus whispered consolingly, his hand rubbing over my hair. I could hear the pain in his voice, too, even though he didn't cry. "You didn't know."

"Exactly." I grasped his shoulders, looking into his eyes with despair. "How could I not know? I'm his mother! I'm supposed to protect him, yet I let him hurt my son! I was so stupid! I'm a horrible mother!"

Marcus continued to comfort me, but there was no solace to be had that night. Or the next. Thankfully, according to the ER doctor and Dr. Hammond, Ken never sexually or physically abused Caleb. Merely threatened him. But still, that was bad. He was so small, so vulnerable, as he couldn't defend himself. I was supposed to protect him, but I hadn't paid enough attention.

I thought I would never forgive myself.

Even though Caleb forgave me.

That night, as Caleb was resting my arms, lying between Marcus and me, he whispered, "Mommy?"

"Yes, baby?"

"I'm happy you'll be safe now."

I felt the tears rolling down my cheek. It choked my throat, and I couldn't breathe. I pressed a kiss to his head and his cheek, wanting to hold him forever and never let go. My brave little boy was thinking of me this whole time.

I was determined to protect him from then on.

I would watch out and wouldn't naively trust people. I would make sure I knew who they were before I let them into my son's life. That was how I would make up for my carelessness.

Luckily, it seemed the incident didn't traumatize Caleb as much as I thought it would. On the contrary, he slowly began acting like every normal kid, talking more and even playing around. Dr. Hammond said it was

understandable since Caleb felt safe now that the threat was behind bars. I didn't care why it was happening. I was just happy my little boy was back to me.

And it was all thanks to Marcus.

After the incident, the town's attitude toward Marcus did a complete one-eighty. Evan was fired for his incompetent handling of the case, and certain people came one by one to personally apologize to Marcus for the accusations.

*Too little too late*, I thought, annoyed by their audacity. But surprisingly, Marcus was a lot more gracious than I was. He simply shrugged the whole thing off, accepting it as it was.

They supported him as he finished the resort renovations with my family's support. The people of the town helped push the advertising, too, and the news stories on Marcus didn't hurt. We had loads of sign-ups this year, though some people only wanted to meet the local celebrity who caught the murderer. Due to this, the town's efforts, and Marcus' brilliant marketing, the resort's relaunch turned into a roaring success.

He was so amazing.

And I got to call the man my future husband.

"Okay, he's been out there for ten minutes," I said. "I think he's been tortured enough. I'm going out."

"Good luck," my mother called out as I left the kitchen. On my way, I caught sight of Marcus' mother and Athena having a conversation in the living room. Probably about the pitfalls of men. It seemed that both of them liked each other very well and agreed on that point exponentially. Marcus' mother had finally accepted our relationship, especially after my entire family went over to extend a formal apology to her.

She'd ignored the apology at first, which I understood. But eventually, Marcus spoke to her, and she warmed up slightly.

As I was about to head outside, I caught her eyes, so I waved and smiled. She nodded back, which was as good as it got.

When I got to the front yard, I saw Marcus holding our little girl in his arms while nodding distractedly at whatever Vernon was saying. All his attention was on our child.

Amara.

It was like there was sunshine sitting in my chest as I observed them.

Ever since my daughter was born, Marcus had been protective over her.



So had Caleb. The two males doted over her and watched her like she hung the moon.

And my daughter practically preened under the attention. Right now, she was staring up at her father in adoration.

“Sorry,” I said, walking up to them and interrupting Vernon’s complaints about stolen cows. “I have to borrow my future husband. Do you mind?”

“Ohh.” He looked like he did mind, but in the Christmas spirit, he merely smiled.

I dragged Marcus away to the backyard, and once we got there, he pulled me into a deep kiss, one that had my heart singing.

“You’re welcome,” I teased when we pulled apart, amused. He winked as our daughter chortled, and he immediately turned his attention back to her.

I smiled down at her too. “It seems you’ve completely stolen his heart, Amara.”

Amara blinked at me and then smiled as she kicked her foot up and down.

“She and Caleb have my heart,” Marcus said in a soft voice. “But you own my soul.”

I couldn’t help it. I kissed him again. “You own my soul too.”

The End.

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Then you’ll love Doctor Grump!**

**I need money.  
He needs a nanny.  
And the last thing we need is this unexpected baby.**

Dr. Ian Graham is a lot of things.  
A veteran single dad, twice my age, and my new grumpy boss.

FYI, I have zero experience being a nanny.  
But his precocious daughter insists to hire me after I’d saved her from an  
accident.

I need a job and a place to stay anyway.  
So, why not?  
Furthermore, how hard can it be to be a live-in nanny, right?

