

Single Dads

Big Hearts

A PIPER RAYNE ROMANCE COLLECTION



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

PIPER RAYNE

Single Dads Big Hearts

PIPER RAYNE

Free Downloads

[CLICK HERE](#) to join our NEWSLETTER and receive 6 FREE Prequels that aren't sold on retailers!

Who doesn't love
FREE

Click Here
to join our newsletter and get 6 FREE books

PIPER RAYNE
Heartwarming humor with a side of sizzle

Contents

Mad About the Banker

Dedication

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Chapter 36

[Chapter 37](#)
[Chapter 38](#)
[Chapter 39](#)
[Chapter 40](#)
[Chapter 41](#)
[Epilogue](#)
[Acknowledgements](#)

[Dirty Talker](#)

[Dedication](#)
[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)
[Chapter 4](#)
[Chapter 5](#)
[Chapter 6](#)
[Chapter 7](#)
[Chapter 8](#)
[Chapter 9](#)
[Chapter 10](#)
[Chapter 11](#)
[Chapter 12](#)
[Chapter 13](#)
[Chapter 14](#)
[Chapter 15](#)
[Chapter 16](#)
[Chapter 17](#)
[Chapter 18](#)
[Chapter 19](#)
[Chapter 20](#)
[Chapter 21](#)
[Chapter 22](#)
[Chapter 23](#)
[Chapter 24](#)
[Chapter 25](#)
[Chapter 26](#)
[Chapter 27](#)
[Chapter 28](#)
[Epilogue](#)
[Cockamamie Unicorn Ramblings](#)

[Faking it with #41](#)

[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)
[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)
[Chapter 6](#)
[Chapter 7](#)
[Chapter 8](#)
[Chapter 9](#)
[Chapter 10](#)
[Chapter 11](#)
[Chapter 12](#)
[Chapter 13](#)
[Chapter 14](#)
[Chapter 15](#)
[Chapter 16](#)
[Chapter 17](#)
[Chapter 18](#)
[Chapter 19](#)
[Chapter 20](#)
[Chapter 21](#)
[Chapter 22](#)
[Chapter 23](#)
[Chapter 24](#)
[Chapter 25](#)
[Chapter 26](#)
[Chapter 27](#)
[Chapter 28](#)
[Chapter 29](#)
[Chapter 30](#)
[Chapter 31](#)
[Chapter 32](#)
[Chapter 33](#)
[Chapter 34](#)
[Epilogue](#)
[Cockamamie Unicorn Ramblings](#)

[My Twist of Fortune](#)

[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)
[Chapter 4](#)
[Chapter 5](#)
[Chapter 6](#)
[Chapter 7](#)
[Chapter 8](#)
[Chapter 9](#)
[Chapter 10](#)
[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Freebie](#)

[About Piper & Rayne](#)

[Also by Piper Rayne](#)

MAD *about the* BANKER



PIPER RAYNE

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

© 2017 by Piper Rayne

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever.

Cover design: RBA Designs

Line Editor: RJ Locksley

Proofreader: Behind the Writer

About Mad About the Banker

Who knew my brother's friend could be Mr. Right, and not just Mr. Right Now?

My brother refused to introduce me, so I blame him. If he'd just caved, and introduced me to Jasper, I wouldn't be in this mess. I mean, really, what's the big deal? I'm not interested in the guy's looks.

Oh no, I want his cold hard cash. (Be honest, you were expecting that other four letter 'c' word weren't you?)

Now, before you go getting all judgy, I'm not a gold digger. I have a legitimate business opportunity for Jasper to invest in. The problem is that my stick-up-his-ass brother is embarrassed that his twin sister invents kick ass sex toys. His problem, not mine.

So, I took matters into my own hands. Defeat isn't a word in Lennon Hart's dictionary.

Using my stealthy P.I. moves, I narrowed my search to a time and place where I knew I could find him. It was completely innocent. A chance meeting that would give me the opportunity to pitch my business.

It wasn't until I sat down across from the gorgeous panty soaking man in front of me, that I realized I wanted so much more than just his money. I could very well want his heart if I wasn't careful.

Apparently my P.I. skills aren't as stellar as I thought because Jasper had his own secret—and it changed EVERYTHING.

MAD
about the
BANKER
PIPER RAYNE

Dedication

To the wild child in all of us!



CHAPTER

One

I **SLAM** my portfolio down on the mahogany table at the Thirsty Monk. Whitney's blue eyes widen and Tahlia's white wine splashes in her glass. Her manicured hands stop it from spilling. Of course. I shouldn't be surprised because her life is working out fucking fantastic.

"What's wrong?" Whitney asks, leaning forward in her ivory blouse and matching pant suit.

My two best friends sit at the table, eyes zeroed in on me. They have everything going for them. Their dream careers, check. Dream guys, check. Okay, other than the fact that they each found their unicorn cocks, I'm not that jealous of the monogamy aspect of their life. I mean, one day, they'll probably be envious of my ability to nail a new guy every week, but right now they're thoroughly enjoying the one magical cock in the universe that can deliver the type of orgasms every girl dreams of—hence unicorn cock.

"Another bank shot me down." I sit my ass down in the booth and let out a long sigh. "I thought San Francisco was supposed to be liberal? Every banker has a rod up their ass, when if they'd just change it out for one of my dildos they'd probably be on their knees begging to invest in my sex toy company." I slump in the seat.

Whitney raises her hand for the waitress.

A minute later, a whiskey neat is sitting in front of me. Yeah, we come here a lot. It's where Whitney and Cole first met, not to mention it's Cole's bar that he bought from his dad's empire. Long story, but just another example of how everyone gets their dream, except for me.

I down the glass, enjoying the burn as it travels past my throat. I've

probably been indulging a little too much lately, but there's no one counting my drinks. Might as well add 'drunk' to my list of flaws.

"Another one?" Tahl's lips dip down and she reaches across the table to touch my hand in sympathy. "Do you want me to look at your business plan?"

She offers with every decline and I refuse each time. She worked as vice-president of her father's sausage company—I know, I can barely say that with a straight face—and now she's started her own successful party-planning business. She'd probably redo everything I have, but I went to college too. Switched my major from art to business. Maybe not magna cum laude like Tahl, but I like to think I'm not the dullest pencil in the box. Plus, there's a satisfaction of doing this on my own, without the help of my friends.

"No. I got it."

The perky red-headed waitress drops off another whiskey neat, which I quickly lift to my mouth.

"Cole's outdone himself with this one." I raise my cup up in the air and Whitney proudly smiles at my compliment toward her boyfriend.

"He'll be here in a few, so you can tell him yourself." She sips her own mixed drink which I'm sure contains Rock Hard Whiskey—Cole's distillery.

"Great." Any hint of excitement in my tone is void.

"Lucas is, too. We thought we'd all go to the movies tonight," Tahlia says, excitement bouncing through every octave in her voice.

Another fifth wheel date? No thanks.

"I might have other plans." I eye the new bartender.

Whitney and Tahlia both turn their heads and swivel back my way with huge grins.

"Slade," Whitney sighs. "He's new." Her voice is slow and sultry.

"Hey, Cole." I wave at the door like he's actually here and Whitney's back snaps straight, her eyes searching for him before they zero in on me. "You shouldn't be ogling other men, Whit," I say with fake seriousness.

"I'm sure he looks at other girls," she comments, leaning back in her chair and sipping her drink.

"You think?" Tahl asks, clearly not as comfortable with the fact that her lover dearest Lucas' eyes could stray for a second.

Whitney's brows crinkle. "Tahl, you don't mind staring at Slade, do you?"

Tahlia gives him another look over at the bar before turning her attention

to us. “No, but I’m not thinking about going home with him.”

Whitney laughs and I sit back, enjoying the exchange between my two friends, who have never truly enjoyed having casual sexcapades. They’re the ones who want marriage, kids, a house. I’m the odd man out when it comes to the three of us.

“Of course not. It’s like when you go to a strip club. You look, but you’re more than happy to go home at night,” Whitney says.

I scoff. “But I bet you bang your boyfriend like a naughty, naughty girl after the guy at the club has got you all horned up.”

Both their eyes zoom to mine and I raise my eyebrows in a challenge. They know I’m telling the truth.

“No,” Whitney argues, while Tahlia takes refuge in her glass of white wine.

“Hmm... I think one of us does.” I laugh.

Whitney turns to Tahl, but she’s so busy guzzling down her Moscato, she pretends she’s not paying attention. Whitney dips her head lower so she’s in Tahlia’s line of vision.

“Once, okay. It was Chase so it doesn’t count.” She sips her wine again, her face matching her red blouse.

“You can’t erase your past, Tahl, but I’m looking at you in a whole new light.” I raise my glass to her and sip my whiskey.

She rolls her eyes and stares off, forever the débutante who is too self-conscious to be unleashed. “New topic, please,” she mumbles.

“Let’s talk about the fact that you gave me one of your sex toys and only told my boyfriend about the app.” Whitney’s drink slams down on the table and she gives me an admonishing glare.

A roar of laughter throttles out of me. “He finally did it, huh?”

I’d secretly told Cole that he could control the toy with his phone. It’s the impromptu sex toys that I love so much.

“In the middle of dinner with my grandparents! Now they think I loooove tuna casserole. Thanks.” Whitney tilts her head, but I’m too busy laughing to really see if she’s mad or not.

“Great though?” I ask and Tahl leans forward, wanting the answer as much as I do.

“Fucking awesome.” The corners of Whitney’s lips turn up. “Brilliant, of course.”

“So, write me a review on the product,” I remind her and she nods.

“I’ll have Cole write one up too. I’m not sure which one of us got more pleasure from it.” The waitress brings another drink over to Whitney and then places chips and salsa on the table. Must be happy hour. “Make a guy version so I can give him a little payback.” She waggles her eyebrows and I nod, agreeing.

“Payback for what?” Cole asks, leaning over and giving his girlfriend a kiss.

“Hey,” Lucas says, leaning down to give me a one-armed hug and then moving toward Tahlia.

“Hey, guys,” I say, but each of them are busy saying hello to their unicorn cock owners.

Lucas unbuttons his suit jacket, shrugging it off and placing it behind him on the chair. After he sits, he leans over and kisses Tahlia.

“Hey, baby,” he says and she places her hands on his cheeks, leaning into his touch.

Damn, they make monogamy look good.

“So, Cole. Whit was just telling me about the app.” I stifle a laugh with my hand.

This is where I should probably just leave and let them do their coupledom crap, but hearing a little praise about my sex toys takes precedence after the shitty week I’ve had.

“Classic. Seriously, Len. You have a gift.” Cole smacks his hand on the table, rearing back in laughter.

“What am I missing?” Lucas asks, taking a swig of the beer that the waitress just brought over.

Like I said, we’re here a lot.

“You didn’t give them one?” Cole asks me, as though it’s the latest toy on the market that everyone can get their hands on. That’s the idea, but capitalist motherfuckers are making it difficult.

“Nope, just you two,” I say.

“Oh, you gotta give him one.” Cole swings his gaze to Lucas. “There’s this toy that you have the girl wear and then an app controls it. Whitney practically had splinters under her fingernails from gripping the table so hard.” He’s like a kid who’s met his idol, pulling out his phone, demonstrating the pressure to Lucas.

“How did you get her to wear it?” Lucas asks and Cole eyes me.

I shrug. “I told Whit that it was just supposed to keep you mildly

stimulated throughout the night so there'd be more urgency when you got home."

Tahlia's wide gaze shifts to Whitney. "You wore it when you were having dinner at your grandparents?"

"I was trying it out. I didn't believe it would work and Cole was pushing me to wear it." She glares at him from the corner of her eyes and he wraps his arm around her shoulders.

"It worked." His eyes light up and the entire table laughs.

I love my friends and their boyfriends are great extensions to our group. Each one I'd have picked out for them myself.

"I want one," Lucas pipes up like I'm the ice cream truck and he's six.

"Invest, Mr. President." I love referring to Lucas like that because he hates it. But c'mon. He's now the president of what was Tahlia's family's sausage business. The jokes practically write themselves.

I cock my eyebrow at him and he glances to Cole. "Did you?"

Cole shrugs. "I believe in enhancing my sexual experiences." Cole acts all proper, or Webberly, as I refer to it. Cole comes from San Francisco royalty—the Webber family.

Lucas looks at Tahlia and then to me. "Sold. Come by the office tomorrow."

I smile. No way would I ever let my best friend's boyfriends give me money. Money and friends do not mix.

"Don't forget the toy though." His eyes light up and Tahl elbows him in the ribs.

He slides closer to her, his lips moving to her ear and whispering. Whatever he's saying, she's smiling and her face is getting closer to the shade of her blouse again.

"Care to share?" I ask.

Tahlia shakes her head.

"So, the movie." Lucas changes the topic just like she did and I smile because he knows Tahlia so well. No way she wants to discuss her sexcapades in front of all of us.

"I'm out," I say, standing up and grabbing my portfolio from the table.

"Why?" Whitney whines.

All their eyes are fixed on me.

"Because I'm sick of being the spare." I eye Slade at the bar and pat Cole's shoulder. "I like your new bartender." I waggle my eyebrows and he

laughs.

“He’s under strict rules not to touch the customers,” Cole adds, his face too serious for his own good.

Back in the day, Cole was a bigger player than Dan Bilzerian. Haven’t heard of him? Google and you’ll understand my point.

“Oh, Cole. You should set a better example then.” I smile sweetly between him and Whitney.

Whitney laughs because I’ve got him there. The two of them met while Cole was working the bar. He rolls his eyes, shaking his head.

I laugh and walk away, sidling up to the bar as two stealthy blue eyes peer into mine.

“What can I get you?” Slade asks, his voice deep, gruff and powerful.

I lean forward so only he can hear me. His arms rest on top of the bar, the wood holding his weight so he can get closer. “You, naked in my bed. Oh, and of course your cock in my mouth.”

CHAPTER

Two

I'LL GIVE Slade some credit. He waited until Cole left before he followed me to the bathroom. Even then, he stopped at second base, not allowing me to detour him further when I pulled him into the stall.

Later, when the redhead said someone should leave early since it was so dead, he jumped at the chance, hopping over the bar, taking my hand in his and escorting me out of the Thirsty Monk. I like a man who takes action.

On the taxi ride back to his place, his tongue was lodged in my throat, his hands up my shirt. Things were hot and I was more than eager to feel his rippled stomach under his white t-shirt.

“You’re so damn hot,” he whispers now in the stairwell of his apartment building.

I jump in his arms, his hands gripping my ass, mine fisting his long dark strands.

Our lips lock and he weaves us from one side of the wall to the other on our way up the staircase. He’s strong and that turns me on more than the bulge in his pants. Stopping outside a door, I unwind my legs and slither down his body until my feet are planted on the ground. His lips stay on mine while he fumbles with the lock.

“Finally,” I say, sliding past him into his apartment.

I take no time to investigate the place. As long as the door is locked behind us, I’m good with whatever. The door slams shut, his fingers hook in my belt loop, pulling me toward him, and when my lips land on his, his fingers are unbuttoning my jeans. My own fingers slide down his white t-shirt, feeling the ripples of his abs while I match his objective—to become

unclothed as fast as possible.

He pushes my pants down along with my panties and I toe out of my flats and shimmy my jeans off the rest of the way. I'm hot and ready.

His hands mold to my bare hips as he backs us until I fall into a soft couch. Standing above me, he slides his fingers down his zipper. I lick my dry lips, waiting for the glimpse of the cock I'll feast on tonight.

The bulge in his underwear isn't as big as I felt grinding against me up the stairs, but maybe he's not fully hard yet, which I'm more than happy to lend a helping hand with.

Look, I should tell you now that I make no apologies for my open sexuality. I'm a single, adult female—why shouldn't I enjoy getting it on as much and as often as I'm able? Because some man tells me it makes me a slut? Or because some uptight woman who doesn't know her clit from a light switch thinks it's wrong to enjoy sex?

Screw that. I don't mess with taken guys and as long as everyone's a willing participant then I'm down for a little fun. And hopefully an orgasm. Because who doesn't love those?

Anyway, where were we?

I eye Slade with my sultry blues, widening my legs for him to stand between them. Hooking my fingers on the waistband of his boxers, I slide them down his legs as I promise him with my eyes how much fun we're going to have tonight. The anticipation to feel what I'm working with is too strong and so I glance down, finding a thin penis that gives no tingle between my legs. His fingers weave through my short dark hair and he urges my head back up to his eyes.

I'm sure this guy has been the running joke in his locker room and I'm not some bully or tease, so I plaster on a smile. It's not how big it is, it's how he uses it... right?

"Go ahead," he says, grinding his hips toward me so that his dick might reach my lips—if it had another three inches.

I size him up again, trying to figure out how a guy over six feet, with huge muscles and a ripped stomach, could have such a disappointing package. He's fully hard now, the tiny mushroom facing upward.

My hands are shaking slightly as I wrap them around him, my fingers overlapping, and I pump.

He groans. "That's it. Mouth, you little bitch," he says, shaking his hips again, and my hand unclenches before I squeeze so hard he falls to his knees.

Now, I'm all for dirty talk and the right guy can boss me around in the bedroom with zero complaints from me. But there's a way to make it hot and there's the douche way. Slade is being a douchebag.

"I don't take directions well," I comment, leaning back to wait for him to apologize.

"Oh, you want to play hard to get?" A knowing smile crosses his lips and I raise my eyebrows.

I think we're on different pages.

"My pussy is spread-eagle on your couch. I don't think this is exactly hard to get."

He grabs my arm, urging me back up to the edge of the couch, and he places my hand on his pencil penis.

"I promise, I'll make it worth your while." He shimmies forward, and for the first time in years, I'm not horny with a dick in front of my face.

"Let me guess." I stand up, making him stumble back. With his pants still around his ankles he can't get his footing and ends up falling to the floor, but he sits there, not attempting to pull his pants up.

Grabbing my own pants and panties from the floor, I put them on while continuing to talk. "I'll blow you and you'll expect me to swallow, which I'm not opposed to, but then you'll tell me you need some time to recover. Have you never heard of ladies first?" I button my pants, slipping on my flats, finally able to look around the space I'm standing in the middle of.

Doilies on the table.

Vases of flowers.

Little ceramic statues of kids.

Flower fabric couches with pink drapes.

"Oh. My. God. Where are we?" I ask and step to the door, placing my hand on the doorknob.

"My place," he answers with a shrug.

"And who else's?" I narrow my eyes.

His gaze casts down for a moment but then meets mine with a ring of fury around his pupils.

"You're just a tease. Girls like you think you have so much control, but all you are is some whore guys use to get their rocks off." He stands to his feet, pulling up his pants.

"If you'd treated me with any respect, I would have been a sure thing. As far as being a whore, I'm going to let that slide since your hard-on probably

isn't giving you enough testosterone. But let me be very clear." I step closer to him, staring up so that he knows how serious I am. "You ever disrespect me again and I will wrap that pencil-thin penis of yours around a twenty-pound weight and let go."

He laughs, a hollow and overly sarcastic one. "I'd rather have a small dick than be the pass-around girl."

Before I can stop myself, I cock my arm back and punch him in the face. He holds his cheek and points to the door.

"Get the fuck out!" he yells and a door clicks from down the hall.

"Stevie?" an elderly lady says.

"Go back to bed, Gram."

"Is everything okay?" She rounds the corner in a pink night coat and her hair in rollers. Her eyes widen at me and then she scowls at Stevie, aka Slade. "I told you no girls." Her shaking finger points to him.

"I'm out," I say, springing the door open and leaving the apartment before Granny gives both of us a beatdown. The door shuts behind me and I hear him apologizing and her yelling.

Crisis averted.

I hit the street and try to decipher where I am exactly, and notice that the night must still be young because couples are walking hand in hand down the street with takeout containers. Another group of people look like they're just getting the night started as they file out of their apartments.

I take a few steps to the corner crossroads and read the street signs. Slade's grandma lives way too close to me and I hope I never cross her in a dark alley.

After walking a few blocks I find my usual Starbucks and open the door, allowing the warm, comforting smell of coffee to surround me. I wish I had my sketchbook. Drawing has always been how I relieve stress. Maybe I can design a toy that could help men like Slade in the Nanometer Peter club.

I head to the restroom first to use the facilities and then wait in line. Most people ahead of me order iced teas and other drinks that aren't hot or loaded with caffeine.

Missy, the usual barista, smiles up to me when I step up. "Bad night again?" she asks, one side of her lips cocking up.

So I may come here too often after a bad night. Which seems to be happening way too often lately.

"Needle dick," I deadpan.

She cringes and a deep laugh rumbles from behind me. I glance over my shoulder, finding a man. I grant him a half smile and he winks, his lips only turning half wattage.

“Grande black,” I say.

“Name?” She arches her eyebrow, waiting to see what’s coming.

“Katniss Everdeen.”

She laughs, punching it in, and I hand her the cash. “I volunteer as tribute,” she says and we both share a laugh now. “It’ll be right up.”

“Thanks, Missy.”

I tuck the cash back into my purse and pull my phone out to distract myself, checking my Facebook notifications. Whitney and Tahlia have both been posting about their date nights. A twinge of jealousy flares and once again I’m reminded that one thing isn’t like the other when it comes to my group of friends.

I mean, they’ll forever be my friends, but once they get married and start having kids, we probably won’t have much in common. Pretty soon, I’ll just be the crazy aunt who shows up at birthday parties and all the kids wonder who I am. No, I promise myself. They’ll always know me and I’ll be the cool aunt who gives them expensive gifts because I can afford it. I’ll be the one they look up to because I travel all over the world, live life by my own rules and have affairs with exotic men.

The man behind me leans against the counter and I glance up to see that he’s on his phone. He’s smiling as he types away. His suit jacket hangs open and his tie is loosely undone, but his vest is still buttoned. Who still wears a full three-piece suit? I have to admit though, it looks hot as fuck on him. His hand rises and he weaves his fingers through his already dishevelled brown hair. The sparkling of cufflinks catches my eye and I wonder what kind of job he has that he’s this dressed up. Aren’t most companies going to business casual nowadays?

I picture him behind a boardroom table barking out orders and the mental image of him having a very powerful job ignites a tingling between my legs. I bet this guy is packing and would know how to dominate me in the bedroom.

“Katniss Everdeen.” Missy’s singsong voice rings out.

Before I turn my attention to her and my coffee, the guy looks up and our eyes meet. A smile plays on his lips and I’m not sure if it’s from the texts he’s receiving or if it’s for me, but no matter what, it lights up his face, raising him up the attractive meter until the bell rings on top.

The tingling turns into an ache down south.

I snap my eyes away from him and grab my coffee. “Have a great night, Missy.”

“See you tomorrow,” she says and I nod because I’m here at least once if not twice a day.

Moving over to the counter to pour in my Splenda and milk, I try not to feel the small hairs on the back of neck snap to attention. Nor do I admit that I feel his eyes on me. Instead, I busy myself pouring and stirring. If he wants me, he can make the first move.

“Peeta Mellark.” Missy’s voice rings out again and then she chokes out a laugh.

I whip my head around and find a set of hazel eyes set on me with arched eyebrows. The amused smile on his lips is even more prominent than seconds earlier. My gaze whips over to Missy and she’s smiling from ear to ear, pointing to his back. She wraps her arms around herself and kisses the air. I roll my eyes and when the guy turns around to see where I’m looking, she quickly straightens her back and pretends she’s organizing the straw compartment.

“Have a good night.” She uses her sweet-as-pie voice and the man nods, stepping toward me.

I swallow the lump in my throat. I have no time to try to figure out why I’m suddenly nervous. No matter how hard I try to relax, I can’t control my heartbeat. Only five steps separate us so I don’t have time to think about why this guy is bringing out a side to me that rarely, if ever, makes an appearance.

I wait for him to say something, but he doesn’t.

Instead, he slides next to me at the condiment stand and a waft of his cologne breezes past me. The scent is intoxicating. It’s musky and all man. I cross my ankles, pressing my thighs together.

He busies himself with the sugar, no milk, and he stirs it for an unusually long time. His phone chirps as he’s placing the lid on top of his coffee.

I’m about to stop him, but something holds me back and I cower down, fascinated by his hands. Strong and manicured. Never would I have thought manicured nails would turn me on.

All movement stops and I look up to find his eyes on me. He slowly appraises me from top to bottom and back before he leans in, his lips only an inch away from my ear. Our bodies aren’t touching and somehow that’s hotter than if he’d pulled me into him.

“I thought you’d want to know...”

He trails off and the scent of his cologne has my eyes drifting closed while I wait with anticipation to hear the end of his sentence.

“... you have toilet paper stuck on your shoe.”

He pulls away and my eyes snap wide open. He winks and before I can say anything, the door chime rings and he’s eyeing me through the window as he talks on the phone and I frantically try to remove the toilet paper with my other shoe.

God, no wonder he was staring at me.

“Holy shit,” Missy says, her hand over her heart.

I grip the counter behind me to stay upright—half from embarrassment and half because my knees are still weak. “Who was that?”

“I think he’s your Peeta Mellark,” she says with a dreamy edge to her voice as she leans over the counter.

I shake my head. “Oh, Missy. Lennon Hart doesn’t get to have a Peeta Mellark. She just gets to screw around with a lot of Gale Hawthornes.”

One thing I can’t deny, he turned me into a fumbling mess and he only uttered a handful of words. Now there’s a man who can boss me around in bed.

CHAPTER

Three

I WALK through the doors to Venture Bank and wait for the receptionist to stop typing and actually look at me. Eventually, she takes the pen out of her mouth, her fingers stop moving and she fixates on me. Her gaze roams me up and down.

Yeah, I know I'm hot, but I'm over my lesbian phase so she can look but she can't touch.

"How can I help you?" She uses her pen to scratch her scalp under her pile of auburn hair.

"I'm here to see Jacob Hart."

She eyes my t-shirt with disdain and I roll my eyes. She's probably some stuck-up, snobby woman who's never been fucked properly in her life.

"And you are?" She picks up her phone, her fingers poised to dial Jacob.

"Lennon Hart," I say and her back straightens, a smile replacing the scowl. "His sister."

"Oh, let me ring him."

"Thank you."

I take a seat in the small waiting area with four chairs and an array of magazines. I've never been to my brother's office before, but it's a nice place. He's vice-president and about as opposite of me as you can get. Everyone's always thought twins must be alike, but Jacob and I couldn't be on farther ends of the spectrum.

Just as I expect, he comes out himself to greet me.

"Thank you, Mrs. Mendez," he says with a smile and then sets his eyes on me. "Lennon." He nods his head, turns on his heels and walks back to his

office.

“Thank you, Mrs. Mendez,” I say sweetly and she gives me the polite smile, placing the pen back in her mouth and typing away.

Jacob waves and speaks pleasantries as we weave our way through the desks until he reaches his office. He opens his door and waits for me to go in first.

“No hug?” I ask, plopping down on a chair in front of his desk.

He shuts the door and rounds his desk to sit in his enormous chair. Overcompensating much?

“Is the big chair to make up for other inadequacies?” I ask and his eyes bore into mine with no reflection of the humor I was going for.

Debbie Downer.

“I’ve told you never to come to my office.” He clasps both his hands together in front of him.

“Oh, come on, bro, you know you love me.” I cross my legs and shrug my shoulders as if telling him, *This is me and you need to accept it.*

“I do love you, Len.” He looks out his glass window. “But this is my place of business and I worked my ass off to get where I am. The people here don’t really understand people like you.”

“People like me?” I’m starting to be offended between my brother and that jackass Slade.

“Look at you.” His hand floats down my body. “Your skin is a damn art show. Your jeans are ripped. Your toes have skulls painted on them. And the shirt. What the hell is that? A rooster with a unicorn horn.” He shakes his head with the same look he used to have when our mom forced him eat oatmeal.

“First of all, my tattoos are an expression of my personality. Ripped jeans are in, Mr. Brooks Brothers. As for my shirt, it’s a unicorn cock. You wouldn’t understand, you’re a guy.” I uncross my legs and bring them up to the seat so I’m cross-legged.

“Unicorn cock? Is that the name of one of your new sex toys?”

Actually, that’s not a bad idea.

Jacob’s phone rings and he picks it up. “Please hold all calls, Mrs. Mendez.” He listens for a second. “Tell Jasper I’ll call him in five minutes. Thank you.” He hangs up.

“Jasper Banks?” I ask with an innocent bat of my eyes.

“No,” he deadpans and I can’t help but be hurt that my brother is trying to

lie to me. Isn't that some sort of twin no-no?

"Mom taught us not to lie, Jacob," I remind him and he rolls his eyes. Jasper isn't a common name like Mike, so I know it's got to be the guy who mentored my brother out of college.

"Len, you are not getting Jasper Banks' phone number," he says with annoyance. Jacob let it slip once that Jasper had moved on from conventional loans and he's a partner at a venture capital firm now. I may have bothered him for an introduction a few times. The difference this time is that I'm sober and not rambling on about how my family doesn't understand my vision.

"Then why don't you invest in my business?" I ask him, for the millionth time. There was one week I messaged him ten times a day. Needless to say, he blocked my number after five days. Then I told my mom and the next day she made him unblock me in case I had an emergency and couldn't reach him. I know how to work my family.

"I've told you before, I can't have my name associated with something like that. It's a bunch of dildos and vibrators. Use your head." He taps his temple to drive the point home.

"Now you're getting mean." I act upset, although I'm used to Jacob—this is him. He's strait-laced and above board while I'm crazy town soaked in a vat of gasoline.

His shoulders sag, the need to never see me upset setting in. It's been that way since we were eight and he pushed me off a swing and I broke my arm. He'll forever feel guilt for that. Not that I don't use that guilt to my advantage every now and then, like right now.

"Listen, I know you want to start this company, but I don't understand. The tattoo shop does great. And if you remember, I gave you the first loan for that place."

My feet drop to the floor and he stands, making his way around his desk and sitting down next to me. "Len, I believe in you, but you have to understand I can't exactly approve your loan here when I was just promoted to VP. How would that look? Give me some time and I'll see if I can figure something out."

I look up to technically my younger brother by six minutes, who constantly acts like my older brother. "Why won't you just give me Jasper's number? He might be interested."

He shakes his head and releases a sigh.

A knock on the door interrupts us.

“Come in,” my brother says and in walks a woman close to my age. Her wrap dress is flowery and flows nicely over her petite frame. I notice that she has a matching pair of flats on. I also notice that she’s looking at my brother in a way that isn’t entirely professional. She’s cute and I decide right there that I like her.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she says, her gaze tipping down when she spots me. “I didn’t know you were with someone.” Her eyes meet mine and she’s appraising me, but I see no judgment there. I snap my head in the direction of Jacob, whose gaze hasn’t left her since she opened the door.

“It’s okay, Megan, this is Lennon, my sister.”

The despair in her eyes fades and she walks over to me with a bounce in her step, her hand in front of my face within seconds.