*Wrong.*

Living under the same roof as Dr. Ian is *torturous*.  
Tearing my eyes away from those hot chiseled abs and muscular arms is a  
tough job.  
Did he always forget to put his shirt on?

I should've kept a distance when I found out about his troubled past.

But it's too late now.  
I'm pregnant with his baby...

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# DOCTOR GRUMP (SNEAK PEEK)

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## CHAPTER ONE

### **Start reading Doctor Grump NOW!**

“If they don’t bury that old hag in the next fifteen minutes, I’m going to melt from this heat,” my mother muttered in what she likely thought was a whisper. However, she quickly caught the attention of a few of my cousins sitting in front. One of them turned and gave my mother a dirty glare.

It was a pretty miserable day, even for a funeral.

“Mom,” my sister, Patricia, hissed. “Not so loud.”

“Oh, what?” My mother threw her hands up in exasperation. “This has been going on long enough already. Do they plan to keep us here till nighttime? Ugh, of course. Your grandmother was unpleasant in life. It only figures that she would choose to die in one of the hottest summers in a decade.”

“Oh please, Eugenia,” my father snapped, wiping his brow with his handkerchief. “Have some tact. The woman just died.”

“Yeah, so what?” My mother glared at him. “She hated me when she was alive. Am I supposed to weep for her now that she’s dead?”

“Jesus, you don’t have to mourn her, but at least have the decency to not be so loud in your insults. Everyone can hear you.”

“Let them hear. Fucking traitorous snobs, all of them. After everything our family has been through in the past few months, none of them have even bothered to check in or help us. As far as I’m concerned, they can all go to h \_\_\_”

“It’s okay, Mom,” I said in a soothing tone, putting my hand on hers. “I’m pretty sure Uncle Fred is about to give the last speech. We’ll get to the

reading of the will after that.”

I knew hearing about the will was the only thing that could calm my mother at this point, and I was right. She nodded and didn't say anything else, fanning herself with her hand fan as she waited for the priest to finish the final points of his sermon. My father gave me a thankful look, but I could tell that despite his admonitions, he didn't have as much care about his mother's death as he did about the way people would view us for not showing adequate sympathy. After all, she was only his stepmother. My father was a product of an affair between his father and another woman, which tainted his relationship with his stepmother his entire adult life. While she had reluctantly admitted him into the family when he turned eighteen, she never made it a secret that she had no love for him—not even an ounce of maternal instinct toward him.

But that could have just been Judith's manner. I doubted the older woman had a maternal bone in her body.

I looked around the room, searching amongst the faces in attendance. There were about three dozen people here, most of whom were members of the extremely large and powerful Santorini clan. The main branch of the family, led by Judith's oldest son, Fred, stood closer to the gravesite, where they had already placed her body in the ground. Fred, on the other hand, stood by the priest, and his twin daughters stood behind him, looking bored as hell. His wife, looking fashionable in her black Armani suit, was constantly checking her phone, probably needing to get to a meeting for their company. I had no doubt she didn't want to be there. In general, no one at the funeral looked like they wanted to be there or were even mournful. Their expressions showed various shades of boredom and anticipation about what was to come next. No one was crying. Everyone seemed to only want to get over the formalities and proceed to the main event—the reading of the will.

Everyone except me.

Sadness sat heavy in my heart, as it had been ever since I received news of my grandmother's death.

In the grand scheme of things, I guess I couldn't blame my family for their indifference. Judith was often a harsh woman who could be cruel with her words. She had been raised in an era where women had to be cold and unforgiving to be taken seriously in the business world, so that was her defense mechanism against the cutthroat nature of her society. She hardly imparted any warmth toward her children, so it might have been too idealistic

to expect them to feel anything but a sense of duty for her at this point.

Still, I couldn't help feeling resentful toward them.

No one here cared that she was dead.

No one here had probably even known who Judith was beyond the businesswoman. They didn't know what she was like in those last few days when her disease stripped her of her harsh defensive nature and left her vulnerable. They probably hadn't seen beyond the billion-dollar will she would eventually impart to them.

They hadn't sat with her on the porch for hours, listening to her tell stories of her childhood. Hadn't seen her nearly shed tears over the loss of her first love, a man who had been poor but kind and who she fought for but eventually had to give up due to her family pressures. They hadn't heard her speak of all her regrets in life and seek peace in her memories as pain ravaged her body and eventually took her life.

They didn't mourn her because they didn't know her.

And perhaps I didn't either.

But I thought I knew who she was during these last few years when we had gotten close, and it was for that woman that my heart was heavy. It was the reason I wanted the funeral to be over, so I could go home and cry for her alone.

"No one will miss me when I'm gone," she had bemoaned the last time we met. She was looking off into the sunset at the time, lying down on a pile of goose feather pillows.