“I’m Megan Channing,” she says.

I shake her hand. “Lennon.”

“It’s so great to meet you. Jacob doesn’t say much about his family, but you guys have the same nose.” She looks from me to Jacob and back.

I take a quick glance at Jacob’s desk and spot his cell phone sitting there and an idea begins to form. I lean back in my chair. “What do you do here, Megan?” I ask, knowing just how to get under Jacob’s skin.

“I’m a teller.”

“A teller? So Jacob is your boss?” I ask and her lips dip. For a second, I feel bad for putting her in the middle of my sibling fuckery.

“Yeah.” She nods, appearing a little unsure.

I look at Jacob and raise my eyebrows. “Interesting,” I say and he huffs.

“Give me a second, okay?” he says to me and waves Megan over to the door.

His phone chirps on the desk and I lean forward, seeing Jasper Banks’ name light up on the screen.

Seriously, this is going to be easier than getting Professor Hendred to change my grade freshman year of college. Don’t judge.

“Don’t,” Jacob warns when I reach for the phone.

Damn it. My brother knows me well.

“Megan, just give me a few minutes,” he whispers.

I stand, pretending like I’m getting ready to go. I look from the two secret lovers to the phone. Jacob has his back to me now, his hands on her arms. Seems there’s trouble in paradise.

I press the home button on the phone and the phone lights up, displaying

a few texts he's gotten this morning. Boy, Megan sure has been busy on her phone this morning. Jasper is the text at the top and I slide the phone closer to me to catch the words *Richmond's at eight tonight*. Well, that was easy.

Jacob swipes the phone and tucks it into his pocket. "You're not getting his phone number," he says, his blue eyes that match my own piercing into mine.

I roll my eyes. "Just making sure you didn't miss any important phone calls." I turn my head to find Megan's no longer here. "Screwing the help, Jacob?" I shake my head. "I had higher expectations of you."

"Don't you have a dildo to sell?" he says and I pick up my purse.

"I think I'll go hit Megan up. See if she's in the market." My footsteps move away from his desk and he follows me, probably making sure I actually leave.

"Don't you worry about her, she's more than satisfied." He smiles and I'm surprised he didn't grab his junk in his hands.

"From what I remember..." I don't actually say anything but scrunch up my nose and shake my head while I raise just my pinkie finger.

"We were five the last time you saw my dick," he says, reaching past me to open the door. "Bye, sis."

"Let's get together tonight. I can get to know Megan better?" I ask.

His unamused eyes linger on mine again. Seriously, Megan needs to do her job better because it's obvious that my brother needs to get his rocks off. He's way too uptight.

"I'm taking Megan out for her birthday. Just the two of us."

"Where?" I ask, acting the part of the caring sister. I push aside the guilt I feel at knowing I just want to be able to pinpoint his whereabouts this evening.

"It's private. Listen, I'm bringing her to Dad's retirement party. Run interference, will you?" He changes the direction of conversation, but I know my brother wouldn't take a girl he's interested in to a bar, which means I can *accidentally* meet Jasper tonight without worrying about running into him.

"Sure thing, little brother." I squeeze his cheek and he groans. "See you."

He shuts the door and I start walking. My phone dings before I'm even through the doors of the bank.

Jacob: Love you. I'll look into another option.

I smile.

Me: Love you. No problem, I think I might have a lead.

A cynical laugh escapes from my throat and my phone dings again.

Jacob: In the last minute?

Me: See you next week.

Jacob: Lennon.

I laugh again because he knows me too well. Climbing into my unicorn van, I turn up Eminem and pull away from the curb.

Tonight, I'll finally meet one Mr. Jasper Banks and he's going to be the one to solve all my problems.

CHAPTER

Four

“I NEED A NICE PANT SUIT. One that screams serious, conservative, but a little sexy, too.” I push past Tahlia and into her condo.

Lucas looks up from the television.

“Hey, don’t mind me, just grabbing something. The Cincinnati bowtie can commence in ten minutes.” I wave to Lucas.

“I don’t even want to know what that is,” Tahl says behind me.

“Where’s my toy?” he asks and I dig into my purse, tossing it to him.

He examines the packaging with a huge smile on his face then throws it back to Tahlia. “Put it on, baby.” His smile could compete with a kid’s on Christmas morning. He pulls his phone out while we leave the room.

I walk into Tahlia’s bedroom and she rolls her eyes at me. Tossing it on the mattress, she moves to her closet, stepping in.

She and Lucas moved in together last month and with his income, they can afford more, which means she finally has a walk-in closet. Lucas’ suits line the left side and her dresses and blouses the right. Every high-priced high heel is perched on shelves in the back next to Lucas’s mismatch of sneakers and loafers.

“Must drive you crazy.”

She follows my line of vision to the shoes. “We fight about two things. Family dinners at my parents’ house and that.” She points and her face scrunches up as though it smells like a garbage truck in New York City on a hot summer day.

“He doesn’t like the fam, huh?” I ask, my hands digging through her clothes.

“No, he does. He doesn’t mind going. It’s me. He’s found some common bond with my dad and it’s so annoying.” She huffs and pulls out a black silk suit.

Now I’m the one scrunching up my nose. She hangs it back up. “That’s awesome that they get along, Tahl.”

I truly am happy that everything turned out so great for her, and yet that twinge of jealousy unexpectedly stabs me in the chest again.

What the hell? I’m happy, too. I don’t even want what she has.

She shrugs. “So, what’s this for?”

I sit down on her closet floor. Yes, it’s that big.

“I’m meeting with an investor tonight, but it’s at a bar.”

Her eyes narrow and she pulls a light pink suit out, pairing it with a navy blouse.

I shake my head again and she huffs and hangs it back up.

“A bar? Are they legit?” She rifles through her clothes some more.

“Oh, he’s legit. He just doesn’t know I’m coming.”

Her eyes shoot to mine. A look of worry crosses over her face.

“Relax. It’s fine.” I hop up and start rooting through her clothing. She leans against their built-in dresser in the middle of the closet.

“I don’t want you to be disappointed.” Her voice is soft and I should expect nothing less. She’s my best friend. “I was talking to Lucas—”

“No, Tahl.” I raise my hand and squash the topic of any of my friends helping me.

“Come on, Len. We’re friends and we want to help. Lucas has the money,” she pleads, but I won’t hear of it.

I have faith in my ability and this company, but there are too many factors that could go wrong. If this fails, I refuse to let my friends take a hit in any way.

“I appreciate it. I do, but no.” I pull out a Chanel pant suit. “Can I borrow this?”

“Of course, anything.” She crosses her arms, clearly not understanding why I won’t take her boyfriend’s money.

My shoulders deflate and I wait for her eyes to reach mine. “Listen, Tahl. I need to do this on my own.”

She nods. “Okay.” She takes the pant suit from me, placing it on the dresser. Taking my hands, she squeezes. “Never be too proud to ask for help though, okay?”

I nod this time and our conversation ends with an understanding that nothing will change. I'm not taking her or her boyfriend's money.

"Babe? Are you wearing it?" Lucas hollers from the other room and when we enter the living room, his finger is on the app screen.

She playfully smacks him in the head and his shorter, now gelled hair doesn't move. "We have a guest."

"Lennon's not a guest," he jokes and I sit down on the chair across from Lucas. He places his phone down.

"Oh, I have the best necklace you should wear with that outfit." Tahlia rushes back into her bedroom, leaving Lucas and I alone.

Lucas sits up, resting his elbows on his knees, and glances back to their bedroom door. "So, Lennon. I've been thinking."

I place my hand up in the air. "Your girlfriend beat you to it."

His eyebrows scrunch and for the first time I notice how perfect they are. I wonder if he threads or waxes. Maybe he got laser hair removal?

"I want to invest. I need to invest my money somewhere. Might as well be your company."

I appreciate my friends wanting to help me out, and it would be an easy to accept Lucas's and Cole's money, but no. I have my pride.

"I'm meeting an investor tonight." I hold up my crossed fingers. "Let's hope he loves sex toys as much as you and Cole."

Lucas picks up his phone, presses the app and Tahlia comes out holding the vibrating toy in her hand.

"Seriously, Lucas. Wait until Lennon leaves." She tosses it on the table and I wonder if she'll ever wear it for him. Although I'm fairly sure they have a kinky sex life behind closed doors. Tahl just likes to act like she can take it or leave it, but I can't imagine there's ever any headache nights with Lucas.

He laughs and she comes over, handing me the necklace.

"Who's the whale?" Lucas asks, crossing his leg on his ankle and placing his free hand on Tahlia's leg.

"His name is Jasper Banks," I say and Lucas' eyes light up.

"Seriously?" he asks. Tahlia and I both look at him, not understanding his reaction.

"Yeah." My voice sounds small. "Do you know him?"

He nods and a smile crosses his lips. "I went to school with him. He was a year older than me, but we were in the same fraternity."

Damn it. I didn't have to sneak behind my brother's back. I had a connection to Jasper all along.

"How perfect. Lennon, tell him you know Lucas." Tahlia practically bounces in her chair.

"You've already pitched?" Lucas asks.

I bite my lip and shake my head.

"Why are you meeting in a bar then?" he asks and I'm starting to feel a little foolish about my plan.

"Um. He doesn't know who I am, but he was my brother's mentor. I saw a text he sent to my brother and I'm going to the bar hoping to corner him."

Lucas laughs again and though I've always loved how easy-going Lucas is, right now I want to sew his lips shut.

"You know he's a control freak, right? Not to mention a pompous ass? He'd shred you in front of a crowd of people without even blinking," Lucas says.

I slump back in my chair. "He's a jerk?" I ask because I don't know much about him other than the fact that he invests in companies others don't. I mean, he got a kitchen gadget on the HSN and made the inventor a shit-ton of money.

Lucas nods and Tahlia's excitement dims significantly. Her eyes bore into mine, silently asking me to allow Lucas to give me the money.

"Well, I can be a bitch and if he doesn't like the idea and tries to embarrass me, he'll have a challenge on his hands." I stand up and drape the pant suit over my arm.

"Be careful, Lennon," Tahlia says, unwrapping herself from Lucas and walking me to the door.

"Hold up." Lucas stands and pats Tahlia's ass to get her to slide out of the way. "Let me walk you to the elevator."

Lucas grabs the door and Tahlia leans in, giving me a hug.

"Good luck. Not like you need it because you're going to knock this Jasper guy off his ass when he sees you." Her arms tighten right before she lets go. "Call me when you're done."

"I will. Thanks for the pant suit and I'll get it dry-cleaned."

She giggles and shakes her head. "No, you won't, but it's nice that you think you will."

I roll my eyes because she's probably right.

Lucas walks with me side by side to the elevators. I'm about to tell him I

don't need a babysitter, but when my hand moves to hit the button he stops me.

"Lennon, I meant what I said about investing. If you're worried about putting Tahl and I in a bind if the company fails, you don't need to." He looks pained, as though he doesn't want to throw his eight-figure bank account in my face.

Jesus, what if it's eight figures? I should get Jacob to do some digging. I shake my head, immediately dismissing the thought.

"It's not that I think you two would be eating ramen noodles for the rest of your life if it doesn't work out. Money and friends don't mix."

He nods, his eyes focused on the ground. "Let me come with you tonight. I'll introduce you. We'll act like it was a coincidence."

Of course Tahlia fell in love with this man. How could she not?

I shake my head. "No, Lucas, but thank you."

His shoulders falter and he tucks his hands into the pockets of his worn-in jeans. "Okay." He looks resigned.

This is the difference between him and Tahlia—he doesn't push, which I appreciate.

"Thank you, though."

I move my hand to press the elevator button and this time he allows me, but continues to stand by my side. The elevator dings and when I enter, he holds the door.

"At least use me as a reference. Tell him you know me and I swear by your products." He flashes a panty-melting smile of white teeth. Well, panty-melting for Tahl, not me.

"Are you willing to write a review?" I joke, but he nods his head.

"If this new toy gives me as much fun as it did Cole and Whitney, hell, I'll buy you a billboard."

The doors move to close and I wave.

"Bye, Lucas, thank you."

"Good luck," he says, waving back.

Pompous control freak or not, Jasper Banks better watch out, because he's never seen the likes of Lennon Hart.

CHAPTER

Five

I CLIMB out of the Uber in my Chanel pant suit and heels. Well, okay, Tahlia's Chanel pant suit and heels, but tonight I'm making this outfit work for me. I hate the fact that I'm changing myself into someone else, but this is my last resort.

I've never been to this bar before and from the outside it appears way higher-end than I thought it'd be. As far as I know, Jacob doesn't really spend his money on frivolous things, which makes him a good banker, I suppose. He's more of a beer guy than a guy who can recite the wine menu. Sure, he's stuffy, but not nose-in-the-air snooty.

I step through the door and the inside of the place is dark with crimson walls and black tables and chairs. Businessmen fill the seats with jackets strewn on the chairs behind them. The gleam from their expensive watches and cufflinks sneaks out from under the sleeves of their suit jackets as they pick up their highball glasses that contain alcohol without any ice. The number of women in here is low. I count only five to the men's twenty. They too are dressed up for the business world and I thank God I made one good choice and borrowed an outfit from Tahlia.

I sway my hips on the way to the bar and slide onto a stool. The bartender, who is probably a few years younger than I am, approaches me immediately. God, I wish I could take off my jacket, but that would leave me in a sleeveless blouse and I'm not sure this crowd would appreciate my tattoos. Once again, I'd be in a situation where 'one of these things is not like the other'. Cue the *Sesame Street* theme song.

"What can I get you?" He leans across the bar, invading my personal

space. He's cute and normally I wouldn't mind, but I'm trying to be Miss Proper here. Miss Proper doesn't flirt with the cute bartender while she's on a mission to save her not-even-a-real-business-yet business.

"Scotch. Neat," I order and he nods, and places a glass on the bar, pouring the scotch in front of me. "Thank you." I slide my twenty across the table and he leaves it there to go help out another customer.

I sneak a few peeks of the group over the rim of my glass, trying to figure out which one is Jasper. It's seven fifty, so technically there could be ten more minutes until he arrives, but I doubt a man like Jasper Banks is ever late. Nor does he accept tardiness in others, I bet. I've never met Jasper and when I Googled him, no pictures come up. How in this day in age do you not have one picture on social media? Sure, there's plenty about him, but not even a picture at a charity gala. Does the man not believe in giving back? Nothing private is mentioned about his life and everything is strictly about his business. So I search for a guy around Lucas' age, only a few years older than myself.

All the blue-hairs I omit. That leaves me with ten men still in the running. Unless he's prematurely gray. It could happen. I knew a guy with a full head of gray at the age of thirty. I used to call him the Silver Fox.

From my vantage point I can't get a really good look at all of the men and I resign myself to the fact that I'm going to have to work the room. Each of these men looks like matching game cards in a game of memory. Expensive suit, yes. Gelled hair, yes. Flashy watch, yes.

The bartender slides the twenty my way.

"Ladies' night, drinks are on the house." He winks and I'm unsure if that's just for me or for every woman.

I mean, shouldn't there be a sign outside stating this very convenient fact? Maybe because this is such a classy joint, they let word of mouth do the work rather than an advertisement that could drag in *any* women to their place. Me being the perfect example.

"Thank you," I say, tucking the money in my purse and then handing him a five-dollar bill.

He nods and the door behind me opens. I turn in my stool to watch a bunch of women walk in, all done up—dresses, hair, jewelry adorning every limb and more make-up than a Mary Kay factory.

This group of clones is a little odd and why do they arrive together? Maybe it's a bachelorette party.

I check my phone and see there's five more minutes until eight o'clock. I need to be prepared to make a good first impression.

I take a deep breath and knock back the remainder of my Scotch. The friendly bartender fills it up immediately. He's very attentive.

At eight o'clock on the dot, a man comes into the bar from the back, locks the front door, then claps his hands to get everyone's attention. All heads turn in his direction and as I examine all the other faces, none of them hold any surprise, as I'm sure mine does. They're all the opposite—smiling, the women on the edge of their chairs, the men putting their jackets back on.

What am I missing?

The man in charge looks to be in his fifties with gray hair and beard. He glances around the room and spots me. "Looks like we have some new people tonight."

Fear grips my throat that he's going to single me out and ask me something I can't answer. Oh, shit, is this a speakeasy or some private party that I'm crashing? Just then someone knocks on the glass door. The man turns to open it and shakes hands with the person who's entering.

You have to be shitting me.

In walks the guy from Starbucks the other night.

Makes sense. This is definitely the right kind of place and people for him. He never looks around the room, but takes a seat at a table with two other guys. They all shake hands and say their hellos before returning their attention to the man in front.

"I'm fairly sure that's everyone for this evening." He claps his hands again. "For the new members, I'm Gage, and I'm your speed-dating leader for tonight."

Speed dating?

Umm...

"The tables are set up through the curtain." Gage motions with his hands to a curtain-covered doorway on the far side of the bar. "Rules are the same, guys stay, girls hop. You have five minutes at each table. First names only. No specifics as to where you live or work. There's a list of questions to ask printed out on the table in case conversation proves to be a challenge. Fill out the questionnaire sheet at your last table and come back out here. We'll announce any matches after and you're more than welcome to find out more about one another at that time." He waves his hands frantically in the air to get everyone moving once he's done speaking.

I stand, figuring this is my time to cut and run.

“Um, Gage.” I touch his arm and he slowly rotates his head my way. “I think I’m in the wrong bar,” I say, ready to slide past him to the door.

“Oh, sweetie, I knew you hadn’t registered, but we had a cancellation so why don’t you stay? Free of charge.” A gold cap emerges when he smiles. “There’s a connection in the air tonight, I feel it.”

I scoff. “I’m not really looking for a connection.” From the corner of my eye I catch the man from Starbucks stand and he follows the crowd to the back. Why does a man like that need speed dating? “Can I ask you a question?” I lean closer and he does too, like he’s the paparazzi and I’m about to tell him where Rihanna and Drake are out clubbing tonight.

“Anything.”

“Is Jasper Banks here?”

I have to be at the wrong bar. Although I have no idea what he looks like, I can’t imagine Jasper Banks would need to resort to speed dating.

A full-watt smile emerges on Gage’s face and he nods. “He is. Do you know Jasper?”

The caterpillars turn into butterflies in my stomach. Finally.

“Could you point him out to me?” I ask and a devilish look gleams in his eyes.

He shakes his head.

“No?” I clarify, my own lips pressing into a straight line.

“You’ll have to find out for yourself. Best way to do that will be to go in that room and take a seat at a table.” He walks away and exits the room behind the curtain.

The bartender clears his throat and my gaze detours to him. “If you don’t find what you’re looking for in there, I’m free.”

From the smug smile on his lips I’m guessing that he probably gets propositioned often and never goes home alone after one of these functions.

“I’m good, but thanks.” I tuck my clutch under my arm, and my heels click on the floor while I head toward the curtain.



The lighting is dimmed back here. Black sofas line each wall, with small tables in front of them and chairs on the other side.

“Women take a seat at one of the booths,” Gage instructs and I wonder why we have to be on the booth side.

All the women get giddy like it’s picture time at prom while I sit down, cross my legs and lean back until this torture is over.

Once I find Jasper, I’ll stalk him when he leaves and confront him then. I mean, surely blackmailing him that he does speed-dating will get him to invest.

“Now, men sit in the chair closest to you,” Gage says and chairs slide out, men sit.

Lucky me, I get the best-looking one.

Kidding. Haven’t you realized? Luck is not on my side.

I get the creepy older man with a pinkie ring. Do men still wear those? Then again, he could be Italian. I should play nice.

I sit up in my seat, folding my hands together and resting them on the table.

Gage walks over to a huge clock on the wall, presses a few buttons and then he screams, “Begin.”

“Hi, I’m Bill.” He places his hand out and I shake it.

“Lennon,” I answer before figuring out I should have used a fake name.

“Is this your first time?” he asks. “I’ve never seen you here before.”

I nod. “Yeah.”

“There are usually more people here, but with the holiday...”

“Memorial Day?” I ask.

“I’m looking to take someone to my house in Napa this weekend. Have you been?” He smiles brightly.

At first I think creep—he’s inviting me on a weekend trip after one minute, from what the clock says—but then I think it’s sad really. He wants to share his life with someone and can’t find the right person. I can see if that’s something you want in your life and you can’t find it, it would be upsetting.

“I have. It’s beautiful. I can’t imagine having a house there.”

His eyes light up. “I have a winery. Small and serene.”

“Do you bottle?” I ask. This fascinates me.

“Only enough for myself and friends. If you ever make it up there, check out Ginger’s Winery.”

“What a great name.”

“I named it after my wife. She died five years ago.” His eyes zoom down

on the table. He is lonely.

My heart pricks. Here I am judging this man and he's been through more than I might ever be. *Food for thought, Lennon.*

"I'm so sorry," I say and the buzzer goes off before he can say anything.

He nods his head and I slide down the booth to the next guy. When I glance down the row of tables my eyes lock to a set of hazel ones that unglued me more than I care to admit last night. This time he shoots me a wink that seriously has my engines purring down below. Who is this man?

The buzzer rings again and I have no choice but to look in front of me to my speed-dater companion. He's younger than the first guy, but looks way too strait-laced for me. He's J Crew to a tee. Sweater vest under his jacket and although he's got that swanky retro thing going for him, he opens his mouth and I think I just ran nails over a chalkboard.

"I'm Bec," he says. "Short for Beckett Humphrey III."

Rich boy and wants to stake his claim immediately.

"Lennon," I answer, shaking his hand. It's soft and moisturized. No pinkie ring, but a nice wedding ring tan line.

He catches me examining his hand and pipes up, "She divorced me two weeks after our honeymoon."

"When was your honeymoon?"

"Last month," he deadpans and I swear tears well up in his eyes.

"And you're here why?" Okay, so I probably should have taken the sarcastic tone out of my voice.

He crosses his arms. His jacket even comes with reinforced elbows. What are people doing with their elbows that they need extra fabric as back-up there? "I'm trying to forget the bitch."

Man, this is a hot mess of a place.

"Let me give you a hint. Head over to Sundowners. You need a hook-up, not a girlfriend. Play around there for a while and when you're finished, come back here to find your one and only," I offer and this information piques his interest. "Or there's always Tinder."

"I've known her since I was in seventh grade. She was my first." His whining mixed with screeching must be what a dog whistle sounds like to a dog.

"Oh, Bec, go get yourself some experience. The only way you're going to do that is if you fuck a truckload of different girls. You're young. At least you look young and now is the time to find out what you like."

His eyes widen and he's like a dog where he's all invested in what I'm saying right now.

"What are you doing after this?" he asks and my eyes veer over to Hazel Eyes'.

"I'm here on a different mission. Sorry."

"Oh," he says. I reach over and pat his hand.

Gage scrambles over, crouching down. "There's no touching except for one handshake in the beginning."

I nod. "Okay." I raise my hands in the air, but I'm thinking the conversation to my left is going stale because they're staring at us.

The buzzer rings. Thank God.

"Good luck, Bec," I say and slide.

The song *Slide to the right, slide to the left* rings in my head and I giggle a little myself.

"What's so funny?" my third date asks and I wave him off.

"Just a song in my head."

"Oh." He puts his head down and again my vision veers, but his eyes are set on the woman in front of him. Hazel Eyes is still two people down from me and I'm anxious to hear what's about to come out of his mouth.

Two more guys and two heartbreaking tales of scorned men later, I'm right next to him. He's my next date. I can practically feel my body buzzing being so close. He's given this date his full attention whereas the prior two our eyes locked on occasion. The playful smile on his lips is constantly teasing me. I wonder what I have to do to make it not so playful.

Instead of looking at him, I look to the woman across from him and next to me. She's a blonde, big breasts and flirtatious personality. No touching, my ass. I'm about to call Gage over because she's discreetly touched his arm no less than five times. Worse is the fact he hasn't pulled away. He could easily move his arms under the table, but he's like a statue, with an upturned smile the entire time. He likes her and for some reason a stab of the jealousy knife pierces my heart and it drops in the pit of my stomach.

It's then when the jealousy washes over me that I realize I'm worried about this man I know nothing about when Jasper is somewhere in this room.

Priorities, Lennon. Priorities. My eyes search out again and I figure out the next five guys after Hazel Eyes are Jasper's age and then after them it's all white hair. So in the next half hour I should have a face with a name.

Buzz.

“Pleasure meeting you.” I nod like a Southern belle at the ball of a duke. Slide to my left and his hand is already out before I can situate myself.

“Katniss.” He nods.

“Peeta.”

His hand is rougher than Bec’s but softer than Bill’s. No jewelry on his fingers, no tan lines that suggest he’s recently divorced. An expensive-looking watch that Tahlia would probably know the going rate for. The thing that makes that ache between my thighs deeper is the skull-and-crossbones cuff links. This man is not who I’ve typecast him as. Today there’s no vest under the jacket and he’s sans tie. Part of me wonders if it’s stuffed in his pocket and he came here right after work.

“So, are you willing to give me your real name?” he asks, his voice a deep rich tone that makes me think of barrels of whiskey.

“Lennon,” I say before I think it would have been fun to play a game where we don’t know each other’s real names. “You?”

I ask because I’m not about to give him something for nothing.

“Jasper.”

No fucking way. Shit just got real.

CHAPTER

Six

THE SUAVE GUY from Starbucks is Jasper Banks. The one male specimen on this entire planet who has the capacity to unnerve me.

I situate myself in my seat, and his hazel eyes focus on my actions.

“Is it hot in here?” I fan my face with my hand. It wasn’t hot a second ago, but suddenly I’m my grandma in the dead of winter standing in front of a fan to cool off.

“A tad, maybe.” His lips quirk up, knowing exactly why I’m perspiring like a hooker in church. “So, Katniss?”

I laugh and he leans back in his chair, his hand lying out, his manicured nails tapping down on the black table.

“I was feeling extra feisty that night.”

“Why?”

“I feel feisty a lot.” I shrug, not willing to turn this man away by divulging I was with someone else.

Seriously, Lennon, get it together. Who cares?

Why do I care if he thinks I’m a slut? It might actually help with my cause—you know, experience.

The war inside of me continues to waver while he patiently waits for my real answer.

“Someone just got me angry.”

“Ex?” he asks, his voice holding a hint of gruffness.

“I don’t have any exes.” The truth sneaks out.

“Surely you’re not a virgin?” The light-hearted smile comes out to play once more.

“Do I look like a virgin?” I waggle my eyebrows.

There you go, girl, you're on your way back.

“If I thought you were a virgin, we wouldn't be here right now.”

“Why is that?” I arch my eyebrow and a low chuckle escapes his throat. Damn, I want my tongue down that throat and I want to swallow down his groan.

“I don't think I could do what I want to do to you with a virgin.” His tongue snakes out of his mouth and he wets both of his lips.

My shaking hand moves toward the glass of water and I bring it up to my lips to quench the thirst burning for him. I shrug off my jacket before I sweat through Tahlia's expensive suit. His eyes zero in on my arms. Shit.

This man has knocked me off my game. I'm not supposed to be flirting with *Jasper*, but I definitely want to flirt with the guy I saw at Starbucks. It's like a tug of war between the devil on one shoulder and the angel on the other.

“Why do you think I would have allowed you to do those things to me?” My voice should not sound this weak, I just gave myself a pep talk.

A confident chuckle leaves his kissable lips. “Do you really think you wouldn't?”

Damn it, this man has got me all out of sorts. Where is the buzzer and why is not ringing? I've been waiting for twenty minutes to get in front of this guy and now I can't wait to get away from him so I can collect myself.

“Well, I'm not like other women. I'm not one to lie there and wait for you to come.” Jesus, it's like I can't stop myself.

“That's exactly what I'm hoping for.” His eyes tease promises of what he'd do to my body. I squirm in the seat, the vinyl doing nothing to dull the ache.

“I doubt you could handle me.”

He raises both his eyebrows and the buzzer goes off. I move to slide over, but he grips my hand and this time around I'm not tattle-telling to Gage because his touch is warm, comforting and domineering. Just what I crave.

“I'd have you on your knees after one kiss,” he promises, his eyes widening in invitation.

Losing all my power to speak, I dislodge my hand and slide to the next guy, who's looking between me and Jasper since our eyes haven't left each other's.

“Excuse me, it's my turn,” the girl to take my place says in a bitter tone.

Jasper winks and then focuses his attention to the next woman, whose finger instantly twirls her hair.

The further I get away, the more I come together, that unnerving woman stranded at the table across from him. Five men later, and I only have to stare at the back of his head. Who does he think he is? *You*, I think to myself, but I shoo that thought from my mind because I am not like him. I am not expectant like he is. I don't make people feel uncomfortable.

Yes, you do. Whitney's and Tahlia's voices ring in unison in my head. How the hell did they get in there? Quickly, I realize that he's the male version of me. Strike that, he's better than me. His lines are panty-soaking, his purposeful touches like direct hits in Battleship. Well, he sank my battleship, because my entire outward shell of a character is cracking as a result.

The idea of sleeping with him is at the forefront of my mind, but so is my business. I didn't expect to share a connection with him—it's never been quite like that with anyone else before. I guess I need to decide which I want more—Jasper in my bed, or Jasper in the boardroom?

An hour later, Gage walks in with a small piece of paper in his hand. I wonder if Jasper picked me, too? I only picked him because hello, I need to spend some more time with him so that I can talk to him about investing in my company. That's what I tell myself anyway, because when I was writing his name down the only thing in my head was the way the material of his suit jacket hugged his biceps and the way his eyes sparkled when he flirted with me.

"We only have one match this evening," Gage starts. "Jasper and—" A woman on the other side of the room stands up immediately and begins sauntering toward Jasper. Did they discuss picking each other? Because she's very expectant. "—Lennon."

The woman's head whips over to me when I let out a little yelp of excitement.

Relax, lady. From the stink-eye she's giving me you'd think I just stole her boyfriend.

Jasper's eyes do that twinkling thing again as he stands up, ignoring the

woman when he brushes past her. My mouth waters when I notice the way his broad shoulders fill out his suit jacket. God, I need to get my head on straight before I try to convince him that I'm a commodity he should be investing in.

He makes his way over and holds his hand out to me once he's standing in front of me.

"Jasper, if you'd like to go to the back room," Gage offers but Jasper shakes his head without removing his gaze from mine.

"We're heading out." He tips his head, questioning if that's okay.

I hop down from the stool, grab my clutch and accept his hand.

"Have a great night." Gage winks as I walk by him. "Told you," he whispers.

We step out of the bar and into the night. The air still has a chill to it since summer hasn't fully arrived in San Francisco. Jasper still has my hand in his as we walk in silence down the street.

This is the part where I should come clean—tell him about my sex toy business I'm trying to get off the ground and ask him if he's interested in investing. It suddenly all feels too real and for the first time maybe ever, I clam up. How do I bring it up? Will he look at me and laugh in my face? Lucas' words about Jasper ring like warning bells in my head.