"That's not true," I refuted. "I just went to the company yesterday, and everyone there was talking about you and how much they can't wait for you to get better."

She turned to look at me with a sardonic smile. "You have no understanding of how the world works, do you? Those people don't miss me. They need me. There's a difference."

"I'll miss you," I replied.

"That's only because you're completely pathetic without me."

Her tone was harsh but laced with that sadness that pricked at my heart strings. The woman was often prickly, but I noticed it was only to hide her true feelings. She was especially prickly with me because, despite herself, she actually liked me. I could tell she hadn't wanted to, but as my friend, Lucia, would say, I'm infectiously likable.

I usually combated her attitude by being as nice to her as possible. It was

the only way to disarm her.

“And you’re right,” I said. “I am completely pathetic without you. So you better not go anywhere anytime soon.”

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I won’t be dying.”

But of course, that had been a lie.

In her defense, I did not doubt that she hadn’t expected to die right now.

But her disease had been too advanced, and she passed away one day in her sleep.

The jingle of a phone interrupted the solemn speech, and several eyes turned to glare at us once more.

“Jesus, Eugenia,” my father muttered as my mother ignored him, pulling out her phone. She looked down at it, and all of a sudden, her face lit up.

“Oh, good news,” my mother whispered suddenly and glanced at me with a bright glint in her eyes. “Especially for you, Piper.”

“For me?” I asked quizzically.

“Yes,” she said. “It seems the count will be arriving soon, and he is very excited to meet you again in person.”

Dread sank into my stomach. *As if today couldn’t get any worse.*

The count was an elderly man, an old friend of the family that I met once during one of the numerous family gatherings. Of course, being my usually stupidly friendly self, I introduced myself to the man and kept him company during the event. I felt bad because he had seemed so awkward and out of place, and I tried to ease the awkwardness with meaningless conversation. Apparently, that had been enough for him to fall madly in love with me, according to my mother.

And now she had it in her head that I would marry the count so that they had a chance at his enormous fortune.

I thought it was some kind of joke at first, but as the days passed, it became less and less funny.

“Mom, I don’t think I can—” I said, but she glared at me.

“No, don’t give me any more excuses, Piper,” she chastised. “I’ve had enough of that. You will be meeting with him. Who knows, you might even like him and end up being the one to save our family from this debt once and for all.”

“Oh please, Mom, I doubt the entire family is riding on the minuscule chance that the count wants to marry me. Besides, I’m not going to marry the man for his money. How antiquated is that?”

“The count will definitely marry you,” my mother said, deliberately ignoring everything else I said. “The man couldn’t shut up about you. And as you know, he has a....” She ran a scanning and vaguely insulting eye over my figure. “A type. You are the spitting image of his ex-wife.”

“The one who died in an ‘accident.’” I put air quotes around the last word, and my mother rolled her eyes.

“Don’t tell me about your ridiculous theories anymore. He didn’t kill his wife.”

“You don’t know that,” I said, feeling my frustration bubble up. “Dad—”

I turned to my father pleadingly for support, but he gave me a weak smile in response. “We’re all doing our best to stay afloat, honey. Your association with the count would go a long way to helping us get back on our feet.” The eye bags under his eyes were a testament to how hard he had been working to resolve our current monetary issues. He had basically turned into an errand boy for his half-brother, Fred, in hopes that once Fred inherited the majority of Judith’s fortune, he would get a sizeable cut.

“Yeah, Piper,” Patricia hissed. “We’re all trying our best. I’m sure if I were fat too, I would marry the count.”

“Patricia, that’s enough,” my father scolded, but he needn’t have. The truth was that my sister’s barbs barely hurt anymore. I had come to terms with my figure a while ago, and while my curvy size fourteen frame might not be everyone’s cup of tea, I knew it wasn’t ugly. Just a little on the chubby side.

And apparently, the count liked that. A lot.

And my family was willing to sell me off because of it.

I couldn’t lie; the disloyalty hurt. When my grandmother had still been alive, my father supported me against the whole marrying the count thing. At the time, I knew he hoped Judith would leave me portions of her fortune since they knew of her fondness for me, but I wasn’t so sure she left me much in the will. Not enough to cover our debts anyway. Judith had always made it clear that only her blood children would receive anything from her. And now everything hung in the balance.

“Alright,” Fred said, clapping his hands together. “We’ll now be moving on to the reading of the will.”

“Hang on,” my grandmother’s lawyer said. “We’re just waiting for one more person.”



Fred frowned. “Who?”

“Me,” came a deep familiar voice. It was a baritone from the heavens itself, a voice that sent shivers of lust running through me even before I turned around to meet the cool green gaze of Ian Graham.

The most fascinating man in the world.

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