Then again, I think he might want to try a few out with me the way he talked earlier because there is one hundred percent without question something between us. Something different than anything I'm used to, and what if bringing up business fucks that up? On any other night, with any other guy I wouldn't give a shit. But something... something in my gut tells me not to be so flippant where Jasper is concerned.

"Did you have a car?" he asks, dragging me from my thoughts. I haven't said a word this entire time. The man probably wonders if I'm a mute.

I look around and realize that we're at the opening of a parking garage. "No." I shake my head.

He glances up at the garage and then down to me. Letting my hand go, he scratches his fingers along the back of his head, seeming conflicted.

"Is there a problem?" I ask. Shit. Did I read him all wrong? That almost never happens. If there's two things I'm good at it's knowing which men are the gay ones at a bar and which are the ones who want to fuck me. Maybe I'm losing my touch.

Jasper exhales a long breath. "Coffee. How about some coffee?" he asks.

The look in his eyes from earlier—the one that told me he wanted to be balls deep inside me until I was screaming his name—is a distant memory, replaced by a more resigned expression, but I’m not sure why.

“Um, sure.”

He nods, takes my hand in his again and walks us across the street to Starbucks. The place is practically dead since it’s almost eleven. You can tell the employees are annoyed by our presence since one of them is already mopping the floor and the other one is packing up the garbage. The two of them exchange a look. Yep, sorry, baristas, we’re going to be *those* people tonight.

We walk up to the counter and the girl there smiles wide. Compared to the other two this girl looks so happy she has to be winning Employee of the Month from them each and every month. “Welcome to Starbucks,” she says in a peppy voice I thought was only reserved for that My Little Pony show my niece watches.

“Can I have a grande black?” I ask.

She punches the order in. “Name?”

“Vivian Ward.”

The girl smiles, probably assuming that is my actual name. I’m not old enough to remember *Pretty Woman* and I’m sure she’s not either. The only reason I know the name is because Tahlia has forced me to watch that movie five hundred times.

I walk down the way while Jasper orders, waiting by the other end of the counter. He pays and meets me a minute later.

“Did you want to sit?” he asks and I almost chuckle at the horrified look of the employee who’s mopping and silently praying I decline.

“How about a walk around the city instead?”

I don’t miss the way the high school kid’s shoulders relax when I respond. He probably has some hot date tonight. Don’t worry, dude, a cock blocker I am not.

“I haven’t walked in this city in ages,” Jasper says with a smile that shows he’s excited.

“Vivian Ward,” the barista calls out, and places my drink on the counter.

I move to the milk and sugar, but Jasper is right next to me.

“So, where is that name from?” he asks, his cologne overriding all other senses.

“You don’t know?” I ask, stirring my milk into the cup.

He shrugs and a second later, the barista calls out, “Edward Lewis.” Jasper’s eyes widen and the usual full of fun smile emerges.

I laugh, shaking my head, thinking that he might just be someone who can compete with me.

After he makes his coffee the way he wants it, we file out the door and hear the snap of the lock sliding into place a second after it closes behind us.

Jasper checks the door. “No wonder we were getting the evil eye, they must close at eleven.”

I chuckle. “I caught on when the guy mopping was crossing his fingers after you asked if I wanted to sit.”

We walk a few paces down the sidewalk before Jasper says anything else. “I remember I worked at this sub shop in high school and kids would come in five minutes before close on purpose so we’d have to take all the deli meat back out and then clean up all over again.” The annoyance rings through in his voice.

“I worked at a dry cleaner in high school. My hours were good, but some of the clothes...” I do a full-body shiver and he laughs while nodding. “I still remember reaching in to check the pockets of one man’s suit and pulling out a condom. Used.”

“Oh, God,” he says with a look of disgust and covers his mouth.

“Yeah, that’s not something you easily forget.”

“Oh, high school jobs. They did suck.”

We walk a few blocks, reminiscing about how awful high school was. Finally, we reach the Pier and his hand slides into mine. The warmth from his skin radiates up my arm. We stop at the end of the Pier and I take a seat on the bench there.

I cross my legs and fidget a bit. Now would be the time I should bring up the business, but part of me—a big part—wants to prolong whatever this is that’s happening between us.

He sits down on the bench beside me, his coffee cup clasped in his hands, concentrating on his white lid instead of the bay.

Fuck it. It’s now or never, as they say. I inhale a deep breath and open my mouth to speak, but Jasper beats me to it.

“I have a confession.”

“I’m not a priest,” I joke and he glances over at me, chuckling while he does.

“You are something rare though.” He says the words I’ve heard many

times, but he doesn't have that angry or annoyed look that normally accompanies them. His voice almost sounds wistful, as if he enjoys that about me.

"That's what everyone says." I shrug, trying to play it off.

He shakes his head. "I think it's what I like about you."

My heart does some foreign flip thing in my chest. What the hell, heart? What's that about?

"Usually it's what people don't like about me," I admit. I manage not to let any of the hurt I feel deep down show in my voice. There's nothing that turns a guy off faster than baggage—or babies.

"Can I be honest?" he asks. I nod and he shifts in his seat so he faces me. "I want nothing more than to take you to my condo and fuck you with my tongue, my fingers and my cock until your voice gives out from screaming my name."

Whoa.

I blink.

And I blink again.

"Oh," is my über-intelligent response.

Meanwhile wetness pools between my thighs and my nipples peak beneath my bra because the truth is I want that too. So bad. More than I want to pitch my business to him. At least in this moment.

There's something enticingly erotic about a man as put together and sophisticated as Jasper saying dirty, filthy things to me.

"But I'm not going to," he adds—completely serious.

If I was a cartoon character a little sad face emoji would be floating above my head right now. Jasper just stuck a pin in the balloon that held all my pent-up sexual energy.

"Why?" I sip my coffee so that my lips have something to do other than frown.

"Because I don't want this to be over." His eyes dance with sincerity and a dash of mischief.

"Why do you assume it would be over if you did everything you just told me you want to?" I tilt my head, ready and waiting for him to typecast me. Good luck with that. My family has been psychoanalyzing me for years and still haven't figured me out.

"In my line of work, I have to be able to read people. In a short amount of time. Usually in less than half an hour. If I predict wrong, they lose and I

lose. I don't like to lose, Lennon." He's morphed into this intense, serious guy, all that playfulness from earlier now hidden well below Earth's crust.

"Okay. I'm not sure what that has to do with me." This is the part where I should ask what he does because I'm not supposed to know.

"You'd probably come back to my condo, we'd fuck, you'd show me a few tricks—and I have no doubt they'd be spectacular—but it would be one and done. I think you probably avoid seconds and I think after having you I'd feel like a starving man if you wouldn't let me be a repeat offender."

Most girls probably want flowery words and heartfelt emotion, but Jasper is speaking my native tongue. Who would've guessed that he's a sweet talker in his own way?

"So, you think I'm easy?" I counter.

He shakes his head. "I think you're free."

"With my body?"

He chuckles. "Okay, let me start this over."

His hand grips the back of his neck again before he places his coffee at his feet. Next, he takes mine and places it beside to his. His eyes lock with mine and his large hand moves up to cup my cheek. Before I have a chance to realize his intentions, his lips are lightly brushing along mine. Then his tongue slides between my parting lips, gliding along mine. Jasper brings his other hand to my hip, locking me into place. His fingers rub along my bare skin right above my waistline and goose bumps race up my spine.

I knew he'd be an amazing kisser, but it's the need I feel pulsing out of him that sets me aflame. A groan rises from his throat when the craving becomes too much and his urgent hands singe my skin with want until he seems to purposefully calm them.

He wants me and doesn't want me at the same time.

Jasper is totally muffin' bluffin' me.

Slowly, his tongue leaves my mouth and I wish it wouldn't end. My hip grows cold when he pulls away and I want to yank him back to me after he creates some distance between us again. Then he picks up my coffee, handing it to me and then grabs his own, sipping it.

What the hell just happened?

"Do you understand?" he asks.

"I understand that you just soaked my panties and you aren't going to finish the job. I understand that you're a pussy tease." So maybe I'm a little bitter. Even if I shouldn't be because wasn't I telling myself a few minutes

ago that something like this could not happen?

“I barely know you, yet you’re the most intriguing woman I’ve ever met. Believe me, Lennon, I want nothing more than to have you come apart underneath me, but I know once won’t be enough. So I’m going to do something I haven’t done since college.”

“I’m guessing it’s not tying me up and flogging me,” I deadpan.

His flirtatious smile emerges. “Will you go out with me next week? On a date?”

My breath hitches and my heart picks up speed. I’m not sure I’ve felt this way since Jimmy Twendle asked me to homecoming my freshman year. For the first time in a long time, I’m excited to not be sleeping with someone. Scratch that. For the first time in my adult life.

“I’d love to,” I say and yep, if we were in a cartoon right now I’d have big heart eyeballs because I’m looking over at him like he’s the only thing I see.

He smiles and then his phone rings from his pocket. Pulling it out, he holds up a finger to me. “One sec.” He stands and as he’s walking away, he answers. “Jasper Banks.”

As soon as there’s some distance between us, it hits me like a hammer to a nail—I’m not supposed to date him. My entire plan just flew off the edge of the pier, sinking to the depths of the ocean.

How did he make me forget that I don’t want him to spend money on a date, I want him to spend money on dildos?

CHAPTER

Seven

I RING the doorbell to my brother Kurt's house and hear the little footsteps getting closer before the door swings wide open.

"Auntie Lennon!" My niece Katie jumps in my arms and my nephew Ethan, not far behind, clamps onto my leg.

"What's up, you two?" I laugh and limp into the house and let Katie slide down my legs once I'm in the foyer.

From here I can already hear the commotion in the kitchen—the clanking of dishes and silverware, the arguing about arrangements.

Katie quickly wraps herself around my other leg and soon I'm teetering back and forth as I make my way toward the noise.

"Has anyone seen Katie and Ethan?" I ask when I reach the kitchen.

Kurt glances down at my ankles, laughing. "Man, are you pregnant? Because your cankles are bigger than Tina's when she delivered."

I stand there and wait for it to happen. Not a second later, Tina comes by and hits him across the head.

"I'm kidding," he says, following her into the dining room.

As those two start bickering, Jacob rushes over and grabs Ethan off my leg and tips him upside down, swaying him like a pendulum. Ethan squeals.

"Katie, want some cookies?" my mom asks and Katie jumps off me and onto a stool by my mom at the breakfast bar.

I take the tour and say hello to all the family members present here today trying to make my dad's retirement party from the police department the best ever. I finish up with my mom.

"Hi, Mom," I say and kiss the top of her head since she's shrinking in her

older age.

“Lennon, sweetie.” She pats my hand, clasped to her upper arm, until she notices my t-shirt that says, ‘I ENJOY LONG WALKS TO THE BAR.’ “Nice of you to dress up for us.”

I roll my eyes but she misses it because Katie grabs her attention away, wanting her to pour her some milk, so I snatch a cookie and sit down at the table.

My family doesn’t make me feel like an outcast, but I’m misunderstood at the very least, the black sheep at the worst. The circle to the square. I’m the wacky family member no one likes to admit they have who’s always up to something. In short, though I love my family, I just never really fit in with them growing up.

Besides Jacob, my twin, there’s Kurt, who is ten years older than me and married to his college sweetheart, Tina. Mark, my other brother, is four years older than me and he’s been married to his high school sweetheart since eighteen. Kurt and Mark followed in my dad’s footsteps as police officers and both of their wives stay at home. None of them have a ton of money, but they’re rich in love, so if I was ever going to consider a settled-down life, my brothers and my parents are the poster people to show it really can work.

“What did you do last night?” I ask Jacob, taking a bite of the cookie. “Or more who did you do?”

My mom swiftly smacks me in the head. It’s a family thing.

“Sorry.”

Jacob looks over the rim of his laptop and rolls his eyes.

“I think Megan’s cute,” I say, knowing what will happen next.

Jacob shoots me a look and I grin.

“Megan?” My mom bites on the piece of cookie crumb I gave her, leaving Katie on the stool and making her way over to the table.

Ethan runs up and grabs a cookie off Katie’s plate before running away. She’s whining when Tina comes back into the kitchen.

“Oh, stop it, you two,” Tina says, taking the rest of the cookies away and placing them by the sink.

This is how chaotic life in this family is and all members aren’t even present and accounted for.

“Who is this Megan, Jacob?” my mom asks, nudging my feet off the free chair.

Jacob gives me another look like he’s going to kill me, but this is payback

for him not giving me Jasper's number. If he had, maybe I wouldn't be as conflicted as I am right now.

"She works with me." He brushes the question off, but anyone can tell his cheeks are getting pink.

"Why are you blushing?" Kurt points out and Jacob buries his head back in the computer.

"I'm not. I have to work on this proposal." He types away in quick succession while my mom eyes him for an extra-long beat just to make sure he's aware that she knows something's up. No doubt she'll be showing up at the bank Monday morning. Somehow, I manage to suppress my internal chuckle.

"It's not my proposal, is it?" I ask in a hushed whisper so no one will overhear.

Jacob rolls his eyes again before concentrating back on the screen.

"What proposal?" my mom asks.

Damn it. My mom always did have the uncanny ability to overhear everything I didn't want her to.

Ethan stands below her, shaking an orange in her face, so she takes it and starts peeling it.

"For my company," I say.

Up until this point, all my family knows is that I have a new venture I'm excited about. Jacob is the only one who knows the nature of the business and although I know any of the women in my family would fall in love with my products, I'm not sure I'm ready for that conversation.

Jacob looks up, leans back in his chair and crosses his arms over his chest. "You don't know, Mom?"

Oh, so now he has time to focus on the family conversation?

Her head snaps up from where she's peeling the orange with her hands and she focuses her attention on me. "The tattoo parlor?" she asks. "Are you expanding?"

Her eyes almost light up because at least that would be something. Telling people that her daughter is a tattoo artist is about as fulfilling as saying your kid's a musician for a living.

"Nope." Jacob pops the 'p' and I narrow my eyes because I know he's about to out me.

Can't say I blame him though. I've already done the same to him and I did put the grenade in his hand. He just has to pull the pin.

Ethan stands next to my mom, gaze fixated on the orange, bouncing on his feet while he waits.

“Let’s go in the other room.” I motion to the living room and my mom glances down to Ethan.

“Katie and Ethan, go upstairs and watch a movie,” she orders. She quickly finishes peeling the orange and passes it to my nephew. Both kids whine but follow their grandma’s orders, because you don’t cross my mom. At least when you’re seven and four you don’t. Once you’re my age, you like to test the invisible fence and see if the shock is as painful as you remember. Hell, I’ve been testing my pain threshold since I was eight. Maybe Katie will take after me and she can be the one constantly being told to calm down and to keep her dreams based in reality.

Tina and Kurt join us around the table and Jacob closes the lid to his laptop. He smiles as though he’s holding back the punch line to a killer joke.

“Hello!” Mark bellows from beyond the kitchen at what I’m assuming is the front door. I’ve never been so happy to see my brother because maybe his entrance means I’ll be forgotten.

“Mark, sit,” my mom says, pointing to the chair next to Tina. “Lennon has an announcement.”

He eyes me. “This should be good,” he says with a laugh and sits down where instructed, placing his hat on the table.

“It’s not an announcement,” I moan.

My three brothers all exchange looks.

“Can we guess?” Mark asks. We both got the sarcasm gene in our family. “Pregnant?”

“By the priest?” Kurt adds.

My mom scowls and they all sit back, knowing they’re crossing a line. My family is as Catholic as the Pope. If you know what I mean.

“Lennon has a business venture and she’s trying to get your brother to invest in her.”

Kurt and Mark look to Jacob, who widens his eyes: *Watch this, Mom’s going to nail her to the cross. Literally.*

“Mom, nothing is set in stone. It can wait until I have more information.”

She places her hand on my bobbing knee. “Sweetie, if it’s important to you, then it’s important to all of us. We want to support you.” Reverse psychology. She’s good. But every time I fall for it, the judgmental eyes and long sighs happen regardless.

“Um...” Jacob’s smirk annoys me and I can’t wait to show him how wrong he is about my business. “It’s more of an adult entertainment business.”

Tina sucks in a breath and her eyes widen.

“Lennon, prostitution is illegal in the city of San Francisco,” Mark says, and although I’m not entirely sure if he’s joking, I assume he doesn’t think that badly of me.

Jacob chokes out a laugh before my mom shoots him a warning glare.

“Adult entertainment,” my mom says with zero enthusiasm.

“Oh, jeez, Len, I have a bachelor party for a buddy coming up and I don’t want see my sister on the pole.” Tina smacks Kurt across the head.

“Do you think I would really do that?” I half yell and they all remain silent. Fuck a duck, they do. “Well, if you think I’d sell my body for money, then me starting a sex toy business shouldn’t really surprise you.”

I stand, my mom’s hand falling from my knee. I need a minute to push back the hurt and the shame so they don’t see it. There’s no way I can look at them right now, but the silence resonating around the table tells me I’ve stunned them. Lennon strikes again.

When I open the fridge door, my mouth waters for the beer, but I grab a diet soda instead.

“Sex toys?” my mom asks first, probably confused.

I turn to face the firing squad.

“Like the parties?” Tina asks and Kurt’s head whips around to her in a panic, his expression saying, *Don’t act like you know anything about those things in front of my mom.*

Mark leans back in his chair, just like Jacob, waiting for the show to begin.

“Yeah, Mom. Battery-operated toys that help spice up your love life in the bedroom.” That was conservative enough, right? I focus my attention on my sister-in-law. “No, Tina, it’s not a party thing, I’ve actually developed some myself.”

Her eyes widen, clearly impressed. I feel like saying, *Yes, I am smarter than you all give me credit for.*

“Why?” my mom asks and you’d think I just confessed to eating all the hosts for the Christmas Eve Mass.

“Because it interests me, Mom. Because I use them.” I shrug.

Her hand covers her heart briefly and I’m surprised that after all these

years I can still somehow manage to shock her. She recovers quickly though.

“If you had a man you wouldn’t need a toy,” she says. “I don’t understand why you can’t be more like your siblings. What happened to you in the womb?” She places her head in her hands and Jacob places his hand on her back while Kurt slides over to where I was sitting to comfort her on the other side.

All the while Tina eyes me with a Cheshire grin and I know she’ll be hitting me up later for some samples. That right there is why I want to make a success of this business. Women shouldn’t have to feel ashamed that they enjoy sex and want to have it. Besides, there’s a huge market for it and although my mom doesn’t want to admit it, she’d probably have a shit-ton of fun with my products. Not that I want to think about my parents that way because... yuck.

“Mom,” I sigh, hitting Kurt until he slides over to his original seat and stops kissing Mom’s ass.

She looks up and there’s no tears, no sign of sadness because this is her. I love her, but she’s dramatic. Even more than me, I sometimes think, and that’s saying something.

“I’m a good person. I give spare money to homeless people, I allow my elders to walk through doors in front of me, I’m kind and considerate. I support myself with what I earn. The type of businesses I own doesn’t change who I am inside.”

She nods, but doesn’t believe what I’m saying. All she cares about is what she has to tell her church friends. She has two police officer sons and a banker son, but the tattooed, sex-toy-selling daughter negates the previous three.

“It’s just... I was just warming up to the tattoo thing.”

Oh, to be my mother and only worry about dinner on the table at five, a happy husband and bragging to her friends every lunch on the third Thursday of the month.

“I’m sorry I always disappoint you.”

It’s true, I am sorry for disappointing her, but I’m not sorry for who I am. That ship sailed when I was thirteen and my date to the school dance tried to corner me in the hallway. That’s when I realized that I wasn’t the preppy, wholesome girl I was always being told I had to portray—I was anything but inside.

“Listen, I gotta go,” I say and stand. Might be a record—it took less than

an hour for me to be uncomfortable enough for me to want to leave.

“What about Dad’s retirement party?” Mark asks. “Maybe you could do the parting gifts?”

Jacob coughs out another laugh and Kurt is too busy listening to Tina whisper something in his ear to bother paying attention.

“Enough. Sit down, Lennon,” my mom says. “You aren’t going anywhere.” She points to the chair and I slump down into it.

“Maybe we should plan this for another day,” I offer, but her black hair, not unlike my own, is already swishing side to side.

“Nope. This is the only day we can do it this week. The date is almost here and I want this finalized.”

So I stay seated. And we talk. Ironically about parting gifts. Instead of anal beads we’re doing boxes of chocolates. Instead of lube, we’re doing small bottles of sanitizer. Good options, for a good Catholic man who worked hard every day of his life.

“So.” My mom looks at her to-do list and back up to us. “We still need to find a way to get Dad there.”

No one wants to take responsibility for this because getting my dad out of the house on his day off is about as difficult as luring a lion away from a fresh kill.

“Why don’t you do it, Ma?” Jacob asks, his computer back up and running since the ‘Lennon’s Disappointing Choices’ show is over.

“I need to be at the restaurant to set everything up. What about you, Mark?”

“I’ll be coming right from the precinct. I’m hoping I don’t get stuck,” he says.

“I’ll talk to the chief,” she says, her pencil back on the paper.

“Mom,” Mark whines like she said the principal and not his boss. If Mark was the President of the United States I think she’d go to the United Nations. The best thing about my mom is that she’s bold and afraid of no one. Where do they think I got it from?

“Kurt?” she asks.

“We have dance for Katie right before and Ethan has baseball. There’ll be no time.”

She looks to Jacob, but he’s armed with an excuse. “It’s my Saturday to work, but I’ll be on time.”

She huffs. “Okay, well, I guess I’ll have to be the one then. I’ll sort it

out.” She scribbles notes on her piece of paper.

I’d be offended she didn’t think to ask me, but I’m used to it.

“I can do it,” I offer and a long stream of breath flows out of her mouth. “What?” I can handle driving my dad to a restaurant, for Christ’s sakes.

“I doubt he wants to go in your monstrosity of a vehicle,” Kurt says.

“Dad loves my van. He laughed his ass off when I first showed him.”

My van is wrapped in a design that features a unicorn shitting and puking rainbows. It’s fun and unique and I mean, who has a hate-on for unicorns? Come on. It may be a tad excessive, but the more everyone tries to shove me in that perfect box, the more I claw myself out.

“In front of all his friends? I doubt it,” Kurt adds.

“Are you sure you can get him there on time?” my mom asks, every wrinkle she’s earned grooved even deeper in her forehead while she looks on at me.

“Yes,” I deadpan. “I *am* a functioning adult.”

A bunch of sighs ring out over the table. If they aren’t careful, I’m going to call out each one of them on the skeletons they lock in their closets. Maybe Mom would like to know how Kurt used to sneak girls in through the back door after my parents were asleep so they could ‘spend time together’. Or perhaps she’d find it interesting that Jacob used to write his own notes to skip classes so he could hook up with Jessica Townsend?

“Okay, Lennon, I’m putting you in charge of bringing Dad,” she says with resignation ringing throughout her voice. “We’ll have to have an excuse for it.”

“How about I just ask him to dinner?” I say.

“He’d be suspicious,” Mark says. I eye him and he shrugs. “Name the last time you and Dad did something together.”

I rack my brain, not coming up with anything. “Believe me, I can convince him. I’ll get him there and he’ll be surprised when he walks in. Promise.” I point to each one, prepared for them to make a bet.

Then Jacob’s phone rings and even with the evil eye from my mother, he still grabs it and begins to walk away from the table.

“What’s up, Jasper?” he says.

My stomach tightens, my heart flutters in my chest and I swear my palms sweat.

“You’re flushed.” My mom touches my forehead with the back of her hand, but I shake my head.

“I’m fine.”

It’s near impossible to stay seated in the chair and not be able to hear what Jasper is saying to Jacob. There’s no way Jasper’s figured out that we’re related. I mean, he doesn’t even have my last name. Still, I worry that somehow he knows and the only problem with that is that my brother will inevitably fuck it up for me and it’s still too early. There’s something brewing between Jasper and me and I haven’t had time to figure out how to bring up my business to him.

While my mind whirls like a tornado, Jacob walks back in the room, his phone already tucked into his pocket.

“Was your phone call that important?” my mom asks.

“Sorry, it was my mentor. We’re working on something together.”

Phew.

“How is Jasper?” Mark asks.

“You know him?” I ask and everyone looks over to me, questioning my outburst.

“We all do,” he says like I’m a dumbass.

“He came to the house for dinner a few times,” Kurt adds and my shoulders fall.

“Why wasn’t I invited?” I ask and Jacob’s lips curl.

“You were too busy,” Jacob adds and then turns his attention to Mark. “He’s good. Actually, he mentioned that he met someone last night.”

Mark smiles. “That’s awesome.”

Jacob nods. “Yeah, but you know Jasper, it would take a lot for someone to truly win him over.”

“Why?” I ask, interrupting their conversation.

The two exchange a glance and then turn to look at me again. “He’s not just going to fall for some girl because she spreads her legs for him.”

“What are you guys talking about?” I ask, but my mom slams her pencil down on the table.

“That’s enough of that kind of talk, Jacob,” she admonishes. “We’re done here, everyone. I have to get home to your father before he starts to suspect something.”

We all stand and Jacob packs up his computer. Mark calls into his radio that he’s off lunch. Kurt grabs an orange while Tina rushes to a crying Ethan in the other room.

I’m still at the table, watching it all in slow motion, hoping someone

explains what they were talking about, but everyone ignores me.

Maybe Jasper just isn't into committed relationships? Suits me fine.

Still, five minutes later I'm driving away, my mind still plagued with the thought that there's more to Jasper than I first thought.

CHAPTER

Eight

“I’M RETURNING the pant suit for a dress.” I shove the pant suit into Tahlia’s open arms and walk into her condo, past the living room and down the hall toward the bedroom.

“Um, okay,” Tahlia says and follows.

Lucas and Cole are playing Xbox when I pass—somewhat ironically, it’s a boxing game. The two are perched on the edge of the couch, their thumbs pressing the buttons rapidly, and their eyes haven’t strayed from the screen for a second. Who’d think they’re both in their thirties?

“I’m done watching them play this stupid game.” Whitney rises from her chair and joins us. “What do you need a dress for?” she asks when we reach the bedroom.

“A date.”

“Date?” she says in a singsong voice. If I had anything suitable for a dinner and play, there’s no way I’d be here telling them about my date. The last they heard, Jasper was to be my investor, not my date.

“Yeah.”

“With who?” Tahlia asks and I shake my head, but she runs and gets in front of her closet doors. “No access unless you give us the password.”

“Password?” I ask.

“The name of the guy.” Whitney comes to stand beside me. “Who’s the lucky guy who gets to see you in a dress?”

Exhausted and probably needing a little advice from my friends, I save us the ten minutes of me trying to weasel my way out of telling them, or me wrestling Tahlia to the ground so I can get into her closet—Lucas and Cole

would like it too much. “Jasper.”

“Jasper Banks?” Whitney’s eyes stretch wide.

“How do you know?” I ask. But I already know. I turn my head to look at Tahlia, the big mouth.

“I thought he was going to invest in you. I was excited,” Tahlia defends herself, unblocking the closet doors to allow me through. She drops the pant suit in the pile of shirts on the floor.

“Hey, I got that dry-cleaned,” I say and a surprised look crosses her face and she scrambles to pick it up.

“Sorry, I just assumed.” She hangs the outfit up and I see her cringe and exchange a look with Whitney. They might as well put me on the same boat as my family and sail me off to Neverland.

The two of them sit on the floor while I rummage through Tahlia’s closet.

“How did you go from ‘invest in me’ to ‘stick it in me?’” Whitney asks and laughs at her own joke.

“How long have you waited before asking that?” I ask with a smirk.

“Hey, I’m quick-witted, okay?” Tahlia and I just stare at her and she rolls her eyes. “A few minutes.”

We laugh and it feels good to release some of my anxiety with laughter. Ever since Jasper texted me last night to let me know where he was taking me, my entire body has been stiff and my mind has been preoccupied. It’s so bad that when I went to yoga class this morning I couldn’t even flirt back with the hot instructor like I usually do.

“What about this?” I hold up an elegant black dress. It’s nothing like me and not what I would normally wear. Then again, I’ve been to the theater once in my entire life and it was in high school when Tahlia’s parents invited Whit and me.

“It really goes with your shirt,” Whit says with a laugh.

I glance down to my ‘How I Cut Carbs’ t-shirt with a picture of a pizza roller underneath and shrug.

“Nah. Not you.” Tahlia stands and I hang the dress back up and sit down next to Whitney.

As Tahlia slides the hangers back and forth, inspecting each dress, Whitney places her arm over my shoulder. “Tell me about him.”

Whitney and I went to Berkeley together. She saw the one time that I tried to seriously date someone freshman year, only to find out that he had a girlfriend. I’m not sure if Tahlia knows about that or not. I’ve never told her.

“I don’t know enough yet, but he’s intriguing,” I respond.

Whitney dips her head and looks at me from under her brows.

“He’s intense and playful but serious, too. I know nothing about him and what I do know, he doesn’t know I do,” I admit and Whitney’s eyes narrow a bit.

“He doesn’t know you want him to invest?” she asks.

I shake my head.

“Len, are you going to tell him?” I can sense her displeasure.

“I don’t even know what’s going on with us at this point and I think as soon as I agreed to the date, that was me choosing him over the business, as lame as it sounds.”

Tahlia stops what she’s doing and studies me for a minute. “You really like this guy.” She looks at me as if I’m some mythical creature she’s only ever heard tell of.

“I didn’t say that,” I snap, feeling the need to defend myself for some reason.

“You don’t have to.” Whitney squeezes my shoulder.

I ignore what they’re saying and try to move the conversation on. “Anyway... I’m not going to pursue him as an investor anymore. I’ll have to figure something else out.” I sound more sure of myself than I feel, but I can’t shake the notion that there’s something between Jasper and me that needs to be explored. I’ve always been a person who goes with her gut and that’s what I’m going to do.

“Lucas can invest,” Tahlia offers and I roll my eyes.

“Not an option,” I say, as pleasantly as possible. This topic seems to never die.

“So you’re interested enough in this guy that you’re letting your business take a back seat to your personal connection,” Whitney clarifies. Damn her and her investigative reporter instincts.

“He’d assume that I sought him out, which admittedly I did. Then not only wouldn’t I get him to invest in the company, but I wouldn’t get him. I’m not even sure if I want him, like *want* him for the long haul, but I didn’t tell him the other night and so here we are.” I ramble on while Whitney’s mouth hangs open and Tahl’s hand pauses on the hangers above her head.

“Oh. My. God.” Tahlia’s mouth moves, but she’s still as a statue.

“It happened,” Whitney says, so sure of herself.

“What?” I look between the two, wondering what their problem is.

“You’ve met him.” Whitney glances at Tahlia and she nods in agreement.

“Who?”

“Your unicorn cock,” they say in unison.

“Hate to break it to you, ladies, but I’ve yet to sleep with him.” Ha. I mentally high-five myself for pointing out how wrong they are.

Whitney shakes her head slowly. “Now I know for sure you found him.”

“The whole idea behind the unicorn cock is that you found the one *cock*, not guy.”

Whitney shakes her head. “It’s him. I know it.”

I stand up and grab the first dress I see, a navy one with short sleeves, and head to the bathroom.

A small part of me thrills with the idea that maybe they’re right, but an even bigger piece of me panics.

Lennon Hart is *not* a one-man kind of gal. If Jasper is more than just some guy, where does that leave me?

CHAPTER

Nine

THE V on the black dress I stole from Tahlia dips all the way down to my waist, clearly giving a view of my less than ample boobs, but all in all, I'd bang me.

Tossing my lipstick, my phone, my keys and a tampon into my purse (but seriously, fuck me if my period decides to arrive tonight), I take a deep breath to calm my nerves.

Usually, I wouldn't care that I live in a studio apartment where I literally fuck where I eat—really, it's like two steps from the bed to the stove—but Jasper probably lives in a penthouse. I mean, the way his suit fit him perfectly tells me it's tailor-made especially for him and he probably spends what was my entire inheritance from my grandma on his clothing over the course of a year. So I want to be armed and ready to go so I can slide out into the hallway and my place will remain a mythical, imaginary land to Jasper.

Knock, knock.

Shit. I'm not ready. Story of my life.

I grab my clutch from the counter and hop over to the door on one foot while I try to put on my strappy sandals. My hand is on the door handle when I realize that I left my shawl on the table.

“Be right there,” I say, scrambling back for the shawl that will cover the majority of my tattoos.

Right before I open the door, I pause, take another deep breath. This is just a normal date. Not a big deal.

My hand covers the doorknob and it feels like slow motion when I turn it and open the door. Jasper in a suit isn't a new look for me, but Jasper freshly

showered, clean shaven and smiling is. His gaze slides down and back up my body.

I swear there was something I was going to do when I opened the door, but hell if I know what that was. All I can think about is how badly I want to grab the lapels of his jacket and drag him to my bed. Too forward?

“May I come in?” he asks and without thought I slide to the side, opening the door wider for him.

Then I come to my senses and my hand shoots out to push on his chest.

“No!”

He raises an eyebrow.

“I mean, we don’t want to be late.”

He places his hand over mine, easing it down to my side, and strides into my apartment.

“It’s not much.” I follow behind him like a yipping Chihuahua on his heels.

He nods to himself as he glances around. “It’s you.”

“As in I look like I’m poor?”

He turns around and places his hands on my shoulders. “I meant it’s eccentric.” He grabs my shawl, sliding it from my arms. “It’s warm tonight, no need for this. Plus, if need be, you’ll have my jacket.”

I never thought I’d be a girl who’d swoon. I figured if a guy offered me his jacket, it’d be a leather jacket—preferably one from a motorcycle gang. Or like, maybe he’d be referring to a condom as a jacket for his dick and be passing it to me in the heat of the moment. But Jasper Banks has accomplished what very few before him have. He’s made me blush.

I glance down at my tatted arms, unsure, and then back up to him. “I love your skin, Lennon.” He tosses my shawl to the side so it flutters down onto my couch. “I’m dying to find out the meaning behind each and every one of these.” He trails his finger slowly down my arm and goose bumps break out down my skin like a wave cascading into the shore.

There’s no way this guy’s for real. He wants to take me to the San Francisco Playhouse in all my tatted-up glory? And everyone calls me crazy.

“Now that I know where you sleep, we can go.” He spins on his heels and walks the short distance to my front door.

“You wanted to know where I slept?” I ask, locking up my apartment door.

“I’m a visual kind of guy.” He winks and I know for sure now that the

thong between my legs has zero chance of staying dry tonight.

We take the elevator down to the lobby, and when I say lobby, I mean past the mailboxes with overflowing piles of junk mail.

“I’m cabbing it tonight,” he says as we step out into the night. He holds his hand out to hail our ride.

I guess I’d assumed we’d be taking his expensive sports car. Surely, a guy like Jasper Banks owns a two-seater that goes zero to sixty in four seconds.

A cab pulls up to the curb and Jasper opens the door for me. I slide in, trying to be extra ladylike and not flash him the goods before he’s even bought me dinner—not that that’s ever stopped me before. Once he climbs in after me, the space becomes cozy and it’s hard not to be aware of how close he’s sitting to me.

“5A5 Steak Lounge,” he directs the driver who nods and pulls off the curb. Then his attention turns to me. “You aren’t a vegetarian, are you?” The panicked look on his face is amusing.

“No.” I shake my head. “Vegan,” I say.

He grimaces and shifts to pull his phone from his pocket. “Where do you like to eat?” His thumbs move across the screen and I place my hand on his, waiting for him to look up at me.

Once he does, I feel bad for making the joke because he looks almost nervous.

“I’m kidding. I love meat.” I waggle my eyebrows so my double entendre is clear.

He smiles and a laugh escapes his throat. “Good to know,” he says with a grin and slips his phone back in his pocket. “Probably something I should’ve asked before making the reservations, but I hate French food and I’m not a huge fan of Asian.”

“You don’t like Asian food?”

He shakes his head.

“Isn’t 5A5 Steak Lounge also Japanese?”

A smirk crosses his lips and he nods. “All you’ll find on my plate is a steak and maybe a potato.”

“I’ll take you to a place one day and I bet you you’ll change your mind.”

He shakes his head again. “Tried them all.”

“You’re thinking sushi and Chinese food, right?” I turn in my seat to face him as the cab driver whizzes through the hilly streets.

“Maybe.” He acts coy but I can tell that I’m right.

“We’ll go to a Korean Barbecue I know. I promise, you’ve never had anything like it before.” I remember the first time a guy in our dorm took Whitney and I to that place. I’m surprised I didn’t walk out mooing when I left from the amount of meat I ate.

“So, you’re committing to a second date before you know how the first one ends?” His eyebrows quirk up and I giggle like the schoolgirl I am tonight.

“I guess I should wait, but following the rules has never been my style.” I shrug.

He leans in close, his fingertips running along the length of my thigh. “Does that mean you go to second base on the first date?” he whispers in my ear, igniting a rush of goose bumps up my neck.

I turn and our faces are millimeters away from one another.

“Oh, Mr. Banks, if you play your hand right, you might score a home run.”

The scent of his cologne increases, as though it becomes stronger when he’s turned on.

“I always play to win.” He winks that damn hazel eye at me.

I may be playing out of my league.

CHAPTER

Ten

“BANKS,” Jasper tells the hostess after we walk into the restaurant.

I’ve been to fancy restaurants before. I’ve been to Tahlia’s family’s country club, but this restaurant is beyond beautiful. The large circular room is filled with booths and dark wood tables paired with cream cloth-covered chairs. There’s a long bar on one side of the room with a large screen behind all the bottles. The image on the screen is a fire and it’s hard to drag my eyes away from the flames as they flicker and lick up to the ceiling. The entire restaurant is filled with a warm glow from the many recessed lights. My only complaint, if I had one, would be that I wish we had more privacy.

The hostess flings her brunette hair over her shoulder, swivels on her stilettos and sways her ass while guiding us to our table. I’m sure she finds many a rich boy to fuck in the coatroom, but bitch can back off because it’s not going to be with Jasper. Standing at the edge of the table, she clutches the menus to her chest, waiting as Jasper holds out my chair for me. Once he’s seated across from me, she hands us each a menu, bending a little further down for Jasper. I don’t wait to see if he takes the bait and looks down her loose blouse.

I glance over the menu until the hostess has left and then raise my eyes in his direction as he places the menu down on his bread plate.

“I assume you’ve been here before?” I ask.

“I have. The prime rib is my favorite.” He busies himself by placing the napkin in his lap and I follow suit and do the same.

“I’m a filet kind of girl.” Even though I’ve decided on what I’m going to have, I continue to read over the menu, considering trying something I never

have. Who knows if I'll ever go to a restaurant like this again?

"Yes, you are." He smiles.

"What does that mean?" I tilt my head.

"Filets are feminine without an ounce of fat on them. They're lean and petite but hold a punch. And they melt in your mouth."

I laugh. "I've never been so happy to be compared to a slab of meat."

The corners of his lips turn up. "I do try to be unique."

"That you do." I place my menu down on the table.

Our waiter, who introduces himself as Leon, comes over. "Good evening." He bows slightly at his waist. His hair is salt and pepper, his white shirt crisp and his pants pressed. I bet he's been doing this for awhile.

"Good evening," Jasper says in return, nodding his head.

Leon relays the specials and asks us what we'd like to drink. I defer to Jasper, allowing him to dictate the bottle of wine, which he does without looking at the menu.

While we're waiting on the wine our conversation stays on course as we discuss my tattoos and my work at the studio. It isn't until he asks me about my family that I realize I haven't thought this through.

"Any brothers or sisters?" he asks.

I grab my water glass to coat my suddenly parched throat. "Brothers," I say.

He nods. "You're the only girl?"

"Yep."

Leon comes over, shows Jasper the bottle of wine and does the whole opening rigmarole that they do at places like this. Jasper tastes and then nods to pour, which Leon does, starting with my glass.

"What were we saying again?" Jasper asks after Leon takes our order and leaves. "Oh, yeah, I saw your name on the buzzer at your apartment."

"You did?" My throat closes and I try my best to suck some air into my lungs even though it feels like a giant boulder sits on my chest. Why the hell didn't I figure out how I was going to handle this beforehand?

"Hart? Is that your last name?" he asks, leaning forward and steepling his hands.

I smile, as genuine and surprised as possible. "You have a knack for details," I joke and he chuckles, continuing to wait for me to answer the question. "Yes. Lennon Hart," I finally admit with a choked voice. It might just be Jacob's hands strangling me right now. You know, a twin thing.

Jasper's eyes light up with recognition and I wait for it. In the seconds I have to answer the question at the tip of his tongue, I weigh my options. Lie. I could definitely lie. Hart is not an uncommon name. If this was our only date would it matter? But the fact that he's been to my family's house for dinner continues to plague me.

"Do you know Jacob Hart?"

The question hangs in the air for an uncomfortable minute as I swallow down the wine I sipped at the last minute to buy me some time. He seems content to wait and lets me finish all while picking up his own drink. His eyes remain on mine over top of his wine glass.

"You know my brother?" I squeak out before I can change my mind about telling the truth.

He chokes on his sip of wine and coughs, beating his chest in an effort to catch his breath. Eventually, he swallows it and seems to recover.

"Brother?" he questions and that light in his eyes dims slightly. "You're Jacob's sister?" He takes another sip of his wine.

I nod. "Twin actually."

He doesn't choke this time, but it looks like he's having a hard time swallowing the liquid. After a big gulp he places his glass down on the table and leans back in his chair, a safe distance away from choking hazards. Quick learner.

"Twins? Wow. How did I not know that Jacob was a twin?" he says. I'm a little put off over the fact that Jacob hasn't at least mentioned that I exist. "I've met your parents." He cringes, like he's a little put off by that.

"Sorry," I respond, not knowing what to say.

He waves me off. "Your family is great, they remind me a lot of my own. When I took Jacob under my wing..." He pauses. "Did you know I was his mentor?"

"Oh, you're *that* Jasper?" My voice is about three octaves too high as I try to sell the idea that I'm surprised.

He nods, and the pit of my stomach weighs heavy with the lie. Jasper is the first man who's piqued my interest for more than his cock in years. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I realize this could blow up in my face, but I push the thought away.

"The one and only," he says. I smile. "Jacob's been great. He's a natural and his drive is exceptional."

"Have you ever heard of twin competition?" I ask.

“No.” He laughs like it’s not a real thing.

“Well, I don’t want to hear how great my brother is unless you want to compliment me equally.” I pretend to flick my hair over my shoulder—pretend because I don’t have hair long enough to manage it.

“Where do I begin?” His eyes twinkle and I’m glad to see that he understands my sense of humor.

“Usually at the beginning.” We both chuckle.

He picks up his wine glass by the stem and tips it to his lips. “I can’t believe you’re Jacob Hart’s sister.” He shakes his head.

“Neither can I most days,” I say and he laughs again but looks a little preoccupied, obviously still processing the information.

“Listen... now that I know Jacob’s your brother I feel a little weird being out on a date with you.” His face has an apology written all over it.

“Gee, thanks,” I deadpan.

He reaches across the table and squeezes my hand. “Sorry, that came out wrong. What I meant is, I feel weird that he doesn’t know. Depending on how things go...”

I see what he’s getting at. “I’d prefer to tell my brother, if you don’t mind. If it becomes necessary.”

Jasper’s shoulders relax and he smiles across the table. “That’s all I’m asking. I don’t want to feel like I’m sneaking around behind his back, that’s all.”

“No problem.” Seems Jasper’s a stand-up guy. Even more surprising is the fact that I kinda dig it. “But please don’t mention anything to him before I have a chance to talk to him.” And I will tell him... eventually.

He does a mock zipper motion with his mouth. “My lips are sealed.”

Now that that’s out of the way I want nothing more than to move this conversation along. “What about you?” I ask. “Family?”

“Well, I’m originally from Nebraska. My parents were farmers, but they live out here now. Outside of the city, but close.”

I nod. “That’s a big change.”

“Yeah, they replaced corn stalks with vineyards, but they’ve embraced it. I’m an only child, so once they knew I wasn’t going to take over the farm, they sold it to my uncle.”

“Ah, so you didn’t want any part in the family business either,” I say. I lift my wine glass to take a sip.

“Yeah, your other brothers followed your dad into the police force,

right?”

He knows way too much about my family.

“Mark and Kurt did. The fact that I’m female kept most of the pressure from coming my way, but I know Jacob struggled with that for awhile. My tits might not be huge, but they did the trick.” I wink at him.

His gaze dips to my chest for a second before it returns to my face. “They look perfect if you ask me. The perfect handful.” I suck my bottom lip into my mouth because the look he’s giving me makes me want to slink under the table and do some seriously inappropriate stuff to him below waist level.

“Maybe you’ll get to find out some time,” I say in a breathy voice that gives me away.

“A man can dare to dream.” He tips his wine glass at me and then takes a sip himself.

“Anyway...” I need to move this conversation back into a PG rating otherwise I will end up on my knees under the table no matter how fancy a place this is. A girl can only take so much. “Like I said, I had no interest, nor do I think I would’ve made a very good cop.”

“I don’t know, I bet you’d be a tough cop.” His eyes swim with lust as though he’s picturing me in one of those risqué police lingerie sets. I make a mental note to invest in one.

“Are you kidding? I’d be the worst cop. I’d probably let all the kids off with a warning if they agreed to give me their pot,” I joke and he laughs but it rings hollow.

Okay... moving on. “So, are you still a banker?” I shouldn’t have asked because I’m forcing myself to pretend like I don’t already know his office address, the name of his company and his web address, but it was the first thing I could think of after the strange look he gave me with my last response.

“No. I started my own company shortly after Jacob worked for me at the bank. I partnered with someone I went to Harvard with and now invest in emerging companies trying to bring products to market.”

I nod. “Do you enjoy it?” I ask.

“I do.” Jasper sits up straighter in his seat like he’s brimming with energy now. “It’s kind of a high to take something in its infancy and nurture it into a success. It’s always interesting to see which companies rise and become more than you imagined they could be. My partner and I are way too competitive. And we’re not even twins.” He winks.

I smile. “So you like living on the edge? You enjoy risk?”

“I straddle the line in my business life, but in my personal life I prefer both feet on solid ground.” There’s no smirk or humoured smile on his lips and thankfully, Leon brings our entrées to distract me from having to pry about the meaning of his last statement. I’m far from solid ground—more like quicksand, which would mean there’s no room for me in his life.

I already knew I wasn’t getting the business deal. Does this mean I won’t get the man either?

CHAPTER

Eleven

THE FIRST PART of the play was amazing. Jasper selected *She Loves Me*, a romantic comedy that's an adaptation of the original play that was once made into the movie *You've Got Mail*.

I walk out from the bathroom during intermission to find Jasper perched by the bar with a wine glass in one hand, a highball in the other. The playhouse must have the air on full blast because I'm freezing, but I'm guessing Jasper enjoys seeing my skin because I've caught him sneaking a few peeks at my ink tonight.

"The only time I wish I were a man...when it comes to public bathrooms." I roll my eyes, taking the wine glass he's offering.

He smiles then sips his drink and places his hand on the small of my back, right where the fabric dips down above my ass. His fingers skim along my bare skin and I squirm. His touch is like lighter fluid he's dousing me with before the match is struck. My radar has been off lately, but I'd place good money on the fact that Jasper knows exactly what to do to drive a woman crazy.

"Are you enjoying the play?" he asks, his gaze tracking every one of my movements.

"I am. My friend Tahlia will be so jealous when I tell her about it. She has this obsession with romantic movies." Talking about my friends feels natural with Jasper and I wonder about the company he keeps. Just as the thought sparks, a couple walks over.

"Jasper," the woman coos, offering her hand to him.

He accepts the hand, shaking it between both of his.

“Sabrina, where’s Gavin?” he asks the redhead who’s now appraising me and clearly finds me lacking. Her eyes skid along my body, almost faltering at each tattoo as though she can’t believe it.

It’s the same look I got every time Tahlia invited me to her family’s country club. I’m way too awesome to let a bunch of uptight assholes make me feel bad about myself so I stopped going when she asked.

Sabrina glances over my shoulder and I turn to see a tall male walking over with two glasses of wine. Sabrina only glances him with a fleeting look because she’s too busy sweeping her gaze between Jasper and me.

“Sabrina, this is my date, Lennon Hart.” Jasper’s hand finds the spot on the small of my back and gives me a soft rub.

She takes my extended hand but her hand is limp in mine, as if I don’t deserve the effort of a handshake. I smile like the polite Catholic girl my mom tried to raise me as and then take a step closer to Jasper, wanting as far away from this woman’s toxic energy as possible.

“Nice to meet you,” she says, her eyes doing that sweeping motion again.

“Jasper, what the hell? It’s been a while.” The guy—Gavin, I presume—sets down the two wine glasses on the bar so he can shake his hand.

“Never thought I’d see you at a play.” Jasper laughs and Gavin picks up both glasses, handing one to Sabrina. She sips it, but continues to study me as the men chat for a minute.

Gavin glances my way and I don’t miss the way his eyes flare with I’m not sure what...surprise?

“Who’s this?” he asks and Jasper’s hand slides to my hip, his fingers digging into my flesh, pulling me flush against his side.

“This is Lennon Hart,” he says, not giving me any breathing room so that I can shake Gavin’s hand.

Gavin nods at me. “Nice to meet one of Jasper’s many ladies.”

Well, fuck a duck. I was expecting the first jab to come from Sabrina, not him. Two can play at that game.

“Well, tonight is my turn.” I place my hand on Jasper’s chest and weave his tie through my fingers. “I do only get him twice a week, but he’s so worth it.” My tone is sultry and sexual and Jasper’s chest rumbles with laughter.

Sabrina’s lips contort into a sneer of disgust and Gavin shoots me a half smile.

“I’m sure you keep his hands full,” Gavin continues and Jasper wraps my hand in his and brings it up to his lips.

“You have no idea.” Jasper looks down at me and my breath catches. I lose myself in the green and gold mix in his eyes and the rest of the room fades away. For a brief moment, it’s only the two of us and the plethora of possibilities that exist between us.

The lights flicker, jarring us both back to the present.

“Well, we better go,” Jasper says, taking my hand.

“Good to meet you.” Gavin leans in and kisses my cheek. When he pulls back his gaze rakes over my body. Jasper’s entire body stiffens beside me.

“Um, yeah, you as well,” I stammer.

Jasper doesn’t exchange handshakes or hugs with either of them. Instead he gives them a quick wave and then we’re heading back into the theater, down to the front row.

Once we’re settled in our seats, I look around to see where Sabrina and Gavin are sitting. Not finding them anywhere, I lean into Jasper. The question I’m dying to ask is like acid burning a hole through my tongue the longer I hold it inside.

“Can I ask you something?” I whisper and he leans into me as the curtain comes up. “My tattoos? They don’t embarrass you? I mean, I saw the way your friends looked at me.”

He chuckles. “First, they aren’t my friends. I went to school with both of them. Second of all”—this time he turns to look me in the eyes—“do you really have no idea that every man in this room is jealous of me because I’m the one who gets to take you home?”

My face heats and his hand rises to my cheek as the spotlight zeroes in on the stage. Still, I can’t look away from him.

“I would never hide you,” he whispers and my eyes close as he seals that promise with a chaste kiss that leaves me wanting more.

He really does play to win. I can’t wait to shine up his trophy later.

CHAPTER

Twelve

THE TAXI DROPS us off at South Beach Harbor Marina. Jasper climbs out and pays the driver through the passenger window while I slide across the backseat.

“Why are we here?” I ask, allowing him to entwine his fingers with mine and lead me down the plank walkway through the boats.

“I hope I’m not being too presumptuous.” He stops us and grabs my other hand with his. “I don’t expect you to do anything. I just didn’t want the night to end.”

A foreign giddiness washes through my body like the ripples of the ocean surrounding us.

I eye the marina, figuring he owns one of the boats. “Which one is yours?” I ask, my gaze scouring all the boats, trying to guess which one is Jasper’s based on what I know of his taste. Unless the flag is a one-hundred-dollar bill I might not be able to figure it out because they all look kind of the same from here.

He points to the far end, at a sailboat that’s not as big as many, but not as small as the majority of boats lined up. Mid-sized and currently swaying a bit on the water.

“When the boats are a-rockin’,” I say, a smile teasing my lips. I kick off my heels, hang them from my fingers as I step in front of him, eager to see what Jasper’s packing and to get on the boat. I can’t remember the last time I was on a boat.

He follows a few steps behind me, his dress shoes scuffing on the worn wood. In my mind, he’s watching my ass sway back and forth. He’s admiring

the way my dress dips all the way down to right above my ass, remembering what my skin felt like when he rested his hand there. My imagination has him adjusting the chubby that's growing in his pants.

I stop at the edge of his boat, jumping up and down on my toes.

"You're like a kid on Christmas." He looks at me from the corner of his eye as he slips his own shoes off.

"I've never been on a sailboat before."

He steps up onto the boat, stopping and holding his hand out for me. When I step on, the boat sways and he grips my hand harder to keep me steady, but I fall right into his chest.

"You arranged that," I joke and his hand moves up to my cheek, his thumb caressing my skin.

"Let me show you around." He ignores my comment, his hand sliding down my arm until my hand is in his again.

I'm not usually a hand-holder, more of an ass-grabber. Anyone who knows me knows I don't like being led anywhere. I'm in charge of my own life. But with Jasper, it somehow feels right that he leads me.

He walks me around, and when we get to the wheel I pretend like I'm on the high seas. When we reach the front of the boat I sit down and let my legs hang off the edge before striking a pose like I'm a celebrity bathing in the sun. Jasper laughs, but when we reach the door to the cabin, all my amusement vanishes because this is where I'm going to fuck his brains out.

The entire date, I didn't waver about whether I was going to sleep with him or not. That'd be like giving me a lottery ticket and expecting me not to scratch it. How the hell would you know if you're a millionaire otherwise? Tonight, I'm hoping for a lot of zeros after Jasper's performance.

He goes down the ladder first so he can steady me from below. As my foot hits the second rung, his hands slide up my hips.

"You aren't peeking, are you?" I joke and his fingers tighten on my waist.

"I don't spoil my surprises," he says in a low voice that I feel in all the right places.

My feet reach the bottom and he turns me around, stepping forward to crowd me into the ladder. My breathing hitches in my throat, but he continues his prowl, leaving my ass perched on a step of the ladder and him between my open legs. Smooth move that I didn't anticipate. I'm impressed.

"I haven't seen the bed yet," I pretend to whine.

His gaze stays on mine, fierce and predatory. "If I'm lucky you'll see

every inch of this place. Repeatedly.”

“Do you have any neighbors?” I ask, my hand sliding down the front of his slacks, gripping his hard length in my hand.

Not a chubby, girls, a full-on, hard-as-granite cock. I give myself a mental high five because unlike the last dick that was trying to make an impression on me, Jasper is rockin’ cock. At least nine inches by my estimation and though I don’t want to call myself an expert in such things... I kinda am.

The thought that I’ve turned Jasper on makes me throb between my legs. I’m going to rock this guy’s world and pray he doesn’t ruin me for others.

“There aren’t houseboats. So you can scream as loud as you want.” Moving closer, he kisses my collarbone, moving up my neck, until he pauses. “I promise to send you home with throat lozenges tomorrow.”

“Who says I’ll be the one screaming?” I giggle, my head falling back until it hits the ladder. “Ouch,” I say, still laughing.

He grips my ass, and I lock my legs around his waist. Swinging us around, he walks me back until I’m against a counter.

I jump down when he gives me some space and my hand moves to my back to unzip my dress.

Jasper steps forward, his hand landing on mine. “Allow me,” he says, his hand on my hip, swiveling me around. He shrugs off his jacket and I watch it fall on the couch to our left. He cages me in, his hands grazing over mine and placing them on the counter in front of me. “Hands stay,” he whispers, kissing where my neck meets my shoulder.

My skin scorches under the softness of his lips. He slowly unzips my dress, his finger gliding down my spine.

A strangled groan escapes his throat. He pushes the dress off each shoulder and I unglue my hands from the counter just long enough to allow the dress to fall to the ground, leaving me in my black thong and my heels.

“I’m such a lucky bastard,” he says, his voice strained and filled with lust.

I shake my ass a few times, impatient to have his hands on me, and he grips my ass, squeezing. When I move to turn around, he steps into me, pinning me there, my front half falling to the counter top.

“You’re used to control, aren’t you?” he whispers against the skin on my back. When I don’t answer he nudges my legs apart and I feel his thick, hard cock through his slacks. What I wouldn’t do for him to take those pants off right now.

I nod.

“Tonight, I’m in charge,” he says and a jolt of adrenaline courses through my body before I relax under his gentle touch.

“I don’t take directions very well,” I reply and he chuckles, a deep low sound that I feel between my legs.

“There will be consequences if you don’t,” he promises me.

I suck in a breath. God, I’m practically dripping between my legs for this man.

“Tell me you’ll spank me,” I say with a breathy voice, turning my head to the side so I can see him.

“I have a feeling there’s no punishment you wouldn’t enjoy.” He squeezes my ass cheek.

I shake my head, my teeth digging into my bottom lip. “I’m open to most things.” I rise from the counter and this time he allows me, taking my shoulder and swinging me around to look into his eyes.

“Undress me,” he orders with a devilish tone that ignites a tremble through my body.

I fiddle with the buttons of his shirt as he stands there and lets me unclothe him.

I almost always call the shots in the bedroom, but I’m usually dealing with guys in their twenties like me. Jasper’s in his early thirties though and he’s all man. He owns his sexuality like I do and doesn’t seem to make any apologies for it. I have a feeling he could rock not only this boat, but any surface he fucks me on.

His shirt opens and as I push it off his shoulders, my mouth drops open.

“That’s hot.” My hands run over the tribal tattoo on one of his shoulders that leads across to his muscular back. I push his inked shoulder and he turns like a fashion model and lets his shirt join my dress on the floor. A tattoo runs along the top of his shoulder blades across his entire back. Circling back around, he ignores the fact that I’m admiring his tattoos and eyes his slacks.

“Mr. Banks, would you like me to take care of these pants for you?” My hand snakes down his muscular chest until I cup his balls in my palm, squeezing and massaging.

“I’d like you to do that on your knees, Miss Hart.” He cocks his eyebrow as though he’s daring me.

Does he not get me at all? A dare pretty much guarantees I’m going to do whatever it is. I enjoy a challenge.

I sink to my knees, staring up at him as I swiftly unbutton his charcoal slacks.

They thud to the floor, pooling at his feet and he cocks that eyebrow again. His black boxer briefs tent with his throbbing erection and my mouth waters. Teasing has always been my forte and since he's informed me that I'm only in control until he's naked, I figure it's time to play a little.

My hand slides up his muscular leg. He's statue still, not even a flicker of an eyelid as he stares down at me, his gaze impassive. His hard length stops my hand and I squeeze, rubbing up and down.

I inch closer, arching my back and bringing his cock to my lips through his boxers. With the fabric barrier, I allow my teeth to scrape up his erection until the tip is in my mouth, where I let my tongue wet the cotton fabric. My hand continues to pump him up and down and his hands move toward my hair.

We both know what he wants, and I'm curious if he'll stick to his word that I lose control once I take off his boxers.

Unable to resist the burning question in my mind, I pull back and my mouth leaves his fabric-covered cock and my fingers hook on the sides of his boxers. I drag them down and his cock springs out, hard as a rock, straining toward his navel.

And what a beautiful cock it is. Holy shit. A spotlight with a chorus of 'ahs' should be ringing out around us in this moment. A chorus of angels should be singing hallelujah because this man is perfection personified.

I grab him, sliding his length through my hand before covering his mushroom tip with my mouth. I exhale in relief through my nose, but before I can get a good taste, Jasper bends down and picks me up under my arms, propping me on the counter. Though I'm disappointed, I can't help but be impressed by his strength.

"I told you, I'm in control now." He steps out of his slacks and kicks all our clothing out of our way. He pushes my legs to the sides, opening me to him, and he runs his finger along the underside of my thong, teasing my clit and making me grow even wetter.

I lean back on my elbows and his other hand comes up to slide my panties down my legs, tossing them over his head. Then his hands are on my inner thighs, pressing them down on the counter. I'm completely bared to him.

My eyes flutter closed in preparation to feel his breath or his tongue on me. A moan practically rests in my throat, waiting to be unleashed. But I feel

nothing and when I open my eyes, he's watching me. His eyes are the flint and I'm the spark to ignite him.

He opens the drawer to his left and pulls out a condom. While his gaze stays on me, he tears it open with his teeth and spits out the wrapper.

Now, I've been in this position a few times—more than a few if I'm being honest—but no one has ever done that maneuver like he should be in a porno. Never as flawless as Jasper. No one has been able to keep me wet and panting while I'm waiting for his cock to take me.

He sets the package on the counter and his hands slide under my thighs to pull me forward. I'm perched on the edge and he directs my legs to his sides. I tighten them behind his thighs and he grabs the base of his cock with his hand, gliding the head up and down my wetness. A muffled groan echoes in the small space when the tip slides over my swollen clit and I scoot closer, needing him inside of me.

"You want it?" he asks and my breathing staggers, watching the movement of his dick, and for a second I think to hell with precautions. I just want him to slide it in me.

"Yes," I answer in a breathy voice that betrays how lost I am in him.

A slow smirk tips up the corner of his lips. Reaching over, he places the condom on and less than a second later, he's buried inside of me. He growls and his fingers dig so far into my hips, I know there'll be marks in the morning.

There's nothing slow about Jasper. He thrusts in and out of me like he's finishing instead of starting. Normally, a little primer would be necessary, but I feel like we've been doing the slow grind all night and it's time to unleash the animals we've been keeping at bay.

The desperation with which Jasper wants me right now is a bigger turn-on than his cut abs, his intelligence or his perfect dick. Nothing turns me on more than when I know a guy wants me just as bad as I want him.

Jasper pumps into me over and over again and the need to get closer to him builds, so I inch up, wrapping my arms round his neck and using my legs to draw him in deeper.

His hands direct the movement of my hips, forcefully pulling them toward him and then pushing them away. Before I have a chance to react, he hoists me up, walks a few steps and slams me down on something soft. He continues to ram into me the entire time and then draws my legs up so my ankles are at either side of my face.

Thank God for yoga.

“I wish I had a camera,” he says, his gaze focused on our joined bodies.

“Next time,” I remark and his sexy as sin smile appears and I’m pretty sure he thinks I’m kidding.

He thrusts into me a few more times and then his cock leaves me. I long for it immediately, but before I can complain he’s lying in the bed beside me and directing me to get on top of him.

I don’t miss a beat, rolling over on top of him and lowering down on his length.

He feels so much bigger in this position and I’m sure my eyes roll back into my head out of sheer bliss. Our movements are frantic as I slide up and down on him and he crashes his lips to mine. My fingernails dig into his shoulders as I grind my pelvis back and forth, my clit throbbing with the friction. Our tongues mix and mingle, our teeth knocking, our lips swollen. When he takes his teeth to my bottom lip, the explosion I was holding at bay floods out of me and I cry out. Every part of my body feels electrified, as if I’ve just been hit with a bolt of lightning. When I’m done riding out my orgasm I let my trembling body fall onto his chest.

Never, ever in my sexual conquests have I become a shaking mess after an orgasm. I’m always ready to give as good as I receive, but for some reason I feel weak-limbed and completely spent.

Jasper refuses to let me stop though. His lips continue to devour mine and as exhausted as I am, the tingling between my legs ignites again.

With his hands on my hips, he brings them up and down on his hard length until he stills inside of me. His head falls back to the pillow, the muscles in his neck strain and his mouth falls open as he groans through his orgasm.

I study his eyes as they flutter from open to closed and I swear I could watch him come every second of every day. He’s even more beautiful with just-fucked hair, red lips and sweat glistening on his hard body.

A full minute later, he opens his eyes and I collapse on his chest. His fingers graze my bare skin, up and down my back.

“Shh...sleep now,” he whispers and as much as I want to repeat what we just did, my eyelids close.

CHAPTER

Thirteen

I WAKE up and the slow sway underneath me reminds me that I'm on Jasper's boat. I'm not even sure of the last time I slept over at a guy's place unless I passed out after because I was drunk.

Last night, I never stirred and we didn't even have sex again. What the hell? There's a good chance he thinks I'm a stage-five clinger now and I've completely blown my chance with a fine specimen like Jasper Banks. One and done. I could kick myself.

He never even ate me out. Fuck.

I roll over, sitting up on the edge of the bed, narrowing my eyes while I glance around the small room. I'd like to investigate further since I didn't really get the tour last night. Unless demonstrating what the counter and the bed feel like under my ass counts. Unfortunately though, my bladder is screaming at me so I stand in search of a bathroom.

Bingo. The small door to my right holds my salvation. Thank goodness, because in about thirty seconds I'd be peeing in his sink or hanging my ass overboard.

I do my business and notice there's no toiletries. No shaving cream, not even a toothbrush or toothpaste. I cover my mouth, testing my breath. Oh, God, I need toothpaste. I scour under the cabinet, but other than some Band-Aids, sunblock and a brush, nothing. What the hell?

Giving up, I open the door and promptly scream.

"Jasper!" My hand covers my frantically beating heart as he stands there in his slacks and shirt from last night. He's a wrinkled mess and I smile inside at the fact that he didn't think to lay his clothes out neatly before we

went at it.

“Coffee?” he asks, holding out a Starbucks cup.

I smile. “Thank you.” I take it from his hand and see ‘Bella’ scribbled on the outside. “And you are?” I ask with a smile.

He circles his cup in his hand and I laugh at ‘Edward’ written on his.

Twilight.

“I love that you play my game,” I say, inching up my toes to give him a quick, closed-mouth kiss on his lips.

He steps closer, prolonging the kiss a second. “What are you doing today?” he asks me, walking me backward until my ass falls to the bed.

“Um...” I rack my brain. I don’t have any plans and the tattoo shop is closed today. “Shouldn’t you ask who I’m doing?” I ask and he chuckles.

“Good answer.” He sets his coffee down and leaves the small room, returning a second later with a Target bag. “I got you some sailing clothes.”

I quirk an eyebrow. “Are there special clothes for sailing?”

“Well, there are, but they don’t sell them at Target. I got you some shorts and a shirt. Along with a toothbrush and toothpaste.” He passes me the bag and I set it in my lap.

I run a hand through my hair, knowing I could really use a shower.

“I also bought you a bathing suit,” he continues. “There’s a spot we can anchor and swim.” His eyes light up so I root through the bag and pull out the skimpiest bikini. Seriously, almost all string. Now I’m all for working what your mama gave you, but I’m not auditioning to work the pole right now.

He holds up his hands in a placating gesture when I hold it up in front of me. “In my defense, it was either that or a one-piece and I just couldn’t picture you in a mom bathing suit.”

I chuckle. “Yeah, me and Mom probably shouldn’t go in the same sentence.” I glance away from the small amount of fabric in my hand and something flashes across Jasper’s expression, but it’s too fast for me to figure out what it’s about. “At this point you might as well tie me up naked. It might cover more of me.” I toss the bikini on the bed and he laughs. “If I ever have to buy you clothes, I’m buying you a Speedo.” I eye him and he chuckles again. “A thong Speedo.”

Still smiling, he moves into the bathroom with his toothbrush and toothpaste. “Do they make such a thing?” he asks.

“I’ll have one shipped over from Europe.” I sit on the bed, waiting for him to finish before I intrude.

“I look forward to it.” He comes out a couple minutes later, grabbing my hand for me to get up and when I do he wraps his arms around my middle. “Now, go get dressed. I can’t wait to have you alone on the water.” He kisses my nose and pats my ass to get moving.

He leaves the room and I stare after him, wondering what the hell I’m doing spending the day with a man after I slept with him the night before.

Where are you, Lennon Hart? Are you still in there somewhere?

Pretty soon I’ll be giggling, batting my eyelashes and pretending to like things I hate just to impress him.

I sigh and pick up the Target bag and lock myself in the bathroom to get changed. Somehow it just feels safer at the moment.



An hour later, we’re out on the water. Jasper is behind the wheel and I have no idea what I’m doing, but I’m helping him as much as I can. Of course, every task he gives me somehow means I need to bend over. I don’t mind though. I enjoy the way I catch him watching me. Like he’s the fisherman and I’m the prized catch.

Okay, maybe that’s a bad analogy because I suppose after the fisherman hooks the fish he ends up gutting it or mounting its dead body on the wall, but you catch my drift.

I’m wearing the shorts and too-tight t-shirt he bought over my almost non-existent bikini. I sit back and grab one of the coconut water bottles he put in a cooler. I’m not sure what time he got up, but he was a busy beaver because we have drinks, snacks, wine, and he’s making us lunch whenever we anchor.

“So, why a sailboat?” I ask, propping my feet up on the ledge, making myself comfortable.

He glances over to me. “When I went to Harvard my best buddy’s family owned one. Much larger than this, but I don’t know... I loved it. His dad showed me how to sail. Just took a liking to it, I guess.”

Good answer. I pop a piece of cheese in my mouth from the plate he put out. I’ve never spent time with a guy who catered to me like this.

“What about you?” he asks.

I look up, thinking I must’ve missed something while daydreaming.

“What?”

“Why tattooing?” The sun shines on his own inked skin. Wherever he went, they did an awesome job. Not as good as me, but not so bad that I’d suggest a redo.

“I love to draw. I went to Berkeley.”

“Good school,” he comments.

“It’s no Harvard, but I’m proud. Anyway, I quickly realized I might be a good artist, but I’d need something more to make a living, so I changed my art major to business. Tattooing lets me mix the two, so I had a guy who showed me the ropes. Eventually, he wanted to move to San Diego, so I took over his shop.”

He nods. “So you own the shop?”

“I manage it and we’re on a buy program, but I’m not sure that’s what I want to do with my life.”

He leaves the wheel for a minute to join me, reaches down, grabbing a slice of cheese and a cracker, then returns to his spot.

“Your dream isn’t tattooing?” he asks and my stomach clenches.

Do I tell him? No, because he’ll really think I’m a loon. “It’s fine for now, but the hours are exhausting. Especially on the weekend. When I’m working, I can be there until all hours of the morning. The only good thing is my younger employees usually want those hours. It tends to be more entertaining.” I smile, thinking about all the drunken guys I’ve hooked up with who have come in there, and then cringe, thinking Jasper wouldn’t much like to hear that. Of course, he has his own drawer full of condoms at the ready, so who am I to say?

“I can imagine you meet some pretty interesting people.” He smiles as though he truly does believe that and there’s zero judgment.

“Yeah,” I say, looking out to the horizon. “It’s beautiful out here. Peaceful.” I raise my hand, letting the wind blow through my fingers.

“I think that’s why it’s so addicting. Come here.”

I stand up to join him and he puts me between him and the wheel. “I didn’t like you so far away.” He kisses my shoulder and I fall back into his strong chest. “We’ll be docking soon,” he says. “Take the wheel.” He holds both my hands and places them on the wheel.

“I have no idea what I’m doing,” I tell him, but he shoos me off.

“I’ll instruct you,” he says before his fingers slide down the front of me. He unbuttons my shorts and shimmies them down my hips until they fall at

my feet.

I suck in a breath.

“You have no idea how hard I was when I bought that bikini. Just from imagining you in it.” His hands slide around me again and he cups my mound.

I let one hand drop from the wheel in anticipation of touching him, but he has other ideas.

“Hands on the wheel,” he scolds me and I return my hand to where it was, all of my knuckles white as I grip the wheel.

“I think all I have to do is this.” He pulls the string on one side of my bottoms and they flop open. “Ah,” he says, his hand moving to the other side. “This is the view I really want to see.” He undoes the tie on the other side and the bottoms fall to the wooden floor of the boat.

Then his hands are gone, his chest no longer warming my back. I glance over my shoulder to find him sitting on the bench behind me, admiring me while he rubs his hard-on over his shorts.

“Now this, this is a beautiful view,” he says, and then glances up to see my gaze on him. “Tsk, tsk. Hands on the wheel, beautiful.” His finger circles around in the air and I do as I’m told.

His hands splay my ass and he squeezes. “I love your ass,” he says. “The jeans you were wearing that time I first saw you in Starbucks... I beat off to that vision all night.”

I feel the wetness pooling between my legs.

“Why don’t we do this when we anchor so I can touch you?” I ask softly.

He chuckles, his finger moving through my wetness and back. “Because I like control.” He smacks my ass with one hand and I jump.

“I’ve figured that out,” I say dryly and he chuckles again.

“You can act like you don’t like it, but I know you do.” He eases my thighs further apart. “Your body doesn’t lie.”

I say nothing because I’m not going to agree, and I can’t deny that this alpha domineering shit turns me on more than a teenage boy looking at his first *Playboy*.

“So wet.” He slides his finger back and forth over my slit until he mercifully plunges one finger into me. I rise on my tiptoes, surprised and elated.

He stands up while another finger massages my clit. “Tell me, Lennon, would you prefer my tongue or my fingers?” he whispers and sucks my

earlobe into his mouth.

His other hand rubs my ass, and I should be expecting it but I startle anyway.

Slap.

I yelp and grip the wheel tighter, the boat weaving slightly.

Jasper takes one hand and steadies the wheel until we're going straight again. "Now, now, don't crash my boat." He nibbles on my neck. "Answer the question, beautiful. Fingers or tongue?"

He's asking me whether I want cake or ice cream. They're equally delicious and I want them both. Together. At the same time. I want the ice cream to melt a little on the cake until I can't tell where one ends and one begins.

"Both." I inhale a deep breath and I feel his head shaking no in the crook of my neck.

"One or the other," he says, his teeth lightly scraping along my skin.

"Please," I whisper.

Smack.

Now my right ass cheek is red.

"Tongue," I pant.

His lips move up my neck and his finger leaves my clit, much to my dismay. A second later, his mouth replaces his finger and I arch my back—the way every man loves when they're doing you doggy style—giving him as much access as I can.

He swipes his tongue the entire length of my opening and my hands fall from the wheel.

"Hands on the wheel, beautiful."

And I do as he says because I never want him to stop. He plants his hands firmly on my ass and spreads me apart while his thumbs trace lazy circles on the inside of my thighs as he devours my pussy.

My hands ache from clutching the wheel in an iron grip.

"I'm so hard," he mumbles.

I let my head drop back and stare up at the blue sky, dotted with wisps of clouds as my orgasm teeters at the edge, ready to dive into bliss.

I pant and squirm, my hips rocking, needing the friction on my clit that he's expertly denying me. His thumbs stop and he grips my thighs tighter, the tip of his tongue moving faster.

"Jasper," I sigh, trying to squeeze my thighs shut from the throbbing, but

he holds them open and continues to worship me, never rushing the job.

Small inaudible moans escape him and just when I'm about ready to beg, he pushes two fingers into me and I fall forward over the steering wheel.

What starts as slow and rhythmic quickly turns fast and deep and I whizz past the teetering stage and dive right into an earth-shattering orgasm.

Damn, either those Kegel exercises are really helping, or Jasper is a Jedi when it comes to sex. I'd put money on the latter.

Jasper places a light kiss on my pussy and then rises from the deck, taking the wheel from behind me. His chest accepts the weight of my body as I collapse into his strength. He kisses the top of my head as I let my eyes drift closed.

"I hope you know I'm already planning my payback," I mumble, still falling back to Earth from the shooting star that was my orgasm.

"I would expect nothing less." He chuckles and kisses my head one more time. "You have about two minutes to regain your strength."

I turn around and he glances down at my bare pussy. "I so love that you want me like this, but I don't think I can orgasm again. I need to eat something first."

He kisses the tip of my nose and I feel my cheeks heat. Why do I love that small, non-sexual gesture?

"I need you to help me with the sails so we can anchor."

My face heats further. "Oh," I say and he chuckles again.

"You have a reprieve for now," he says and winks.

Just like that my embarrassment disappears because I know deep down that our attraction is mutual. I'd always wondered if I'd ever find anyone who could make me speechless and sated after sex. Someone call Guinness, because Jasper's the world record holder and I think he'll be holding that spot for a long time.

Why is that so scary?

CHAPTER

Fourteen

WE SWIM, we eat, we sail back to the marina. By the time the sun is setting on the city, every limb hurts. Maybe it's from Jasper taking me on the beach of the small island he anchored near. Or maybe it's from when he thought he could eat sushi off my body after I told him I worked at a naked sushi place for a bit and he took a break to suck on my tits. His drawer of condoms is almost depleted and although I would love to have him once more before coming back to the real world, my body is not going to survive.

Holy shit. Jasper has out-sexed me.

We're docked and my back is to his chest, each of us with a glass of wine, watching the sun disappear in the sky. The hand he has slung around my stomach tightens and he kisses my temple.

"Thank you for spending the day with me," he says and I crane my neck to look at him.

"Thank you for inviting me. I think if I owned this boat, I'd be on here every day." I place my hand on the seat and graze it along the soft leather.

"Well, I hope it won't be your last time here," he says, sounding a little unsure of himself.

I twist around, up on my knees to face him. "Anytime you invite me, I'm here."

I mean it too. Jasper might not be mine. Hell, he might not want me for more than a few dalliances, but I'll take him while I can have him.

"Let's lock this up and we'll get you home." He pats my ass and I move to stand up.

A surprising rush of disappointment floods my veins and it feels like a

boulder rests in my stomach. I wish I didn't have to say goodbye to Jasper. I push the thought away because there's no way I would ever consider monogamy. Too boring.

I climb down the ladder and grab my dress that Jasper so nicely put on a hanger in the small closet. A minute or so later, Jasper comes downstairs, grabbing flip-flops he must have bought, and throws his other clothes in the Target bag.

"Do you get sad when you leave it?" I ask him and he chuckles but nods.

"I do. I'd live on it if it was bigger," he remarks. From what I saw he could totally live on it, but men like Jasper Banks probably like to live a lush lifestyle.

On the taxi ride home, my cell rings and I press ignore, not wanting to interrupt my last minutes with Jasper. It rings again and he looks over, releasing my hand from his.

"Go ahead." He nods and I slide the phone to my ear.

"Yes?" I answer, already knowing it's Whitney.

"Oh, my God!" she screams. "Oh, my God! Oh. My. God!"

I hang up.

"Who was that?" Jasper asked with a wrinkle in his forehead.

"I think my friend just butt-dialed me while fucking her boyfriend. I'm pretty sure I heard her orgasm."

Most friends would find it disgusting, but Whitney and I went camping together a time or two in college and tents aren't exactly known for their noise-deafening properties. Let's just say I was woken up in the middle of the night thinking a bear was outside our tent.

His eyebrows crinkle. Yeah, welcome to my life.

My phone rings again and I look down to see it's Whitney again.

I answer.

"Whitney!" I scream into the phone and the taxi driver slams on the brakes.

"Oh, it's okay, she's on the phone," Jasper tells the taxi driver and he hits the gas again.

"Why are you yelling?" Whitney says.

Thankfully, her orgasm is over.

"You butt-dialed me while Cole's cock was inside of you," I say dryly.

"Oh, my God, that's so embarrassing." She laughs.

"Please don't repeat those words. I'll never be able to keep a straight face

in church the next time my mom drags me there if you keep reminding me.”

She laughs again. “Well, you should know that it wasn’t Cole’s cock. I was raving about Cheap Thrill.”

Cheap Thrill is my newest creation and I just passed along the vibrators to her and Tahlia to try out.

I sit up straighter in my seat and my melancholy about leaving Jasper is replaced with a high over the success of my latest product.

“You like it?” I ask.

“Um, yeah.” She lowers her voice. “That swirly thing it does? Cole has some competition.” She giggles.

“The hell I do. I’m her unicorn cock,” Cole screams behind her and I laugh that the two of them might have enjoyed Cheap Thrill together.

“I’m glad you like it,” I say softly because Jasper’s studying me.

“I do. I hope Tahlia tries it out. This is going to be a *huge* seller, Len. Great job,” she raves and I blush, slightly embarrassed at the compliment.

“I’m glad,” I repeat because I can’t very well ask her any specifics about the product right now.

“Why are you so quiet?” Whitney picks up on my uncharacteristic demureness.

“I’m just in a taxi,” I remark, offering Jasper a small smile.

He seems appeased and looks out the window.

“That’s never stopped you before. Ask me the questions. Cole was here so you can ask him too,” she offers and I cringe.

“How about I stop by tomorrow sometime?”

“I’m not sure if he’ll be around. Come on, you want our honest thoughts while it’s fresh in our minds. Now or never,” she singsongs.

I should tell her I’m with Jasper, but then she’d ask questions about why I’m still with him when the date should’ve been over last night. I’m not in the mood to try to define my feelings about him or what the hell it is I want from him. I’m in shambles as it is.

“Okay, well, I’ll call you when I get to my apartment,” I mumble into the phone, covering the receiver with my hand.

“Have you been abducted?” she asks, actually sounding concerned that that’s a possibility.

“No. Are you a crazy person? No.”

“Where’s my Lennon? Is this someone with a voice changer? Give me back my friend,” she jokes and I roll my eyes.

“You’re taking that investigative reporter thing a little too seriously. I’m here. I’m fine. I’ll call you when I get home.” I click the phone off and thankfully she doesn’t call back.

I turn to Jasper. “Just my friend,” I say and he nods.

“She’s very loud,” he remarks and I nod several times.

“Tourette’s.”

He laughs and I smile that I was able to make him laugh.

A second later my phone lights up with a text. It’s a picture of Cheap Thrill next to Whitney’s head with a thumbs-up. I fumble my hand from Jasper’s to grab it, but he’s faster, reaching across with his free hand.

“Is that what I think it is?” he says, lifting the phone to inspect it. “Is that the reporter from the WHFI Station?”

A rush of heat floods my face and I grab the phone back. “Whitney Knight, yep. She’s one of my best friends.”

“Is that a vibrator?” he asks, leaning over for another glimpse. “Are you bisexual?” he asks with a straight face. I almost want to say yes to see his reaction and if it were anyone else, I would’ve.

“Yes and no.”

“Should I be upset that my buddies don’t send me pictures of anal beads?” he asks and now I’m laughing, the uncontrollable kind that has tears streaming down my face. “Seriously, I know there’s a lot of things the genders do differently, but do girls send pictures of sex toys to one another on the regular?” I can tell he’s joking from the impish grin on his face, but I have no idea how to get out of this conversation.

Telling someone you want to start a sex toy company is hard. Even more so when this is the one topic of conversation I want to avoid having with him.

“No, not really.” I shake my head.

“Care to explain?” He accents his voice like Ricky Ricardo and I’m about ready for him to scream “Lennon” with the same accent. Who knew a strait-laced guy like Jasper Banks had a humorous bone in that amazing body?

Not wanting to pile another lie on top of my lie-by-omission when we met, I take a deep breath and shift in my seat, flipping the pictures up on my phone.

“This is what I want to do.” I hand him the phone and he scrolls through the pictures fast and then flicks back slower.

“You want to be a sex toy tester?” he asks, still focused on the pictures.

I take the phone away from him. “No, I created these.”

The taxi slows and pulls up to the curb near my apartment and I catch the driver looking at me through the rearview mirror. He looks interested and if Jasper weren't here I might see if he wanted to purchase one of the samples I have in my apartment.

"Created?" he questions, completely oblivious to the fact that the taxi has stopped.

"I've designed a bunch of different toys and I have a guy who's been making some molds to produce the products and helping me through the testing process."

His fingers stop swiping and he stares up at me, eyes boring into me. "Mold? Helps you to test them?" His eyebrows crinkle and it's the most adorable thing watching his mind whirl with assumptions.

"We don't try them out together. He makes me a few samples of each and I give them to my friends." I move my hand in front of us to insinuate he should slide out of the vehicle.

"So it's platonic?"

I laugh. "Yes, it's platonic."

"Phew." His rigid shoulders relax and he falls back into the seat of the cab. "I was about to volunteer to be a mold." He grins.

I inch closer, my lips coming to his ear. "I'd take you up on that offer, but I don't think I'd want millions of women to know what you're packing. I'd never get you for myself again."

This time it's his cheeks flushing red. "Oh, shit. We're here." He fiddles with the door handle for a second, then he opens it and I file out behind him.

After he pays the cab driver, he joins me on the walk up to my apartment. I'm surprised. I would've thought he'd had enough of me and would just say goodbye in the backseat of the cab—especially after what I just divulged to him.

He's quiet until we hop off the elevator and I can't help but wonder what he's thinking, which is new for me. Usually I could give two shits what a guy thinks about me. Take me or leave me as I am.

Is Jasper thinking I'm way more insane than he thought? That someone who wants to invent sex toys cannot be part of his strait-laced and organized life?

I insert my key into the lock and open my door. Before I can enter he cages me against the hinge of the door, gripping the top.

"So, you have samples?" he asks and I see the devilish gleam in his gold-

flecked eyes.

“I do.” I slip under his arm and he follows me in.

“I take it you’ve tried them?” he asks, his hands on my hips as he kicks the door shut.

“Well, well, Mr. Banks, your sexual appetite seems to have returned,” I joke, batting my eyelashes at him.

“My appetite for you never wanes, beautiful.” His lips descend on mine, mingling and mixing until the back of my knees hits the edge of the mattress. Sometimes it’s good to live in a small space. Less time spent getting into bed.

I fall down onto the mattress and he looks around.

“Let’s try some out,” he suggests.

A slow smile creeps across my face. I get on my knees and scramble to the top of the mattress to grab my bag from the floor near my dresser. Bringing it onto the bed, I allow him to open it.

“Looks like I’m going to be exhausted tomorrow morning,” he says, digging through the bag like a pirate who just found buried treasure.

“Promise?” I ask coyly.

He pulls out Tickled Pink, a hot pink vibrating dildo and one of the first creations. His gaze locks with mine. “Absolutely.”

After giving Jasper a strip tease while I undressed—at his insistence—I lay in front of him on the bed. He’s still fully clothed, which hardly seems fair, but he says he wants this to be all about me. Who am I to argue?

The hum of the vibrator fills the room when he turns it on. My insides clench in anticipation. He trails the tip up and down my pussy a few times and I gasp every time it comes into contact with my clit.

Jasper’s lids are heavy when he pushes the tip into me, just enough to get it wet and then pulls it out. I groan with displeasure and one corner of his lip lifts in a smirk. I watch as he brings the glistening pink toy to my nipple and presses it there, spreading my wetness around the puckered tip. The vibrations jolt through my nipple and straight to my swollen clit. He pulls the toy away and wets it inside me again before doing the same thing to my other nipple.

“I’m going to enjoy licking you clean,” he says and bends forward to pull my nipple into his mouth. He sucks hard and settles the vibrator between my spread legs. I arch my back up off the mattress as the buzzing toy leaves me breathless.

Once he’s driven me near the edge and I’m a panting mess, he bites my

nipple lightly and sits back on his knees, keeping the vibrator in place between my legs.

“Are you ready to come all over my face?” he asks in a rough voice.

His erection strains the confines of his pants and though I’d give anything to get my hands on his perfect cock right now, I don’t want this to end.

Jasper adjusts his position so that he’s laying between my legs, my thighs spread over his shoulders. I watch, unable to breath, as he slowly pushes the vibrator inside of me, his heated eyes not missing any of it.

I moan and cup my tit in my hand, tweaking my nipple.

Jasper’s mouth clamps onto my clit and sucks, then flicks, then sucks again. He eats my pussy like a pro while he drags the vibrator in and out of me. It’s only a couple of minutes before I’m ready to explode.

“Jasper...Oh, God. I’m going to come!” I scream out as he sucks hard on my swollen bud and my pussy clamps down around the toy while my orgasm rips through me. He pulls the vibrator from me and moves down to lap up every last bit of my pleasure.

“Fuck. You taste amazing.”

I glance down at him between my legs while I try to catch my breathe and give him a small smile. It’s all I can manage at the moment.

He tosses Tickled Pink to the other side of the mattress and reaches down beside the bed, pulling up the bag with all my creations. “So, which one do you want to try out next?” he asks with a grin.

I’ve officially met my match.

With the sun comes morning. With morning comes Jasper’s departure, though at the moment he’s still in my apartment getting dressed.

He pulls his t-shirt over his head. “So, where are you in the process of trying to get all this off the ground?” he asks, nodding toward the bag of treats at the end of my bed.

I stare blankly at him, unsure how to respond. This is a do-or-die moment. My business needs him, but I fear losing him personally. Whatever. I can maintain my honesty with him and if for any reason he did offer to invest, I’ll just turn him down.

“I had an inheritance from my grandmother that I’ve used to get this far,

but that's pretty well gone now. I tried to get a loan from a bank, but—”

“Jacob?” he asks and then shakes his head. “Nah, a bank would never take that loan anyway. That's a hard line.” His comment shows how well he understands this business. “You need a private investor,” he says, more as a statement of fact than a question. His eyebrows raise and his lips curve. “I think I know one.”

I shake my head. “I could never let you do that.” What a one-eighty. Two weeks ago and I would've been jumping for joy that I was having this conversation, not turning him down.

“Not me.” His hand moves to caress my cheek. “I'd love to be your investor, but I never mix business with pleasure. And you are definitely pleasure, Lennon. Maybe I'm blinded, but I think you have a good thing here. Your entire approach is different than anything that's on the market as far as I know and you're definitely on trend with the female sexual empowerment angle.” He eyes the slew of sex toys we tried out last night. “But as good as an investment opportunity as I think this might be, I don't want us to end because of it.”

I nod, because unbeknownst to him, I'd already made that decision for us when I agreed to go on a date with him.

“Listen, my partner and I do a lot of deals together, but we've both invested in things independent of our business. Why don't you meet with him? I can't promise anything, but—”

I jump in his arms. “Seriously?”

He catches me, swinging my legs around his torso. “I can give you a personal reference on the products.” A smile teases his lips. “I'll talk to him and set something up for this week?”

He poses it as a question, like I'd say no. The perfect solution to my problem just presented itself. This way I get Jasper and a way to help my business.

“Thank you.” I kiss him on the lips and he deepens it, his tongue diving into my mouth with such ownership that it feels like he's branding me as his.

Once he tears his mouth from mine, he lightly smacks my ass to get off of him so I slide to the floor.

“Now, can we talk about a second date for us?” he asks.

“Since our first date lasted thirty-six hours, I might need you to be more specific.”

He laughs. “How about tomorrow evening?”

I nod. "I'd love to."

He kisses my nose again and I melt a little more for him. "Come on. I'll buy you some coffee."

I follow him out, not having the first clue where this thing between us is going. I'm usually fine not having all the answers and just seeing where life takes me, so I ignore the voice in my head telling me I'm already way too invested in Jasper and me.

CHAPTER

Fifteen

THE FOLLOWING WEEK, my palms are damp and I swear the skin behind my knees is sweating as I sit in a chair in the fancy waiting area of Jasper and his partner's business. The phone hasn't rung once since I've walked in. No one else has gotten off the elevator and no one looks like they've poured a cup of coffee from the area set up with a mini-fridge in the waiting room. It's a virtual ghost town.

I glance at my portfolio, wanting to open it up to make sure I have everything I need, but I must have done that ten times before I left my apartment this morning. Besides, I'd probably open it up just as Mr. Ashland walks out. So, in the meantime, my toes tap on the hardwood floor while the receptionist, Brittany, keeps peeking her head over the edge of the desk, clearly annoyed by my tapping.

I don't stop. Because the alternative is to allow all the pent-up nerves to amass in my system, resulting in me throwing up in this lovely reception area. So even though she doesn't know it, I'm saving Brittany from having the shittiest day cleaning up my vomit.

Jasper walks out from down the hall with two Starbucks coffee cups in his hands. "Why didn't you page me?" he asks Brittany and then smiles at me.

She twists her blonde strands around her fingers and shrugs her shoulders. "She asked for Drew."

"Mr. Ashland," he corrects, with authority in his voice. It reminds me of the way he likes to boss me around in bed and I press my thighs together. "I told you that when Lennon came in, you were to page me." He stops on the

other side of her desk so he can look at her while he's talking to her.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Banks." She turns her gaze down to the desk in front of her and pushes out her bottom lip.

Jasper turns and walks toward me, rolling his eyes. "Hey, beautiful," he says, taking the seat next to me. He hands me one of the coffees and I turn it around in my hand until I see the handwriting.

Joy Mangano.

I laugh and he knocks his cup with mine.

After our dinner Tuesday night, he came over to watch a movie on Wednesday. He picked the movie *Joy* with Jennifer Lawrence because it's a true story about a woman named Joy Mangano who created the Wonder Mop and over one hundred other products. I see why he picked that now, especially since I offered to watch *The Magnificent Seven*. I'm a little relieved. I was worried he was a bit on the pussy side with his movie selection.

"Aren't you a sweetie." I lean over and kiss him on the cheek.

He smiles and rests his ankle on his knee. "I have my moments. I'd take you to my office and let you thank me with a proper kiss, but I might lock the door and you'll miss your meeting." He winks.

"I can thank you in my own special way later." I flutter my eyelashes and he shifts in his seat.

"Stop doing that." He eyes Brittany, who is now typing on her cell phone.

"Doing what?" I lower my voice, but make it high-pitched, like an innocent schoolgirl.

"That." His eyes widen and I giggle, turning my attention to his Starbucks cup.

"Who are you today?" I ask him, and a sly smile tilts his lips.

Gordon Gekko.

I arch an eyebrow and he shakes his head and presses his lips together in mock disappointment.

"I've stumped you already?" When I say nothing, he shakes his head. "I can see I need to educate you in fine cinema from the past. It's from *Wall Street*. Michael Douglas' character."

"Ohhhh," I exaggerate, knowing almost nothing about the movie except that all the guys wore suits. Much like Jasper. "Nice suit." I wink and he leans in closer to my ear.

"I'm freeballing today," he whispers and I smack his arm.

I press my thighs together even harder this time. “Seriously?” I smack his arm again so he knows how unfair he’s being.

“What?” He holds his hands up in the air with an innocent expression on his face.

“How am I supposed to be in the meeting, knowing that if I unzipped your pants, your cock would pop out?” I run my tongue along my bottom lip.

“Shh.” He chuckles and looks in Brittany’s direction.

I glance at her, too, but she’s doing nothing but typing on her phone still. “She’s a real employee of the year, that one.”

He rolls his eyes again. “She’s Drew’s cousin.”

I nod my head back in understanding.

“Miss Hart.” A nice older lady comes out from the hallway and then eyes Jasper beside me. “Oh, Mr. Banks. I was just calling your office. Mr. Ashland would like you to sit in on the meeting.”

Jasper stands, taking my portfolio from where it rests. “I was already planning on it.” He looks down at me and smiles in a cocky smirk because he knows I’m going to have trouble talking about sex toys when I know he’s going commando beside me.

Jackass.

I take my portfolio from him and set my coffee on the side table. “Hello. I’m Miss Hart,” I say and the lady nods.

“Sue. Please follow me.” She walks a little ahead of me and I hear Jasper’s deep breaths behind me. I know what he’s looking at and to say I didn’t think about him when I got dressed this morning would be a lie.

Sue stops us at a door and throws out her hand for me to walk through.

“Thank you.”

“Thanks, Sue.” Jasper trails behind me and I inwardly cringe that this is not the professional meeting I had anticipated.

“Jasper,” she says and nods.

Drew sits behind a desk placed in his corner office with a view. Windows make up every inch of the exterior wall. When he sees us he stands, buttoning his suit jacket and rounding the desk.

Holy shit. He’s hot.

Bad Lennon. He’s... nope, no other word. He’s hot. What can I say? Old habits die hard.

His black hair is gelled to perfection and he’s wearing a dark green suit with matching tie. The man oozes confidence and sophistication.

“Miss Hart, I’ve heard a lot about you this past week.” He holds out his hand and I shake it. Hoping I’m firm enough but not too hard. You know, professional.

He eyes Jasper over my shoulder. “Did you bring me a coffee?” Drew tilts his head and bats his eyes and I turn my head to see Jasper holding the coffee I left in the waiting room.

“Hell, no. Have Brittany fetch you one. Not like she’s busy doing anything else.” Jasper sits down on the sofa and I wonder if he’s going to sit behind us the entire time.

“And here I thought your ornery personality would disappear the moment the lovely Lennon arrived.” Drew purses his lips and I wonder if they had some kind of conversation before I got here. “Come and sit down.” Drew waves his hand toward the couch.

I do what he says and, not wanting to take the chair and leave the two guys to sit by one another, I sit next to Jasper, throwing him a look, warning him not to touch me. He slides over a bit, giving me room, understanding my non-verbal communication.

Look at me, I already have him trained somewhat. Oh, relax, I’m kidding.

Drew sits down on the chair opposite me and unbuttons his jacket and I eye his pocket watch that’s connected by a chain from his vest button to a pocket—very old-school sexy. He rubs his hands together. “Tell me. What do you have?”

He’s like one of those sharks on *Shark Tank*, the way he’s so casual about it. Jasper sits up, granting me his undivided attention as well.

I open my portfolio and pull out the spec sheets of the products I’ve already had made and the drawings I’ve sketched out that remain only in my imagination—for now.

Drew takes my drawings, flipping through them while I tell him a bit about my ideas for the company and what makes my products different than every other sex toy out there. After he’s done going through all my designs he looks up at me.

“Please don’t take this the wrong way, but I’m not sure if I can work with you while you’re dating Jasper. I mean, I can’t help but wonder—”

“Stop it, Drew.” Jasper’s voice is low and his tone is filled with warning.

Drew laughs and looks at me. “Sorry, I just love messing with him.” He leans in closer. “He’s very protective of you. Interesting.” He winks and my stomach rolls over on itself because I’m not sure how to take his comment.

“Business,” Jasper warns him again and is only rewarded with Drew’s teasing laugh.

“I mean, he must really want you to succeed because I know he’d probably rather eat broccoli than have me be your investor.”

I glance back to Jasper and his eyes roll to the back of his head.

“Do you not like broccoli?” I ask and Jasper throws his hands up in the air.

“Hates it. Spits it out like a child.” Drew laughs again and Jasper throws his cup at Drew, hitting him square on the head.

Luckily, it’s empty.

“What the hell, man?” Drew stands up, looking over his suit.

My guess is it’s expensive, God knows why. I do appreciate vintage, but he looks like a giant leprechaun. Of course, he does have a pot of gold he’s willing to share. I’ll be quiet now.

“Relax, it was empty.” Jasper blows out some air. “Get serious or I’ll take on her business and you’ll be pissing and moaning about how much money you lost out on.”

Drew sits back down, his humorous expression turning serious. “All right, let’s get this pitch over with and then we can all go to lunch.”

I can’t help but feel offended that he doesn’t seem to be treating this meeting professionally. I have no plans to rush through the pitch, not to mention the only plans I have for lunch consist of Jasper’s cock.

“I assume you have samples?” Drew asks and as quick as the snap of a whip on my back, the meeting’s tone changes into all business. Now I can see how this man makes all his money.

“I do.” I open the bag I have, setting them on the table between us. I go through each one explaining what they’re used for and what makes them unique.

For the remaining twenty minutes, Drew is the epitome of an assured investor. Jasper sits quietly next to me, his elbows resting on his knees, facing forward to hear my explanations. Once I’m done, Drew asks me questions—the production cost of each unit, how much I’ve already invested in the company, how much inventory I’ll need, how I plan to ship them out and finally how I’m going to sell them to women. I answer all the questions and hand him a copy of my business plan.

He sits back in his chair and crosses his leg so that his ankle rests on his knee. That’s when I notice little pots of gold on his socks as he studies my

business plan. I purse my lips and divert my eyes before I start singing the *Lucky Charms* song. Instead I admire all the degrees he has framed and posted above the couch.

Harvard for undergraduate and graduate. Figures. Mr. Smarty Pants. Show off.

“Magically delicious,” Drew sings, placing my business plan on the table next to him. I glance over to him with wide eyes and he cocks an eyebrow. “You were humming,” he says by way of explanation.

I was not.

Jasper starts laughing next to me and I so desperately want to elbow him in the ribcage.

Here’s my shot and this guy is going to put two and two together and think I was mocking him. “I’m sorry. I have no idea why,” I lie.

“Now, Lennon. You don’t mind me calling you Lennon, do you?” Drew asks.

I shake my head. He could call me a C U Next Tuesday right now and I’d just nod my head.

“I don’t like doing business with liars.” His face is stone-cold serious.

My heartbeat picks up pace, my face heats and those palms that had dried off are now sweating again.

“Well, I noticed your socks and the song just kind of got stuck in my head.” I nod toward the damn socks that might just cost me this deal.

He glances down and Jasper stands from the couch. “You moron. You purposely dressed like you’re ready to slide down a rainbow into a pot of gold.” Jasper holds his hand out to me, but I don’t take it.

Drew looks down at his socks, like he doesn’t remember putting them on this morning.

“I really meant no offense. I swear. It had nothing to do with your suit.” I backpedal as best I can, but I’m making a bigger mess of this. The meeting was going great until my damn subconscious had to hum a theme song I probably haven’t heard since I was ten.

“Come on, Lennon.” Jasper offers me his hand once more. “I razz him all the time about how he dresses, he’ll get over it.”

“No.” I shake my head and lean forward. “I’m really sorry.” My voice is small, but it earns me his attention as Drew raises his head to look at me. His lips hold a coy smile and he looks like he’s trying not to laugh. “Seriously?” I ask.

He falls back into his chair laughing, and Jasper blows out an exasperated breath.

“You’re a fucking baby,” Jasper says, but all I can do is release the tensed-up breath that was locked in my lungs.

“I’m brilliant.” He puts his hand out in front of him for me to take. “I think you have something here. I’ll need my team to do some due diligence to make sure there are no surprises, but from everything we’ve discussed I don’t anticipate any issues. I look forward to working with you.” He has a genuine smile on his face now.

“Really?” I ask.

“Yes. Now if you ever want to ditch jackass and show me how you use them, I’m open.”

Jasper growls from where he stands behind Drew.

“I’m kidding. Of course.” He leans toward me. “Like I said... protective. It’s better not to poke the bear.” He winks and I realize that his emerald eyes match his suit.

“Thank you so much,” I say, realizing my hand is still in his, shaking it up and down.

“You can let go now, Lennon,” Jasper mumbles.

“Maybe she likes my hand,” Drew challenges and turns to look behind him where Jasper’s eyes lock with his and he gives him a short shake of his head. “Oh, this is going to be so much fun.” He lets go of my hand and heads back to behind his desk. “Sue will email you some papers and she’ll include a list of what we need. The first thing we need to get to work on is the patents.” He sits down and just like that he’s all business again.

“Thank you for taking a chance with me, Mr. Ashland.”

“Please, call me Drew,” he says and I nod, picking up my portfolio. While I try to put the toys back in the bag, Jasper and he start talking about another client. I find their relationship refreshing and it shows me an entirely different side of Jasper. “So you two go and I’ll meet you by Brittany’s desk in what? A half hour?”

I eye Jasper and we share a look of understanding, knowing exactly what the two of us will be doing during that half hour.

“Perfect.” Jasper walks to the door to open it for me.

This time when he takes my portfolio, I don’t object because I’ll need both my hands for what I’m about to do.

We walk down the hallway like professionals, Jasper leading the way, his

arm lazily swinging back and forth in a casual manner. He stops, introduces me to his secretary who thankfully, is friendlier than Sue but about the same age.

“Hold my calls, Lynn,” he tells her and opens the door to his office.

I walk in and he shuts the door, then flicks the lock. I take a moment to look around his office. It’s as big as Drew’s but more contemporary. Jasper’s hand skims down my arm, swiveling me around.

“Thank you,” I say and he only stares down at me.

“I’m glad it worked out.” He takes his hand and pulls me toward him and I feel his length pressed against my stomach.

“I think you knew it was going to work out before I even walked in.” I raise an eyebrow.

“Believe me, I may have talked to him, but I never know what Drew is going to do.” His hand slides through my hair and he starts to dip his head for a kiss, but I shake my head.

With my hand in the middle of his chest I push him backwards toward his desk until he falls back into his desk chair. A grin tugs one corner of his lips up as I fall to my knees in front of him. This time I’m in control.

“I want you to think of me every time you’re sitting in this chair,” I say.

Jasper stares down at me as I unbuckle his belt, undo the button, pull down the zipper and let his already hard cock spring free.

I lick my lips when I notice the bead of pre-cum glistening on the tip. “Seems someone’s looking forward to this.”

“I’ve been staring at that red lipstick on your mouth all morning waiting to see what it would look like wrapped around the base of my cock.”

His dirty words always get me so hot. “Well, let’s see if it’s everything you imagined it’d be.”

I lick the pre-cum off his mushroom tip and then spread my lips wide and drag my lips down his hardness until he’s breaching the back of my throat.

“Fuuuck,” he moans and pushes his hands into my hair.

I suction my cheeks in and move back up his length, sucking the whole way. A few more bobs on my part and Jasper reaches for his phone on the desk.

“Mind if I take a few shots? You have my word I won’t ever share them with anyone.”

I let his wet cock slip from my mouth with a pop. “Be my guest. Just make sure you send me a copy.”

I slide my hand up and down his cock a few times, twisting when I reach the tip, and his hips start to piston up off the chair. “God, Lennon. I didn’t know what I was missing before you.”

I smirk and get back to work teasing him to the edge several times before backing off. I can hear the shutter on his camera phone go off and it turns me on so much to know he’s documenting this that I think I might finish before he does.

I lap at his sac and suck one of his balls into my mouth—gentle enough that I won’t hurt him, but with enough pressure to make him wild. And it does. He sets his phone back down on the desk and his hands return to my hair.

“I’m going to be beating off to those pictures after you leave, I can guarantee that. You’re so fucking hot.”

I continue to jerk him off while I switch to his other testicle and his hands tighten in my hair. Deciding he’s close and that I’ll put him out of his misery this time, I pull back and then swirl my tongue around his tip a few times before bringing almost all of him into my mouth.

My free hand plays with his balls while I deepthroat him and a minute later he’s groaning and coming down the back of my throat. I swallow all of him and pump him a few times before I lean back on my heels.

His hands fall from my hair and he lies back in his chair, his legs wide apart, his pants open, looking spent. Right or wrong, it brings a smile to my face that it was courtesy of me.

“You are...” He’s shaking his head as he trails off.

I stand up and dust off my knees. “I’ll take that as a compliment,” I say and wink.

He laughs, but stops abruptly, his expression turning determined and serious. “Now get your ass up on that desk and spread for me. I’m going to make you come on my tongue—twice.”

Thank God Jasper is a man of his word.

CHAPTER

Sixteen

JASPER HAS WHISKED me away for a two-day trip up in God knows where, like he expects me to hike or some shit. My only stipulation was a bathroom with running water and flushable toilet. I gave Tahlia so much shit a few months ago about how not outdoorsy she is, but truth is, I've never camped, nor do I plan to.

"Close your eyes," Jasper says, coming up from behind me and covering my eyes.

"I swear if you're planning to murder me, there are people who will search for me."

He chuckles and I smell the cologne on his shirt. It's been two weeks and I'm still in shock that I haven't gotten sick of him yet. Quite the opposite. I can't seem to get enough of him and the more time I spend with Jasper the more I want him.

"I'm not going to murder you. Okay, now walk forward." My foot hits something and he catches me before I fall face forward. "Sorry."

"Okay, when do I get to open my eyes?" I have my hands outstretched in front of me to make sure I don't walk into anything.

"In a second." From his tone, I can tell he's getting way too much enjoyment from this. "Step up," he instructs.

I hear a creak and then he takes his hands off my eyes. I open them and stare at the log cabin in front of me.

"I'm sorry, who do you think you brought up here?" I ask, turning around to find his Range Rover parked outside in front of the cabin and no other human being in sight. "Oh, my God, you're going to murder me. Either that

or you want me to join some polygamist cult where I'll have to grow my hair long and wear those ugly dresses."

He laughs. "It's just us for two days. The fridge is stocked, movies are supplied, and we get two sunsets and two sunrises for us to watch from the bedroom upstairs." He casts small kisses up my neck and shoulder. He does that a lot and though I haven't asked I think it might be his favorite area of my body. At least his favorite that he can give attention to in public.

I turn to face the cabin. "Hmm...sounds nice." Now, it isn't the Ritz with room service, but a whole weekend away with no distractions except for Jasper? Pretty close to perfect.

"That's why we're here." He unhooks his arms from around my stomach. "Let's go check it out."

On the way to the door, I stop before he opens it.

"How close is the next breathing person?" I ask and he chuckles, inserting the key into the lock, disregarding my question.

But I'd really like an answer. Truth is, I've only known the guy for three weeks. Pulling out my phone, I send a quick text to Whitney and Tahlia.

***Me:** Jasper took me to the woods for two days. If I don't return, make sure the police question him.*

Three dots appear next to Tahlia's name.

***Tahlia:** On it, although I'm pretty sure you'd be the smart girl in the murder movie. Just make sure if you hear something in the woods you don't go investigate it.*

Oh, it warms my heart that she thinks so highly of me.

***Whitney:** Did you bring enough lube?*

Seriously, she and Cole need to calm down because that would have been my line if the roles were reversed.

A deep throat-clearing interrupts my fingers, poised to fire back another text, and I look up to find Jasper standing in the middle of a beautiful living room.

"Sorry," I say, pocketing my phone. "Just letting my friends know where to look for my body."

He chuckles, holding his hand out for me to meet him in the middle of the huge room.

The couches are big brown leather, worn in with lacquered tables and a big screen television anchored to the wall. To my right is a kitchen, small, with a breakfast bar stretching along the front. An open staircase leads to a

second level.

“This is nice,” I say.

His arms slide around my stomach, anchoring on my lower back. “You’re nice.” He kisses my nose.

“Thank you.” I mean it. In the past two weeks, Jasper has treated me like a princess and not just some girl he’s fooling around with. He’s taken me to so many nice places and shown me so many things I would have never seen otherwise.

Ugh, did I really just reference princesses? What’s happening to me?

There have been limited nights that we’ve spent apart, living in our own little bubble, not inviting others to interfere. Drew wanted to get a move on quickly so he has their lawyer starting to work on the patents and according to Jasper, he’s found a love for sex toys in his own personal life. Thankfully, Jasper spares me the details.

Jasper has fucked me on every surface of his boat, my apartment, his office and my tattoo parlor. My hands feel empty if they aren’t on him and since every time we’re within a foot of one another, I’m usually on his lap, he must feel the same way.

“Come on.” He grabs my hand, pulling me toward the staircase.

“We should get our bags,” I mention, but he shakes his head.

“In a second.” He pulls and I oblige, following him up the stairs to where I assume the bedrooms are.

See? All of our conversations happen naked and in bed where we do our best bonding.

We enter the bedroom through a set of double doors and there sits a king-size bed. I jump on it, throwing my body on top of the mattress.

“I’m going to miss you tonight,” I mention and he jumps on to join me. “This bed is so big.”

He snuggles into me, his hands cupping both my breasts. Our usual sleeping positions.

“I don’t care if we have the biggest bed ever invented, this is how I sleep when you’re with me.” His thumbs move over my nipples and they peak in response. My tits are always ready to come out and be played with.

“Maybe I don’t want to share my space.” I grind my ass against him and he grinds me back, letting me know he’s ready.

Last week I made us get tested. I’m already on the pill, and though it’d be a first for me, I don’t want to worry about condoms with Jasper. He didn’t

seem thrilled about the idea, but he agreed to have the test and said we can discuss it later. Our tests came back four days ago and he's continued to use condoms, but this is something I want to share with him.

"Don't worry, I brought a lot of condoms," he says in that low voice I love.

I roll over and place my hands on his cheeks. "How about we forego anything between us? We're both clean."

His hands move to my hips and he throws his head back, blowing out a long breath. "I don't know..." he says, like it's taking every ounce of his restraint not to say anything more.

I lie on top of him, my hand massaging his cock through his worn jeans. "I'm sorry. I want to experience that with you. It's one of the rare firsts I can give to you."

He looks at me with eyes full of lust and yearning, but I can tell that the answer is still no. "Lenno—"

"It's fine, Jasper. One day you'll trust me enough."

He kisses my nose in thanks and grinds his erection against that perfect spot that has me moaning.

I'm not sure what his hang-up is. I mean, he does get BBBJs. That's 'bareback blow job' for those of you not down with the slang. So I know it's not that he's hyper-protective about safe sex.

Jasper's phone rings and now I blow out an exasperated breath. Lately, that thing hasn't stopped. The entire car ride up, I had to listen to his conversation about some key fob invention thing and blah, blah, blah.

"How about we lock the phone in the car?" I ask, kissing his neck.

He glances to the phone and holds his finger up.

One minute my ass.

He stays in the bed, and answers the phone.

"Banks," he says and I prop up, straddling his waist. My fingers unhook the button of his jeans and he shakes his head, holding up that damn finger again.

I take his finger and bring it to my breast so he's slowly circling my nipple. My tight tank top doesn't leave a ton to the imagination.

"Listen, I have some emails out and I'm waiting for calls back," he says, and I open his fist, moving his hand back to my tit, rubbing it around in circles. Pretty soon, he's doing it on his own.

I grind my center along his dick, and then slide down to his thighs, my

fingers sliding down his zipper.

“I have to go, but I’ll call you when I get news.” He pauses, trying to move me off his body, but with one hand I’m stronger right now.

I strip off my tank top and he closes his eyes.

“Yes, I understand,” he says in a strained voice.

Reaching behind, I unhook my bra, letting it fall forward to lie on his chest. His eyes bug out and he reaches out, but I slide away.

“Victor, I do understand, but not much will happen until Monday.”

His eyes are on me and I wonder if Victor can hear the trembling in his voice.

I pull at his jeans and he helps me by rocking his hips back and forth. Once I get them off his legs, I find red boxer briefs below and wetness pools between my legs.

Maybe it’s because we’ve been in San Francisco after workdays mostly, but Jasper has an overabundance of black boxer briefs, so the fact he’s wearing something different excites me. Shows me a different side of him. Is this how men are with lingerie?

“I have to go, Victor. I promise to be in touch.” He clicks off his phone. Fiddling with it, he holds it up. “I’m putting this thing on ‘do not disturb.’” He drops it on the nightstand and I climb up his body. “Take off the shorts,” he orders.

“Such a bossy pants,” I say and he cocks his eyebrow.

“I am and you like it that way.”

True, but he doesn’t need to know that.

“I like control.” I unbutton my shorts and push them down my legs, leaving me in a purple see-through thong.

“Believe me, you have more control than you think.” He sits up on the headboard, holding his hands out for me.

I crawl up, purposely grinding my tits around his dick.

“I like the red,” I say and he smiles, reaching down to push my tits together around his dick.

“I like the purple.” His thumbs rub my nipples. “Come here,” he says and he slides up and I straddle him.

His hands massage my ass and I circle my arms around his neck.

“I’m going to try to be a good boy,” he says, inching forward to kiss me.

The kiss is gentle and slow, similar to the one he gives me when he says goodbye to me. It’s the sweet kiss. He has many kisses. The demanding kiss,

the I'm-going-to-come kiss, the hello kiss, and each one of those is enough to make me crumple to the floor.

His goodbye kiss is always super-slow, super-gentle and his hands never leave the sides of my face. Usually he seals it with one more short kiss and then says something like, "See you soon," or, "Thank you." It's the one that tells me I'm more than just a great fuck, that I might just mean more to him.

I lose myself in this kiss, his fingers gliding down my spine, up and down. He's not grinding his cock to my center, his hand hasn't dipped down between my legs to feel how wet I am. In my mind, I realize this time is going to be different.

He pushes his weight up and places my back on the bed.

"So beautiful," he whispers, his lips trailing a path down the center of my breasts to my belly button. Hooking his fingers under the strings of my thong, he pulls them down my legs, painfully slow. "I'll never grow tired of your pussy," he says in a low voice, still sliding the small amount of fabric off me.

A rush of goose bumps rise to the surface of my skin. He rises to stand at the edge of the bed, looking down at me, bare to him. Most times I'm okay with men looking at me naked. I have no issue with my looks, no shame about the imperfections of my body, but this time is different.

Jasper isn't looking at me with the lust and animalistic need in his eyes like he usually does. This time his eyes glow with something else. Admiration. Satisfaction. Wonder. As I lie here I can't help but feel like I'm baring not only my body, but my soul.

I lie still, my eyes locked with his, craving more of him. His eyes don't waver and I hold out my hands for him to come to me.

He shakes his head and the reverence in his gaze makes me feel undeserving. "I have no idea what I ever did to deserve you," he whispers, stripping off his vintage beer logo t-shirt I bought him two days ago.

He lowers his red boxer briefs and his cock springs out in its full glory. I'll never tire of seeing it. My mouth salivates and I want to crawl on my knees and suck him off, but even though there's no romantic music playing or rose petals on the bed, our afternoon delight feels much different than the quickies we've been having at lunch. So instead, I stay lying down, anticipating the weight of him on top of me.

As always, he doesn't disappoint, crawling up the bed, licking his way from the tip of my toes, up my thigh, circling right above my mound. By the time his tongue is between my breasts, I feel his hard length running along

my legs. I throw my head back, giving him access to my neck. His fingers thread through my short black hair right before his lips take mine.

My legs widen, allowing him space between my thighs, and the tip of his cock pushes into my center, teasing my wetness.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispers and my heart pitter-patters, my hands moving to his back, running along his muscles.

“Jasper,” I sigh, loving this slow dance we’re doing. Our bodies slide and if I wrapped my legs around his torso, he’d be able to push inside me.

He finishes our kiss and draws back to stare into my eyes.

“I need you,” I say softly, and he tucks his head into the crook of my neck.

His open-mouthed kisses ignite a shiver up my spine. Circling his hips, he continues the teasing and I know there’s a condom in his jeans.

“Your skin is so soft,” he says, his hands sliding over every part of my torso.

“Please,” I beg him, opening wider and wrapping my legs over his so that my heels press into his calves.

He looks up to me. “I’ve changed my mind. I don’t want anything between us,” he whispers, kissing my nose.

I lock my legs and he stops, a heart-stopping smile on his face. He pushes a stray hair out of the way and gazes down at me with reverence.

“I trust you, Lennon, but are you sure?” he whispers.

I nod. “We’re not virgins,” I joke, having to ease the heaviness of this moment, for me at least. My lungs constrict and you’d think that I just stepped out on a tightrope five hundred feet in the air, with no net below. But that’s exactly how I feel. Like I’m operating without a safety net because everything that I’m feeling for Jasper is foreign territory.

That wickedly naughty smile I love emerges on his lips and he circles his hips then reaches down to direct his cock into me. Inch by glorious inch he pushes inside of me—my breathing hitches, my fingers digging into his back.

“Oh, God,” I say from the overwhelming feeling of taking him bare inside me. I’ve never had sex with no barrier and though I made the joke a minute ago, in some ways I feel like a virgin. A teenage boy virgin because this is about to be over before it really begins, I’m so close.

Jasper rises to his elbows, staring down at me as he glides in and out in a slow, but glorious pace. He never breaks eye contact and I’m not sure how long it lasts, but I can tell you, I’ll never forget this moment or the emotions

swirling inside me.

“I never imagined you’d feel this fucking perfect,” he says in a raspy voice.

At a pace that would challenge a tortoise, we enjoy each other’s bodies until we collapse—not from exhaustion, but because we’re physically unable to hold our orgasms at bay. We reach our climaxes together, tumbling toward ecstasy, gripping one another tight and feeling not only in a physical sense, but an emotional one, everything between us.

Jasper drops to the side of me, his hands on my side, his lips moving to mine with a satisfied smile. Our arms entwine and he brings me to him, our sweat-soaked bodies sticking together. I realize, in the woods, in a cabin with no one as a witness, Jasper Banks has ruined me for anyone else.

I gaze at him with dreamy eyes I swore I’d never have for some guy and soak in the contentment and peace inside of me. Jasper allows me to be something I never thought I *could* be—still.

Then his phone rings and the sound rips through the moment as sure as if it was a knife on a tapestry.

I smack his chest. “You told me you put your ‘do not disturb’ on.” I crawl from his hold, because one thing I’m not used to with not using a condom is the clean-up required afterward. Seriously, it feels way better in the moment but this mess is a real bitch to deal with.

“I did, but...” He stops abruptly.

I rush into the bathroom anyway because all I can feel is Jasper dripping down the inside of my legs. Definitely a point in the con column for not using protection. “I think I’m going to have to shower,” I call out. “You want to join me?” I wipe myself off the best I can and walk to the doorway, but Jasper is now out on the balcony, naked.

I’m guessing that means there really isn’t anyone around. Good thing he just made love to me. I’d say murder isn’t on the menu tonight.

As the word ‘love’ rings out in my mind, Jasper comes back in the room, his forehead crinkled in deep set lines, his entire body tense. He quickly grabs his underwear from the floor and starts putting it on.

“Is something wrong?” I ask.

He stops what he’s doing and stares at me for second before bending to grab his jeans. “I have to tell you something.” I can see him swallow past the lump in his throat from here.

My heart trips over itself as if it’s saying, *you fool, you trusted him.*

I'll give Jasper some props. Somehow, he convinces me to get dressed and get in the car with him without any explanation of what's going on. Even with my heart screaming that something's not right here, something is about to change everything, I do what he says.

Now I sit in the passenger seat of his Range Rover as he speeds down the highway to some address he plugged into his GPS. A hospital about fifty miles away.

"Was one of your parents in an accident?" I ask, since he's yet to speak since we got in the vehicle.

He's pushed his hands through his hair no less than twenty times. I know this because I began to count after roughly the fifth time. When his hands aren't in his hair, he's white-knuckling the steering wheel.

He glances over to me. "No."

But something is definitely wrong. The worry radiates off him in waves and it's like he can't get to the hospital fast enough. "Okay, is someone you know at the hospital we're going to?" I ask slowly, as though somewhere between the bed and the car he lost his ability to understand English.

"Yeah."

"And who would that be?" I ask in a cajoling voice because it's like drawing information out of a two-year-old.

He glances over to me, apology written all over his face. "My son."

CHAPTER

Seventeen

MY EYES widen and I forget to breathe for a beat. “Oh,” is all I can manage before I sink into my seat.

I wait for the anger to come. I should be up in arms, screaming about how he lied. Or lied by omission at the very least. I should be ramming him with a million questions.

His gaze veers over once more and his fingers thread through his hair. “Say something,” he says.

For the first time in all my life, I can’t. I’m stunned speechless.

My mind is whirling with no one thought landing for more than a second before it pings to the next one. I don’t want to say the wrong thing, though I have no idea why because he lied. Who cares if I offend him? A war is being waged inside and victory wavers between my head and my heart.

“He’s in the hospital?” I ask.

He nods. “He’s at camp. That was the director who called. They think he broke his arm.” The distress evident in his words has me wanting to reach out and soothe him, but I keep my hands to myself.

“How old is he?” I ask, still not understanding how I can sit here and not be losing my ever-loving mind on him. Maybe it’s because I care about Jasper and seeing him in pain makes me want to help him. Maybe it’s because if it was my niece or nephew, I would be as concerned as he is.

“He’s six. Brady is his name.”

I glance at the GPS and see we still have forty minutes until we arrive. Since he’s preoccupied and doesn’t seem like he’s really into answering questions, I face forward, crossing my legs and staring out the windshield.

Eventually I grab my phone and text the girls to inform them of this latest development. Now their reactions? They seem much more in line with what I *should* be feeling right now. At least two out the three of us are thinking clearly.

“You have nothing else to say?” Jasper asks after some time.

I shift to face him. “No. We can talk later. Once you know that Brady is okay.”

A strangled moan escapes his throat and I assume it has to do with his son. “Talk to me,” he says, pressing on the gas as we reach a long stretch with no cars in front of us.

“What do you want me to say?” I ask, dropping my phone in the cup holder.

“Tell me you don’t hate me,” he says and I realize that strangled moan moments ago wasn’t about his son, it was about us. Why does that warm my heart to him?

“I don’t hate you,” I say with little emotion.

A long stream of breath releases from his mouth. “I’m sorry, I know I should have told you, it’s just...I didn’t know how you’d react. In truth, not many people know about him. It’s safer for him.”

“Are you in the Mob or something?” I ask because my imagination is beginning to run away from me with the way he’s talking. At this point I feel like anything is possible.

“No.” He chuckles but there’s no humor behind it. “Brady attaches easily. I’ve never introduced him to a woman I was dating. He’s clingy with his teachers, clingy with my mom. He’s always seeking out female attention because he’s never known his mom.”

Now my curiosity is piqued, but before I can ask him anything his phone rings through the speakers in his car.

“Hold on,” he says, pressing a button on the steering wheel to accept the call. “I’m on my way,” he says by way of an answer. I look at the screen on his dash and see the word ‘Mom.’

“Thank goodness. I called the hospital and it’s a break according to the doctor. Your father and I will start the drive in a few minutes.” I hear mumbling and crinkling of paper in the background.

“No need. The camp leader called me and said they’re casting it. I was away for the weekend, so I’m not that far. I’ll pick him up and we’ll stay up here until Sunday.” His thumb hovers over the call end button like a sniper on

surveillance.

“Your father and I will come up there then and watch him while you work.” I hear a car door slam shut and an engine roar.

“Mom, I’m not working,” he informs her.

“Then what are you doing?” she asks and covers the receiver, though not very well because I can hear her relay the information to who I assume is his dad.

Jasper looks over at me, a pained look on his face. “I’m with someone,” he says in a defeated voice, like she has him locked up in an interrogation room with a spotlight over his head.

“Oh.” Her voice is low and unsure. Again, she relays this information to his dad. “He’s with someone,” she says, and his dad says, “What? Who?”

“Who?” she repeats his dad’s question and Jasper blows out an exaggerated breath.

“Listen, I’ll call you after I get Brady. I might need your help because I doubt if he’s going to be able to go back to camp.”

“We don’t mind meeting your special friend,” she says.

A laugh bursts from my throat before I can stop it and I try to cover it up with a cough.

Jasper gives me the death glare, but his lips tip up after a second, too.

“I’m sorry,” I mouth.

“Can she hear me?” his mother asks and I cringe.

“Well, I’m driving, Mom.”

“Oh.”

This whole scenario is so uncomfortable.

“Hello, Mrs. Banks,” I say and Jasper’s head swivels in my direction so fast, I’m surprised it doesn’t continue all the way around in a move from *The Exorcist*. I wave off his frantic look. “My name is Lennon Hart.” I figure it’s best to just introduce myself rather than pretending I’m a mute.

“Hello,” she says. “Lennon Hart,” she repeats quietly to his dad.

“Oh,” he says and I can imagine the conversation at their dinner table must be stellar if this phone call is any indication.

“Okay, there you go, Mom. I gotta go,” Jasper says, sounding like he can’t get off the line fast enough.

“Well, why don’t we have Lennon over for dinner?” she asks, ignoring his last statement.

We? Does Jasper live with his parents? The fact is, he’s only ever taken

me to his boat, then to my apartment, and now this cabin. I've never actually seen his condo.

"We'll see. Let's focus on Brady right now." His thumb hovers over the end call button.

"Yes, please call me once you have him," she says.

"I will."

"So, we shouldn't come?" she asks again and I press my lips together to keep from laughing.

"No, you shouldn't. I'll call," Jasper repeats.

"Okay," his mom says. "Lennon?" she asks and Jasper sighs, his head falling back onto the headrest.

"Yes, Mrs. Banks?"

"Dinner. Monday night at five o'clock," she says in what's an authoritative tone now. "You can get the address from Jasper." I look over to Jasper who rolls his eyes and shakes his head.

"How about a 'would you like,' or a 'please?'" Jasper says, his voice laced with annoyance.

"I'd love to," I say, not really sure if I mean it.

"Bye, Mom," he says and disconnects before she can get another word out.

After his mom is finally off the line, I laugh. Probably not the best reaction, but whatever. "I don't know if I can be with you," I deadpan.

He glances over for a second before looking back at the road. "What? Why?"

"You just hung up on your mother." I tsk him, lightening the mood. This kid thing definitely changes things, but for once I control myself and avoid a rash outburst, figuring we'll talk after.

"Oh, just wait. You'll be hanging up on her too." He pauses for a second before adding, "I can get you out of the dinner."

I pat his leg. His thigh is rock hard and I really look at him for the first time since he got the phone call. He's like a guitar string wound too tight and close to snapping.

"Who said I wanted to get out of it?" Blood rushes through my ears and bile rises up my throat. I've never met any guy's parents except for in high school. I hate the whole meet-and-greet with the 'rents and having to pretend I'm someone I'm not.

He shakes his head. "You're something else."

I've heard that a lot in my life, but this is the first time I think it's a compliment.

CHAPTER

Eighteen

WE CROSS over the state line into Oregon a short time later and a while after that we pull into the hospital entrance.

“Just stop by the emergency and I’ll park the truck,” I say.

Jasper does exactly that. He’s out of the car in a flash, running through the emergency room doors. I park the truck and then walk through the doors a little reluctantly. Mostly because I’m not sure what my place is here. The closer we got to the hospital, the more real the situation became. The more I wished I was on the brown leather couch back at the cabin, or hell, maybe back in San Francisco.

There’s no chance this kid will like me, I think as I look around. But my brother’s kids love me. *Yeah, that’s because you’re the irresponsible aunt*, my subconscious says and I shake my head to clear my thoughts.

Needing a coffee to curb my anxiety, I buy the horrible vending machine one. I’m sure this remote mountain town probably doesn’t have a Starbucks anywhere in the vicinity.

I take a seat in the waiting room, figuring that when Jasper’s done, he’ll find me and introduce me to Brady. Thank God this is going to go down in a hospital because there’s a chance I might actually pass out.

While I sip on the disgusting brew they’re calling coffee, I spot some college-aged kids in Camp Tall Pines t-shirts. The two of them have worried looks on their faces and keep checking their phones.

“Why did you let him climb that?” one girl asks the other.

“You were supposed to be watching him,” the other girl says.

They’re passing blame. Surely, he can’t be the first kid to break a bone at

camp?

“Are you here for Brady Banks?” I ask them and for the first time I put his name together. Brady Banks. Makes me think about Richie Rich. I laugh inside.

The girls turn to me with wide eyes, neither one wanting to say anything. I point to their shirts. “Or is there another kid here with a broken arm?”

The blonde girl smiles. “Yes, we brought him in with our leader,” she says. “Are you his mother? I’m so sorry.”

“Do I look old enough to be a mom?” I ask, a little offended. I can’t be more than five years older than this girl.

“Well,” the redhead says.

“How old are you?” I ask, still upset they think I could be someone’s mother.

“Twenty,” blondie says.

Okay, so six years. Whatever.

“I’m only a little older than you. Definitely not old enough to have a six-year-old.”

Then I calculate the math in my head. Fuck me. I am old enough to be his mother. When the hell did that happen?

“Oh, sorry,” the redhead says, hitting the blonde’s arm.

I finish my coffee, place it on the table and turn my attention to the TV in the waiting area. Ah, good ol’ Maury Povich.

“I can’t believe this is still on.” I chuckle to myself. “‘You are *not* the father,’” I say in a deep voice.

The two young girls stare over at me like I’m a crazy person and yes, I’ve just confirmed to them that I am in fact old. At least to them.

So I remain quiet. A few minutes later, a tall woman with a ponytail and camp t-shirt walks in the room.

“Robin, Carrie. Let’s go. Brady’s dad will take it from here.” She exits the waiting area without waiting for them.

The blonde stops beside me before she leaves. “We’re really sorry. Brady is so great and we never wanted to see him hurt. I hope he’s okay.” She puts her head down and walks out of the hospital.

“Thanks,” I call out, unsure if she heard me.

Poor girl, but at least she’s escaping before she has to face Brady’s father. Father.

Dad.

Jasper is someone's daddy.

I still can't believe it.

By the time Jasper comes into the waiting area my ass is numb, my back aches and my legs are stiff. I'm cracking my neck and back, stretching out, trying to relieve some of the tension in my muscles.

"Man, what a view. Is this what I was missing?" he says, right as I arch my back, sticking my tits out.

It's nice to see a smile on his face again.

I stand and he grabs my hand. "How is he?" I ask.

He squeezes my hand. "Good. Broken arm, but thankfully no surgery or resetting is needed. He's in the cast for six weeks, though." He huffs out a breath. "Here I thought he'd be at camp for a few more weeks enjoying himself, but he's coming home with me."

"Well, I'm glad he's okay." I hug Jasper to my body.

"Thanks for being understanding," he says, running a hand along my back and kissing my neck. Shivers shouldn't race up my neck in this setting, but they do.

He draws back and he's back to serious Jasper. "So it's time you meet him. They're putting together his discharge papers. We can stay at the cabin tonight and then talk. If you want to go back to the city tomorrow, I understand."

I nod, not giving him an answer because I have no idea what I want to do. I still need a lot of answers and truthfully, I don't even know what he expects from me. He said himself he's never introduced Brady to someone he's seeing. For all I know he's dreading this meeting as much if not more than I am.

"Let's go. He's excited." He smiles and it seems genuine.

My tummy twists into a million tiny knots before combining into one giant ball that sits in the pit of my stomach.

I follow him down the hallway and I take the last breath I have before his son becomes a real live person to me. One who can and will judge me. Usually that's not something I give much thought to, but I find myself wanting to make a good impression on Jasper's son.

I step in to find a smiling boy with Jasper's hazel eyes and a head of mopy brown hair. His arm cast is green. Go figure.

"Hi, I'm Brady," he introduces himself, sliding over the bed as though he's making room for me. "Will you be the first to sign my cast?" he asks and

my gaze darts to Jasper for a second. He shoots me a look of apology and that only endears Brady to me more.

“Well, yeah, that means I’m number one, right?”

Brady smiles at me like I hung the moon in the sky and I know I’m in deep trouble with this little boy, the same as when I first met his father—if not more.

CHAPTER

Nineteen

SOMETHING JASPER FORGOT to mention was that Brady never shuts up. Okay, I should've put that more nicely. Let's just say he's expressive and he has a lot to talk about. Is that more appropriate?

Luckily, he's fast asleep in the guest room and I'm sitting with Jasper on the steps of the cabin.

"I was just finishing up my master's when Gina got pregnant."

Jasper and Gina. Damn, those two names sound good together. Way better than Jasper and Lennon.

I say nothing and wrap my arms around my legs, then rest my cheek on my knees, watching him and waiting for him to continue.

"She wasn't ready to be a mom. Truthfully, I don't even know if she'd have ever been ready." He looks away from me and out to the forest in front of us.

I remain quiet and he slides closer to me. The heat from his thigh seeping through his jeans warms my bare leg. I want to place my hand on his thigh but I don't.

"She wanted to abort and at first I did the whole 'it's your body' thing, but the closer it got to the day, the more I wasn't okay with it. The night before she was supposed to have the abortion, I had a law student friend draw up some papers for her to sign. I paid her throughout the pregnancy, and paid her to sign over her parental rights." He turns his head and stares up at the window that houses his sleeping child. "That stays between us. I'd prefer it if Brady never found that out."

I nod. "Of course."

“So I ended up marrying her for a short time so insurance would cover the pregnancy, because although I was making decent money, I couldn’t afford medical bills like that.”

“Oh.” Now I sound like his father.

“We divorced right after her post-care was done. She left town and I send her pictures and letters giving her updates, but half the time they get returned. Sometimes it’s months before she gets in touch and tells me she’s moved to a different state again. She has no desire to see him or know him.” His voice cracks and I put my arm around his shoulder.

“I’m sorry.”

He shakes off my apology. “It’s her loss.” He turns to face me, my arm falling off his shoulders. “I know you just met him today, but he’s so caring and funny. I’m sure every father thinks his kid is the best. I’d hate to meet a bastard who didn’t.”

I divert my eyes because I’m not sure my parents ever thought that of me. Maybe Jacob, but Lennon was the crazy one who wouldn’t sit still and was always causing them trouble.

“He does seem great. Talkative, but adorable.” I laugh and he nods, knowing, I think, that Brady would never be able to chew gum because he’d never shut his mouth long enough to taste the flavor. I realize that he reminds me of myself in that way, even now.

“I never meant to put you in this situation. You’ve been thrust into it without warning and now we have to make a decision.”

My heart plummets to the depth of my stomach. Decision?

He takes my hands in his and I mentally prepare myself that this is it. He’s going to break up with me and choose his kid. Which I could never fault him for.

“I’ve enjoyed our time together.” His voice is so low I almost can’t hear him over the leaves rustling in the wind.

I pull my hands from his and slide over. His forehead wrinkles. “It’s okay, Jasper. You owe me no explanation. It’s been a great three weeks and I’ll always remember them, but I understand. Really.” I move to stand, but Jasper cages me between him and a giant log post holding up the porch.

“What do you mean?” he asks.

“I get it, okay? We were having fun and you don’t like to mix the two, but now that Brady met me, you’re kind of stuck. I’m giving you the out you’re looking for.” I say the words out loud even though they’re making me

feel physically sick. I guess I didn't realize how much I wanted to stick around until Jasper was letting me go.

He stares at me long and hard, while my heart hammers against my chest so loud it could be part of a drum line.

"Lennon." He says my name slowly. "Do you remember this afternoon? Before I got the call?" His voice is low and holds that confidence I've admired from the first moment I met him.

I nod.

"Did I rip off your clothes?"

"No."

"Did I bend you over a table, pull my cock out and fuck you until you couldn't take anymore?"

"No."

"Did I push you against the glass window, spread-eagle, demanding you tell me how much you want me?"

"No."

All those scenarios sound nice though and now wetness pools between my legs.

"Was I gentle and loving? Did I caress your skin and tell you how beautiful you are?"

A rush of heat rises to my cheeks thinking about our time together this afternoon.

He cocks an eyebrow.

"Yes," I whisper.

"Do you think I would do that if I was 'just having fun with you?'" He uses air quotes for my phrase.

I look away, but he places his forefinger under my chin, forcing me to look at him.

"Maybe," I say and a small smile plays on his lips.

"Lennon?"

I blow out a breath. "No, I suppose not."

A full-wattage smile emerges and his hand moves up and pushes back the hair from my eyes. "So I think we can agree, I'm in this."

I shrug.

"Lennon." Again with the stern voice. Must be a dad thing.

"Yes?"

He kisses the tip of my nose. Damn him, why does that always get to me?

“I need to know if you’re in this. I need to forge a plan.”

“A plan?”

“I’m in uncharted territory. Brady’s never had to compete for my attention. He’s never known what it’s like for me to have a woman around. And you don’t really seem like the kid type. No offense.”

“Okay,” I say, slightly offended that he thinks I can’t handle a child even if I’ve been questioning my own ability all day.

“I just meant tha—”

I hold my hand up in the air. I get what he means—I’m irresponsible, I have my head in the clouds, I’m never serious about anything. Whereas he has a mouth to feed, a roof to put over that little guy’s head. He *has* to be responsible. He has someone relying on him. I don’t even have a fish to feed.

If I don’t go grocery shopping, it’s only me who will starve to death. I don’t have to make sure I eat from all sections of the food pyramid to ensure I’m healthy. The only time I drink milk is in my coffee. I’m way out of my league here.

I realize all this and then I look at Jasper and the thought of us breaking up turns the fissures around my heart into full-on cracks. “I don’t want to break up, Jasper, but like you said, I have no idea what to do with a six-year-old.”

“I’m not looking for a mother for Brady, but I need you to commit somewhat.” He looks at me and I can’t help but feel he’s offended that I haven’t hopped on board the happy family train yet.

“What if I lose him? Or what if I say a bad word? I mean I do have the mouth of a truck driver.” I stand to get away from the fears pushing their way into my psyche.

“I don’t expect you to pick him up from school, or feed him. And believe me, Brady knows all the bad words. He has me as a father.” He says that like he’s not the most perfect dad when I know he is. He must be. Just look what he’s doing here. Vetting me to make sure I won’t put his son’s heart at risk.

I look back at him on the stairs of the cabin, his elbows resting on his knees, his hair a dishevelled mess, eyeing me and waiting for my decision.

I look through one of the cracks in my heart searching for the answer. I’m quiet for a long time before the answer comes from within and it feels right. It feels right in my gut and I’ve always been the kind of girl who goes with her gut and I’ve never regretted it. I’m not about to change that now.

“Okay,” I say softly.

Jasper arches his eyebrows. “Are you sure, Lennon? You have to be sure.”

“Yeah.” I stare up at the star-filled sky. “I mean, I was a kid once. I’m sure I can channel that energy.” I nod my head a couple times, convincing myself. “I’m a good aunt... I think.” I shrug.

“I don’t think you have too far to go,” he jokes and pushes himself off the steps and walks toward me. His footsteps crumble the gravel under his weight and his arms wrap around me.

“Positive?” he clarifies.

I smile, becoming more convinced that I got this. People might doubt me, but I’m an adult and surely I can act like one and be a good influence.

“Positive.”

He smiles and dips his head, giving me his goodbye kiss, except this time I’m not going anywhere. I guess I need to change the name of this kiss.

But to what?

It comes to me as Jasper’s hands leave my cheeks. This kiss doesn’t feel like a goodbye. It feels like a beginning.

A beginning kiss.

The beginning of what? I can’t be sure.

CHAPTER

Twenty

I WAKE up to a small lump next to me in bed.

“Ah!” I scream, sliding out from under the covers and onto the floor. “Jasper!” I whisper-yell, but he doesn’t come.

Prepared for an animal of some kind that’s joined me from the great outdoors ten feet away from the cabin, I look around the room for something to protect myself with. But there’s nothing, so I try to tiptoe out of the room.

One of the floorboards creaks under my foot when I’m almost at the door and I whip my head around. The lump in the bed moves side to side and a scratching sound echoes throughout the quiet room.

My eyes widen and I stay focused on the lump while I walk slowly backwards until I reach the door frame. I turn the knob and slide through the opening, carefully closing it behind me. Then I dart down the stairs to find Jasper.

He insisted we sleep separately last night since he wasn’t sure how Brady would react to the two of us in bed together. He wants to take things slow between the two of us. And that was fine—last night. Before some wild animal decided to take a catnap in my bed.

I find him sleeping on the couch and I hop on top of him.

“What?” he yells and I cover his mouth, but he sits up straight anyway.

A dreamy lust-filled look enters his eyes and his hands slide up my nightshirt, squeezing my ass. The blanket between us does nothing to hide his morning wood and he grinds into me.

Now usually I’m a morning girl. Hell, that’s a lie. I’m a morning, noon and night girl—who am I kidding? But as great as that feels, there’s an

animal upstairs.

He moves his face and my hand slides off his mouth.

“What do you say we go to the bathroom for a quickie before Brady gets up?” he whispers and I crawl off him.

“There’s an animal in my bed,” I say and his eyes widen.

“Animal?” he asks.

I nod. “Yes. And I heard scratching so it must have claws. I almost woke it up.”

Jasper’s eyes narrow and he looks toward the stairs leading to the bedrooms with an ‘are you serious’ expression.

“I’m serious. Come on.” I wave my hand in the air and he stands up, his red boxers tenting from his erection.

I cover my eyes. “Put your pants on,” I say, shaking my head.

He walks over to me and removes my hands from my eyes. “You’ve seen my cock before. In fact, if memory serves you quite like seeing it,” he reminds me.

I shake my head. “Well, Brady doesn’t need to see it.”

“Sorry, babe, he’s seen it.”

I glance down at it again. “Really?”

He nods, sliding on his pants. “Never like this though. I’m not ready for that conversation.” He chuckles and begins walking toward the stairs.

“You can’t go empty-handed,” I squeal and he stops, turning back around.

I glance around. Bingo. I grab the poker from the fireplace and run it over to Jasper like it’s a hot potato, letting go and backing away from it the instant he has it in his hands.

He rolls his eyes and climbs the stairs as I tiptoe behind him, hanging onto the waistband of his pants.

“You have to be quiet, it could be on the other side of the door,” I whisper when we reach the landing and he nods, but I can tell he’s not taking this situation as seriously as I am.

He throws the door open, the knob hitting the wall behind it, and I scream and jump on his back.

“It’s gone!” I yell, my legs around his waist, my arms probably strangling him.

Jasper steps into the room, ignoring the fact that I’m acting like a koala bear on his back. A koala bear on crack. He flips open the covers and—

there's nothing there.

For some reason my response is to try to climb higher up on his back.

“Quit kicking me.” He stops my foot from kicking his stomach.

“It could be under the bed,” I whisper-yell.

He stalks toward the bathroom instead.

“What are you doing? Look under the bed. I bet it's under there.” I smack his bare shoulder and he shakes his head.

The bathroom door is open and I hear water on and then the scratching sound again, so I tense on his back. “Oh. My. God,” I say, my flight response seconds from kicking in.

He steps into the doorway of the bathroom and there's Brady, standing in front of the toilet, peeing with his Spiderman boxers at his ankles, all the while scratching his cast.

I hop off Jasper's back then turn around and cover my eyes. Two penis sightings in one morning. What have I gotten myself into?

Jasper laughs as a very sleepy Brady flushes the toilet and then walks past him. “Morning, Dad,” he says and crawls into bed.

He throws the covers over himself, burrowing himself in my bed.

I run out of the room and Jasper follows, shutting the door behind him.

“Sorry,” I say, cringing.

He hands me the poker and walks down the stairs.

“How was I to know?” I follow him and he gets back on the couch while I put the poker back near the fireplace.

“I missed you,” he says, completely ignoring the situation upstairs, as if it didn't happen. He pulls the blanket open. “Join me?”

I look over at the stairs and back to him. “What if...”

“A half hour,” he says and I trust that he knows his kid well enough to know that he'll sleep a little longer.

But sometime shortly after, I'm awoken by the blaring of a cartoon on the television. I peer over to find Brady sitting in a chair, still in boxers, but instead of watching the TV his eyes are wide open, staring directly at me.

Oh, boy. Literally.

CHAPTER

Twenty-One

MY FINGER SHAKES as I press the buzzer button of Jasper's condo. "Banks," I murmur to myself. How did I ever end up here? I have a Toys "R" Us bag and a bag of groceries to cook dinner, and I'm perching a tray of Starbucks coffee precariously in my other hand. What I should have is a drug store bag filled with condoms and a case of beer, and dinner shouldn't even be on my mind.

"Lennon!" Brady screams through the speaker and the door buzzes and unlocks.

The smile that seems automatic when it comes to that little guy emerges and I remember exactly why I'm doing all this. I press the elevator for the top floor because where else would Jasper Banks live but on the top floor?

When the doors open Brady's already there, jumping up and down.

"You're late," he says and his eyes widen when he sees the Toys "R" Us bag. He calms down, clasps his hands behind his back and looks up to me. "Do you need help?" he asks, but I know what he's really asking me.

I chuckle and switch the coffees to my other hand, then hold out my bag with his new board game in it. "Here, you can take this."

One of the smiles I'm slowly becoming addicted to brightens his face and he slides it off my arm.

"What is it?" he asks, peeking through the plastic. "A game?" he asks.

"Yep, I thought we'd play it after dinner."

We walk next to one another on the way to the condo, him looking skeptically into the bag and me wondering what kid doesn't love games?

"Okay," he says, walking through the door and holding it open for me.

“Brady, go wash your hands,” Jasper dictates as soon as we’re inside, pointing to where I’m assuming the bathroom is. He grabs the coffees from my hands, placing them on the counter before helping me with the bags.

“Dinner’s not even ready,” he whines, but Jasper gives him a long stern look and his head falls and his shoulders slump as he walks down the hall.

Once he’s out of sight, Jasper pulls me to his body, his lips quickly finding mine. His tongue parts my lips and he lifts me by my waist, but moments later the water down the hall turns off so we separate and start unpacking the groceries.

I’ve learned this is what happens when you have kids. I’m trying to look at it as a form of tantric sex. Maybe I can fool myself into thinking I’m down with delayed gratification.

Brady’s feet barrel into the kitchen seconds later, and he props himself on the breakfast stool.

“Man, that cast is slowing you down,” I comment and Jasper carries some of the food to the fridge, his hand slyly brushing along my ass when he passes me.

I smirk, but don’t let on.

“Look how many signatures I have.” Brady holds his arm out to me and I nod.

“Where’d you get all those?” I ask.

Jasper walks back to the counter. “He went to the community center with my parents,” he says.

“Oh, I still need to meet your grandma and grandpa,” I remark, side-glancing Jasper. He was able to get us out of the dinner with his parents, feeling that Brady was enough newness for us to deal with for the moment.

“Grandma asks a lot of questions,” Brady says, staring down at his cast in admiration.

“Really?” I ask, folding the empty plastic bags on the counter.

Jasper’s body stiffens and I have this feeling that he’s delayed the meeting between his parents and me because he’s concerned it won’t go well, not out of concern for how I’m coping with all the changes.

“Yeah, she asked what you look like. Oh, and she wanted to know if you’re nice to me.”

“She can be inquisitive,” Jasper says and when I look up I catch him non-verbally telling Brady to quit it.

I move over to Jasper, and place my hand on his arm. “It’s okay. I’m used

to people judging me and not liking me right away,” I whisper so Brady doesn’t hear but apparently, the kid’s got bat ears.

“She’ll like you,” Brady says and Jasper’s eyebrows shoot up to the sky.

“Now you know... there’s no secrets with kids in the house.” He smiles and I slide by him, purposely brushing my breasts against his chest. He sucks in a breath.

Since this is my first time in Jasper’s condo, he pulls everything out for me and a half hour later, the pizza roll-ups are on a plate with Brady looking at it like I’m asking him to eat a pig’s foot. Or broccoli.

“What’s the matter, Brady?” I ask.

“Brady, eat,” Jasper says.

I bend down to look into Brady’s eyes.

“What is it?” His voice is low and unsure.

I take my knife and cut it open, showing him that there’s cheese, sauce and pepperoni like he asked. His eyes light up with recognition.

“It tastes just like pizza,” I say, cutting a small piece and placing it on a fork to hold it out in front of him.

His lips touch it and he pushes back. “It’s hot,” he whines.

“Brady,” Jasper warns and I have to say his fatherly tone does a little something for me between the legs.

I bring the food to my mouth and blow on it. Brady smiles and then I hold it out again. “Try again,” I urge and he nibbles a bit first, until he slides the rest off his fork. While he chews, I continue to cut up his pizza roll-up.

“It’s good,” he says like he can’t believe it.

I smile. “I’m glad you like it.”

Sitting back up in my seat, I begin to cut my pizza roll-up, but I sense something and glance up to find Jasper’s eyes on me. He smiles and I smile back, wondering why he’s staring at me.

“Grandpa said you guys are bumping uglies,” Brady says.

Both Jasper’s and my eyes widen and our heads whip in Brady’s direction. I try to hide the smile and swallow the laugh threatening to escape.

“I asked Grandma what it meant, but she told me Grandpa’s losing it and not to pay any attention to him.” Brady gobbles down a few more bites of his pizza roll-up, blissfully unaware.

I swallow some of my water to keep from laughing, and eventually Jasper’s face returns to normal coloring.

“I think I need to talk with my father,” he mumbles, eating his pizza roll-

up.

Four hours later, a kid's Monopoly game is strewn on the coffee table, and the three of us are lined up on the couch watching the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles movie. I'm cozied up to Jasper and Brady is cozied up to me.

A head falls into my lap and Brady's mopy hair is strewn on my blanket, his eyes shut.

"Thank God," Jasper moans. "I love him, but damn, he has energy for days." He slides away from me, stands and picks Brady up in his arms like he weighs nothing. Brady's little body lies limp, one of his socks hanging from his toes.

"I'll be right back," Jasper says and heads down the hallway.

I've been on Brady lockdown since I arrived. The only time I've had a moment to myself was when I went to the bathroom. Even then when I opened the door he was there waiting for me. Clingy is an understatement. But rather than annoying, the reason behind his behavior makes my heart go out to him.

Watching Jasper as a dad has only made me fall harder for him—not something I could have anticipated. But he's so loving and patient with his little boy. And at the same time, he's stern and forthright when he needs to be. I had no idea single dads could be so hot but damn, they've got game.

I stand, stretching, and then lower the volume on the television. Moving to the open blinds, I look down at the streets of San Francisco and again the question plagues me. How did I get here? Worse is, do I belong?

Two arms wrap around me from behind, and Jasper rests his chin on my shoulder. I've missed him. I know that's such a girly and ridiculous statement. I've been with him all night, but not truly.

I close my eyes, inhaling his scent of musk and man.

"I thought I was never going to get you alone," he whispers, dipping his lips to my neck.

I turn in his arms, circling them around his neck. "He's great," I say.

A proud smile forms on his lips. "I know." Then he kisses the tip of my nose. "I'm glad you think so, too."

He pulls me closer and my head falls to his chest. My hands skim up under his t-shirt and he inhales a deep breath.

Holding my head between his hands, he bends down and his lips meet

mine. It's his sweet kiss and I love it, but I miss the animalistic ones. The ones that made my lips feel bruised and sore. I really miss the one where he's right on the edge the entire time until his cock sinks into me and a groan of pleasure releases from his throat. We had three weeks of that and this week, besides a quickie in the back of the tattoo parlor when he came to visit, there's been nothing.

He slows the kiss, obviously not going any further. Surely parents fuck? I mean, it's not something I've ever really thought of because the only parents in my life are my own and who wants to think about that? But I'm taking Jasper's lead on the physical part of our relationship and the fact that he ends our kiss says he's not ready for any sleepovers just yet.

"I guess I should go," I mumble and he stares down to my eyes, nodding.

"How about I get a sitter for this weekend?" he asks as I walk toward the coat rack with my purse hanging from it. Swinging it crosswise over my body, I shove my hands into the pockets of my jeans.

"Sure."

He takes me in his arms again, more forceful than before, and I clench my thighs to keep the pulsing to a minimum.

"Thank you for dinner," he softly says in my ear.

"You're welcome," I whisper.

With one last goodnight kiss, I'm walking down the hallway of Jasper's condo building feeling very alone and very horny. I suppose I should be thankful I create sex toys at a time like this.

By the time I step off the curb on the way to my van, the reason for my melancholy is clear to me. I miss him.

"Fuck!" I blurt out, a little too loud. A few couples and families walking along the sidewalk look at me and I lower my head. "The bastard owns me," I mumble.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Two

“OKAY, so you’re sure. A kid?” Whitney asks, sipping her coffee.

“As in a little person?” Tahlia clarifies and I nod again.

“As in a six-year-old little boy. Yes,” I say.

I sip my coffee and the two of them exchange looks. I know the look. It’s the one that’s silently agreeing with my subconscious that I’m in over my head. But it’s been two weeks and Brady and I are getting along like best friends. It’s Jasper and me who have somehow moved backwards into a platonic relationship. Other than quickies in his office or my place at lunch, we’re in junior high hand-holding mode. I’d probably get more action if I challenged him to a game of spin the bottle or seven minutes in heaven.

“I don’t know what to say.” You know it’s bad when quick-thinker Whitney, the reporter, is speechless.

“Is he nice? Or does Jasper have one of those nightmare hyperactive ones?” Tahlia’s expression morphs into a disgusted look. Which is out of sorts because I’m fairly sure she’d be the best mother out of all of us. Nothing against Whitney. Or me.

“He’s great. Clingy.” I tilt my head. “But great. He really likes me. Sometimes I worry he’s too attached.”

Both their eyes bug out.

“You guys do realize that I’m a likable person?” I ask and they share that same damn look. I’m ready to throw my coffee in their faces.

Tahlia reaches over, patting my hand. “Of course,” she singsongs, clearly lying.

Whatever. I know I’m likable.

“You guys probably behave similar,” Whitney adds as though she didn’t just insult me.

“Um, guys. Jasper isn’t looking for Brady to have a friend to have play dates with. He’s looking for a mother,” I say. Although Jasper said the exact opposite, which makes me wonder what we’re doing then. Every time we’re together I can’t help but feel like I have to prove myself to him.

“Did he say that?” Tahlia’s mouth hangs open.

“No. He said he wasn’t, but I’m so fucking confused. I mean how should things be? He has a kid and he’s in a relationship with me. There have to be expectations. I mean we’re not just dating into infinity now. There are expectations with monogamy. Hidden promises of happily ever after.”

“Well, you’re young still,” Tahlia offers, trying to give me an out, I think.

“You don’t get it.” I shake my head, frustrated that no one gets where I’m coming from.

They both look at one another and shrug, not understanding me.

“I’ve never thought about my wedding. I never believed I would get married. Kids? Only if I was the last woman on the planet and Chris Hemsworth and I needed to repopulate the earth,” I ramble, my blood pressure increasing the more I think about all the things I’ve never thought of before. “I mean, I’m starting a sex toy company. How is that going to work for career day? Can you see me strutting in with a tank top, my tats on full display, pulling out a dildo?”

I thump my forehead on the table and Tahlia smooths my hair. See, what’d I tell you? She’s motherly.

“You could do the sex ed class,” Whitney says, laughing, and Tahlia joins in.

I lift my head to narrow my eyes before I stare down at the table again.

“You’re thinking too far in the future, Len. Calm down,” Whitney offers. This is the same advice I repeat on an hourly basis to myself.

“If all these thoughts are surfacing. Do you think...I mean—” Tahlia hesitates. “Maybe you love him?”

I lift my head slowly, and stare her dead straight in the eyes. “No. I’m just saying when a kid is involved, there’s more expectations.”

“Not really,” Whitney says in a soft tone.

I look over at her and she draws back. “I mean, a future is a future, Lennon, and if you don’t think you’ll be able to commit down the road, you shouldn’t be in a relationship, let alone one with a man who has a child.”

I lean back in my chair, focusing on the outside world past the window. I can't be upset because what Whitney is saying makes sense. Jasper and I were fooling each other that day at the cabin. There's no 'let's give it a try.' There's only 'all in and pray you make the right decision.' I've been teetering on that line the past couple weeks and it's time I fully step over it and embrace all that decision has to offer, if that's where I want to be.

A slow smile tilts the corners of both their lips because they know. They knew before me.

"I don't love him," I bite out and they share a smile, shaking their heads.

"Only you would know," Tahlia says, raising her shoulders up and down in a condescending way.

"And I don't."

Whitney tips her cup to her lips. "Definitely not," she mumbles.

I stand up from my seat, eyeing the scribble on my coffee mug. "Annie Reed? Really?" Tahlia and her damn romance movies.

They both laugh and I roll my eyes.

"You know it's funny." Whitney practically spits out her coffee from her laughter.

"I'm not Annie, Jasper isn't Sam and Brady isn't Jonah. This isn't *Sleepless in Seattle*, it's my life." My frustration reaches a boiling point and it's clear in the tone of my voice.

Their laughter screeches to a halt like a car reaching the edge of a cliff.

"Lennon." Whitney sits up straighter, her eyes laced with sympathy.

"We didn't mean—" Tahlia begins but I hold up my hand.

How can I really fault them when I'd be doing the exact same thing if it was one of them? "It's fine. I gotta go, though." The two of them stand but I shoo them back down into their seats. "Really, I'm fine. I just need to figure this out." I toss my coffee cup in the trash, and I'm walking away when Whitney's voice pulls me back.

"It's okay, Lennon. You know that, right?"

I turn around, not understanding what she's saying.

She's nibbling on the inside of her cheek. "I mean... you can want more. It's okay to want more."

I nod, and swing open the door, making my exit into the warm summer night.

I know it's okay to want more in theory, but am I the girl who can handle more?

CHAPTER

Twenty-Three

I STEP out of the elevator of Jasper's office, my heart in my throat, my stomach a churning mess. "Hi, Brittany, I'm here to see Drew."

She nods. "Mr. Banks, Lennon Hart is here." She's nice and polite, but she's an idiot because she called the wrong person.

"I'm here to see Drew Ashland," I clarify and she smiles.

"Mr. Banks informed me any time you come to the office, he's to be rung."

I stare blankly at her, my mind whirling. I have no chance to say anything else because Jasper rounds the corner, a giant smile on his face, his arms already outstretched for me.

"You want lunch?" he asks, and kisses my cheek.

"I have a meeting with Drew." My voice is void of the usual giddiness it bears when I'm in Jasper's arms.

"Oh." He draws back. "I didn't know." His lips turn down.

He doesn't know because we're apart more than together these days and that's not me blaming him or Brady. I'm starting to realize that maybe Jasper hasn't completely let me in. That maybe there's still doubt in him about us.

"It was last-minute. I guess he has some things to discuss regarding branding."

Just then Drew gets off the elevator. "Shit, Lennon. Give me a second and I'll be ready." He's in a brown suit today and he has a hat on. You'd think he just walked out of the forties and a swing song starts playing in my head.

"Nice hat," Jasper says, and it's clear from his tone it's not a compliment.

Drew tips it down, slightly bowing. "Thank you, sir." Then he snaps his

heels together and holds out his arm for me. “Now, I’m going to steal your lady.”

I giggle and take the offered arm.

“She’s my lunch,” Jasper calls out after us.

“That’s not appropriate talk for the office,” Drew says back, leading us forward.

I look over my shoulder and Jasper winks, the naughty minded grin back on his face. My stomach and my heart both flutter.

Sue stands with a stack of papers when Drew approaches.

“Good afternoon, Sue,” he says and I’m wondering if he’s just coming in today.

“Mr. Ashland. Miss Hart.” She looks skeptically at me, but she follows us into the office.

“Do you want anything to drink?” Drew asks me, motioning for me to sit down.

“No, thank you,” I say. She nods and focuses her attention on Drew.

“Nothing for me either. Thank you, Sue. Shut the door when you leave.”

She leaves and the door clicks shut.

We discuss the branding for a half hour and surprisingly he’s on board with my ideas. Drew’s been a pleasure to work with. He made sure the due diligence portion was seen to right away and he’s already got his patent lawyer drawing up the paperwork to file. I’m lucky to have him on my side.

I’m collecting my things when he leans back in his chair, smirking, and I can’t resist.

“What?” I ask.

Drew and I have come to a casual friendship as of late, since he likes to joke as much as I do.

“So, what do you think of Brady?” he asks and I stare blankly at him because this isn’t the first time I’ve seen him since I found out about Brady. “Jasper told me you guys are hitting it off.”

“He’s a great kid,” I say.

“He is. He’s also a kid looking for a mom.” He raises his eyebrows in question.

“Jasper isn’t,” I say, still not sure if I believe it.

“I’m not so sure about that.” He straightens, clasping his hands in front of him on the table, and stares at me for an uncomfortable minute. “He likes you.”

“And I like him, so why are we having this conversation?” I ask.

“She tore him apart,” he says softly as though Jasper’s perched outside with a glass to the door. “I’ve known Jasper since freshman year at Harvard.”

“And?”

“And I’ve seen him with a lot of women. They’ve come and gone, and he wouldn’t return calls, or he’d dodge them at parties after they hooked up. Only two women have had a lasting affect on him. You and her.” I can’t help but hear the disdain in his voice when he refers to her.

“I don’t think my relationship with Jasper is any of your business,” I say and cross my arms in front of my chest.

“She didn’t tear him up because he loved her. She tore him up because she didn’t want anything to do with his son.” Again, his eyebrows rise and my gut clenches into a knot.

“Well, Brady was hers. Of course it tore him up.”

Drew leans back in his chair. “Is that how you think of it? Brady is Jasper’s but not yours? But who gets hurt if the two of you don’t work out?”

“Brady,” I whisper. I know this, Jasper knows this, but for some reason we’re risking a child’s feelings.

“I don’t say this for you to break it off, because you’ve met him and the kid wants a mom more than he wants to meet Iron Man. He’s at the age where all the kids are talking about their families and he’s realizing he doesn’t have what most do.”

“Shouldn’t you be talking to Jasper about this?” I stiffen my back, narrowing my eyes on him. “It’s not all on me.”

He nods. “I think we both know it is.” He knocks his knuckles on the desk in front of him and stands.

“Drew, with all due respect because I appreciate what you’re doing for my business, but on a personal level, fuck you.” I stand, too. “Do you think I don’t think about that kid all the time? The carefree Lennon has disappeared because I’m so afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing and I’m freaked out that if Jasper and I don’t work out, I’m screwing up an innocent kid.”

“First lower your voice unless you want Jasper to run in here.” He walks around his desk to meet me. “I don’t mean to rile you up. I just wanted to make sure you know the stakes. They’re my family and when emotions get in the way, sometimes it’s the people on the outside who can see the train wreck about to happen.”

I scoff. “So you think we’re a train wreck?” I cock my hip to the side.

Drew dips his chin and looks at me from under his brows. “I think the two of you are in a bubble and I’m not sure either one of you truly will know what you’ll do when someone pops it.”

“Well, *I* think you’re an asshole,” I snap.

“Don’t get upset, Lennon. I like you. I think you’re great for Jasper, but I also think the two of you have no idea how to navigate this relationship.”

“What makes you think you know me so well?”

“Let’s see... you’re the party girl, you like your freedom, you’re probably not in a hurry to settle down, you’re used to doing what you want when you want.” He checks each of these things off on his fingers as he says them.

“What makes you such a psychologist?” I ask, picking up my stuff, ready to bolt out the door.

“I’m just protecting my friend. He’s done it for me in the past and now I’m going to do it for him.” He sits back down in his chair, his face indifferent. “I like you, Lennon.”

I stand at the edge of his desk, peering down at him, my veins burning hot with anger. “Do me a favor and let’s keep this to business.” I gesture between us and then spin on my heel and stomp over to the door.

“I like your fire. I’ll take that to mean that you do love him,” he says, laughing to himself.

I roll my eyes, swing the door open and run right into Jasper’s chest. As hard as I try to push back my tears, I blink and they begin to run in a steady stream down my face.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Four

“**WHOA,**” Jasper says, smoothing my hair, holding me to his chest. He tries to walk us backwards into Drew’s office but I hold firm outside his door.

“Sue, will you excuse us,” he says, that sweet gentle tone long gone now.

“Yes, Mr. Banks.” I hear the sliding of her chair and Jasper pushes me back by my shoulders to look at my face.

I wipe the stupid tears and divert my gaze to anywhere but his face.

“Lennon, what happened?” he asks, and he eyes Drew from over my shoulder. “Drew?”

“It’s nothing. I need to go.” I attempt to slide by him, but he sidesteps, gripping my shoulders.

He points into the office at Drew. “I’ll deal with you later.” His voice is authoritative and demanding.

He pulls me into his side and we walk down the hall to his office. He shuffles me in and he locks the door behind us.

I can’t believe this is happening. I’m Lennon Hart, I have it all together. I’m not this emotional, weepy girl.

“What’s going on?” he asks. I sit down on the couch and he joins me, wrapping his arm around my shoulders.

I glance over to him. He’s in a sharp black suit with the faintest pinstripes. Classic and sophisticated like always.

“How come I can’t spend the night?” I ask the question that’s been niggling at my subconscious.

Jasper blows out a stream of air, and tips his head back to stare up at the ceiling. “I just, I’m not—”

For the first time, Jasper is speechless.

“What?” I turn to face him, and he leans forward, his elbows on his knees.

“I told you, I’m in uncharted territory, okay? I don’t want to hurt Brady, I don’t want to feel like I’m forcing him on you.”

“I like him. You’re not forcing me.”

He blows out a breath and stands to start pacing. “If you spend the night, Brady will jump in our bed in the morning. I’ll be taking a cold shower instead of burying myself into you to relieve my morning wood. We’ll have breakfast and barely be able to have a conversation because he’ll be there, clamoring for your attention.” He leans back on his desk, crossing his ankles. “I’ll admit, I’m not sure you’re ready for it.”

“You think I’m not terrified? I’ve never had a relationship, let alone one that if it doesn’t work out an innocent boy is going to be hurt.” I exhale a huge breath, the truth escaping from me.

“How do you think I feel? He’s my son. Brady doesn’t truly know what he’s missing by not having a mom. He only hears the stories and sees his friends. I always thought my mom would fill that role for him, but it’s something he’s still searching for. Two years ago, he made a pin at school. It was a Mother’s Day project and the teachers expected him to give it to my mom. You want to know where that pin is?”

I swallow past the lump forming in my throat. “Where?”

“It’s in the top drawer of his dresser. He’s waiting to give it to someone—to his mom. I want to give him everything, but I’m not even sure I can give him that. It’s hard to allow someone to get close enough to him that they could hurt him if they decided to leave us.” He pushes off the desk and begins pacing again.

“I don’t want to hurt him. I don’t want to hurt you,” I whisper. Another tear slips from my eye and I quickly wipe it off.

Jasper stops pacing and stares down at his feet with his hands on his hips.

“I still remember the first time Brady asked me why he didn’t have a mom.” His voice cracks and I feel that crack spread across my heart. “I thought I’d prepared myself, but I thought it would happen when he was eight or nine. It happened when he was three. We were at a park and a little girl fell off the swings. She went crying to her mom and Brady looked up to me and asked who that was. I casually told him it was her mommy. I patted his head and told him to go up the slide again. On the way home, he asked me

where his mommy was.”

“Jasper,” I sigh and clutch my chest, more tears falling from my eyes.

“I don’t tell you this to make it harder, Lennon. I’m telling you because this is how deep and long he’s wanted it. I see the way he looks at you and I worry that it will make you bolt. He’s already had one mother who didn’t want him. I don’t know what would happen if another person he looked at like a mom left him.” He comes back to the couch, but sits on the edge.

“I can’t promise you,” I whisper and he nods.

“I know.”

“Neither can you,” I remind him and he nods again, the corners of his lips tipping down.

“I know.”

“I don’t know what to do.”

He turns to me and cups my cheek as his thumb swipes away my tears. “I don’t want to lose you,” he says. “Sometimes I think I’m more scared about me hurting than Brady,” he says softly and my heart flutters.

“What if you decide I’m not good enough?” I ask him and he slides forward, his other hand cupping my opposite cheek.

“Don’t ever say that,” he says. “I’d never think that.” He shakes his head vehemently.

“You wouldn’t be the only one.” I tip my head down and he pulls it back up.

“If you take anything away from this conversation, know that if I didn’t think you could, we wouldn’t be here.”

The determination in his eyes and the caress of his hands seal it for me.

“I’m all in, Jasper,” I say and a slow smile crosses his lips.

“Me too,” he whispers and he delivers another sweet kiss.

No, strike that, he delivers a loving kiss, and it melts every bone in my body.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Five

JASPER TOOK the rest of the day off and we picked up Brady from the local daycare and took him to the zoo. Well, we did all that after Jasper stormed into Drew's office and raised hell. Drew's response? He laughed and said he was happy it worked out.

"What's your favorite animal?" I ask Brady, walking hand in hand with him into the zoo.

"ROAR!"

"I take it you like the lions then?"

"Yep." He lets go of my hand and skips ahead a few steps.

"Then it's lions first," I say.

Jasper pulls out the map from his back pocket, locates the area and tells us which way to head. We arrive at the building a while later, after being distracted by the geese and food carts. Brady bounces up and down on his toes to see better and eventually, Jasper picks him up.

All the animals just lie there and I can't help but think how lonely they must be. "It's kind of sad," I say.

"Why?" Brady asks.

I shrug. "I don't know, I mean, I wouldn't make for a very good caged animal." I shrug again. Jasper laughs, knowing I'm right. "I definitely wouldn't be just lying around like that."

"Me either," Brady agrees and I can't help but think that's true. Me and Brady are cool like that.

"Here's to crazy, Brady." I put my fist out and he hits it.

"Crazy!" he screams and Jasper shushes him.

After we see the lions, I can tell Brady is getting excited—he’s talking so fast that I’m barely understanding him while he’s jumping and running. Jasper keeps telling him to slow down, quiet down, calm down and I can’t help but smile to myself because I heard those same things so much when I was younger.

We head to the play area because Jasper thinks Brady needs to burn off some energy and the two of us sit on the picnic table watching him run around having fun.

“Are you always so strict?” I ask him, sipping my slushy. I got red, Brady got blue, Jasper got a water. Boring.

“What do you mean?” He eyes me like I’m crazy.

“You’re so bossy.”

He leans forward. “I thought you liked me bossy?” he asks in a seductive tone that has me pressing my thighs together. It’s been so long.

“I like you bossy, but I bet Brady doesn’t,” I say, eyeing the child in question going up and down the slide.

“He has a hard time following rules. Plus, he can be a lot to handle if I don’t consistently keep him in check.” I see the questions in his head—how badly he probably wants to tell me to mind my own business, that Brady is his son—but he doesn’t say anything.

I pat his hand. “I’m not telling you how to raise him.”

“You’re not?” he asks, not so sure.

I stand up, keeping my hand on his. “No. I just know what it’s like to be a Brady. My entire family tried to keep me in check and tame my personality and the harder they tried to shove me into the box, the more I pushed and prodded until I broke free. You don’t want to raise a kid who has tattoos on his entire body, invents sex toys and has a hard time with commitment, do you?” I raise my eyebrows, pat his hand one more time and then walk out to the playground to play with Brady.

The park is pretty busy, so I try to always keep my eye on him, but the little man can hide. I’m searching the area for him, but I follow Jasper’s eyes because of course he has an eye on his son. I smile, seeing a giant rock on the far side.

Tiptoeing over there, I peer over the edge to find Brady.

“Gotcha!” I scream and he yelps to stand and run, but he trips over his shoelace and falls to the concrete.

“Ouch,” he says, right before a wail of a cry rumbles out of him. He

buckles over in pain.

“Brady!” Jasper yells and I crouch down to him, brushing his arm.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

Jasper reaches us and kneels down, ready to pick him up, but Brady sits up and then throws himself into my arms, crying.

Jasper falls back on his ass as I stare at him with wide eyes. He smiles and I know he’s thinking about that day at the park three years ago. Even though my heart rate is at a record-setting pace, Brady’s small body against mine feels natural somehow.

My hand slides up and down his back. “Are you okay, buddy? Let’s take a look,” I say. He inches back, letting us see that he has a scratch on his forehead.

“Oh, buddy.” Jasper stands and walks to the table.

“Let’s get it cleaned up,” I say and Brady stands up and walks to the table with his two hands around my waist, his face pressed into my side.

Jasper gets a napkin from the churro vendor and pours water on it from his bottle. I guess he thinks ahead because I’d only have a red slushy to clean it up with.

He pats Brady’s head and tells him it’s okay, that it’s small. “How does it feel?” he asks him.

Brady smiles, nodding his head. “Better.”

I put my arm around his shoulders, handing him his blue slushy. “Best therapy,” I say and he smiles, sucking it up the straw immediately.

The three of us sit there for a few minutes with our drinks, watching the other kids play.

“Where do you want to go now?” I ask Brady. “We could do the Little Puffer train, the carousel...”

“Let’s see the kangaroos.” He jumps up and his blue slushy falls from his hands, and it splatters to the ground.

I laugh and Brady cringes, looking over to Jasper, who rolls his eyes and looks none too pleased.

“Well, let’s clean it up.” I bend down, scooping the blue slushy in the cup, using the extra napkins to wipe it up. Brady helps me and throws away the napkins and cup. “Thanks, Brady,” I say and he smiles, proud that he helped.

I look around for something to clean up the stickiness and spot the water. Jasper hands it over to me and I pour it over the mess and it washes away into

the mulch.

Who knew a bottle of water could come in so handy? I always thought that was reserved for bottles of tequila.

While we're in the Australian Walkabout, Brady is hopping on fences, running from exhibit to exhibit. I notice Jasper says nothing to him.

I slide my arm through his. "I think I was wrong," I whisper close to him and he looks down at me. "I think that you do a great job with Brady. I shouldn't have given you advice. I mean, who am I to say anything? You were like MacGyver with your bottle of water to hydrate, clean cuts and wash away a spill."

He chuckles. "You're Lennon and you were right. I've been afraid that he'll scare you off with how hyper he is, so I've been coming down a little hard on him. But at the park I realized you two will probably just keep each other busy." He laughs and I hip-check him.

"I was apologizing."

He glances down at me, that you love me smile on his lips. "Don't. You were right." His head dips and I prepare for a kiss when Brady jumps up to face level.

"I'm hungry," he screams.

My one eye shuts for a second from the pain in my ear. We share a smile and Jasper grips his upper arm, keeping him at ground level, and then kisses me. It was short and sweet but it meant a little more this time around because Brady was there.

"Come on," I say to Brady, finding a pretzel stand.

"Let's have lunch," Jasper offers and I share a look with Brady.

Turning around, I walk backwards. "There is no such thing as a balanced diet while we're at the zoo. Come on, MacGyver, I'll buy you a water." I wink and he laughs, then chases us until we're screaming and he's circling around us.

I guess my man can hang with us crazies.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Six

AN IMPATIENT KNOCK RATTLES my apartment door. I scurry half dressed to answer it, because we're already late. I was late leaving the tattoo parlor and Brady was upset that his dad was leaving for the night to be with me. He truly wants to spend every waking moment with us. It's sweet in its own way.

I swing open the door and before I have a chance to see Jasper's face, I'm backed up into the apartment. The door slams shut, and the shirt I just put on is brought up over my head and tossed to the floor. My bra is unhooked as I hear two shoes thump to the ground.

His lips land on mine, my hands weaving through his hair. I unbutton his pants and he swings his hips side to side to let them fall to the ground.

"I need you once before we go and another five times after." He uses the weight of his body to push me back until I collapse on my bed. He comes down on top of me and presses his weight into my body.

"Sounds good," I say, moaning when his erection grinds between my legs.

"Turn over," he demands.

I like bossy Jasper. Why the hell did I ever question his bossiness? "Feeling a little alpha tonight?" I joke and he smacks my ass as I wiggle it in front of his face.

"I always feel alpha with you," he says in a strained voice, his hand gliding down my spine. "No panties tonight." He rips them off me and his shirt lands on the bed. His hand slides between my legs, his fingers moving from front to back, spreading my excitement all over my pussy.

“Hurry,” I say, my insides clenching.

“You’re definitely wet enough,” he says and my nipples harden into taut peaks.

“How bad do I need to beg?” I groan.

“Tell me how bad you want me,” he orders while he leans over me and slides open the top drawer of my nightstand. My insides clench even before I see the lube and anal plug he’s pulled from the drawer.

I’m not sure when his boxers left his body, but his cock presses against my slit and I try to push back into him. He grips my hips, directing the movement himself. Control freak.

“I ache.”

His tip teases me, but he doesn’t respond. Instead he drizzles lube down my ass crack. I arch my neck to look behind me. He’s watching on in fascination as he spreads the liquid over my puckered hole.

“I’ve been wet all day waiting for you.” I moan as he pushes the tip of the butt plug in then let my forehead drop to the mattress.

“You like that? Want me to put it all the way in?” he asks in a hoarse voice.

I’m too on edge to speak so in response I push back into him. The head of his cock teases my slit and the anal plug pushes in a little more.

“Jasper, I need you,” I beg. I can’t take it anymore. I need to move. I need him to fill me. I *need* to come.

“You’re going to come all over me. Don’t worry about that.” He pushes the remaining length of the toy into me and I gasp in pleasure.

I wiggle my ass side to side, desperate to move. “More. I need you to fuck me.”

“All in good time,” he says, his voice a low rumble.

He pushes his cock in an inch and then backs out.

“I haven’t masturbated for two days, waiting for you,” I say, hoping he’ll give me all of him.

Two inches in and then out.

“The sooner we get there, the sooner we get home and I can wrap my mouth around your cock until you come down the back of my throat.”

He slams into me. I knew that’d do the trick.

I’m full. So full that I’m seeing stars. He drags himself out of me and in an instant I’m desperate to feel that fullness again.

He grabs my hair and pulls me up a bit so his other hand can grab my

nipple. He licks my neck and I've never craved a man like I do Jasper.

As he moves in and out of me, my hand moves to my clit.

"Keep touching yourself," he whispers in my ear and my head falls back to his shoulder, my lips searching for his. He kisses me, his tongue deep, our mouths ravenous.

"Harder," I pant and he thrusts hard and deep, his balls smacking me right where I need them to. Every time he pushes into me, I'm in sensory overload. Pleasure rockets from deep within my pussy and my ass until I'm a writhing, panting mess.

"Like that?" he asks and his hand skims around my waist, keeping me in place while he drills into me over and over and over again.

Faster than ever before, he leads me up that rollercoaster track and I don't even have time to gasp for another breath before he rounds me right over top of that hill. My hand falls off my clit, my body weakening, but his firm arms hold me up. He pulls the butt plug from my ass mid-orgasm and I scream in pleasure—babbling what I have no idea.

I'm a trembling mess and Jasper must notice because he lets me fall to all fours, his hands on my hips, bringing me to him over and over again.

"Jesus, you feel so fucking great," he yells and I moan, a second orgasm quickly rising to the surface. Seems this rollercoaster has more than one peak.

He thrusts into me, rocking my hips into his pelvis more, and a couple minutes later, we're both on the bed, sweaty and spent. He pulls out of me and I lie there making a mess of my sheets, but uncaring.

"Let's stay in," he says. "Give me five and I'll be ready again." He smiles and I shake my head, sitting up.

Grabbing my towel from my shower, I clean myself up. "We promised. Plus, my friends want to meet you."

I move to the bathroom to use a wet washcloth. He follows me, washing himself at the sink.

"You can take a shower," I offer but he shakes his head.

"No way. I want to smell you all night," he says, bringing his hand to his nose, inhaling deeply.

And just like that I'm wet and ready again. I step up, rise to my tiptoes and plant a kiss to his lips. "God, I missed our loud fucking."

"Me, too. I forgot about that soft whimper you do right after you come."

"Let's get tonight over with." I fall down to my heels and go get dressed.

By the time we arrive, Cole, Whitney, Lucas and Tahlia are waiting for us. From the ten texts I received I know they're annoyed, but that orgasm was worth it.

"Hey, guys," I say, barging into the lobby of the building we're meeting at. Jasper follows behind me, like always. His stride is confident. "So, this is Jasper." I put my hands out in the air like I'm introducing Brad Pitt. Well, he's my Brad Pitt.

They each smile at him and introduce each other. When Lucas steps up, Jasper tilts his head. "Lucas?"

Their handshake grips a little firmer. "How are you, Jasper?" Lucas asks.

"You guys know each other?" Cole asks and Whitney and Tahlia share a look. I remember Lucas telling me Jasper was an asshole back in the day and I might have purposely left out the fact that Jasper would know someone here tonight, in case it made him not want to come.

"We were at Harvard together," Jasper says, a genuine smile on his lips.

"Yeah," Lucas mumbles, that casual easy-going personality he's known for lacking at the moment.

"Okay, guys, I know there's like bad blood or whatever, but we're all adults now. So, kiss and make up," I say.

Tahlia laughs, although it's an uncomfortable laugh. Whit stares between the two guys and Cole looks utterly confused as to what's going on.

"Bad blood?" Jasper asks, apparently clueless about the fact that Lucas didn't like him. "I don't know about that. I was an asshole back in the day, granted, and I had a giant chip on my shoulder for the rich boy here." He gestures at Lucas. "I'm sorry if I ever offended you, man, but I'm not that guy anymore."

Lucas smiles. "Your best friend still Drew Ashland?"

Jasper nods.

"No kid richer than Drew." Lucas laughs and Jasper follows suit.

"That is true."

Look at my man being all mature and apologizing. Isn't he the sweetest?

Lucas shoves his hands in his pocket and rocks back on his heels, back to the guy with no worries I'm used to.

"Okay." I clap my hands and everyone looks at me. "Now that's settled. Let's go attack some zombies!" I raise my hands and head over to the check-

in counter.

Yep, we're doing an Escape Room because how else should friends bond than by arguing with each other? With three alphas in our midst, this should be a huge bonding experience for them.

We all sign the release papers and watch the video. We have an hour to free a government spy before he's killed. Good times.

Once the employee has locked us in our room and started the timer we all scatter to separate areas to scour.

"Let's remember, I'm the investigative reporter." Whitney pushes her chest out and uses her thumb to point at herself.

"Hate to break it to you, but there's no Google Search available," Cole jokes and Whitney narrows her eyes, trying to get out of his hold, but he tightens his arms around her shoulders.

"No messing around, we need to find the key," I say, scrambling over to a bookcase.

Jasper goes to the desk. Lucas and Tahlia head over to the corner. Cole and Whitney start going through all the books.

"Why aren't you looking?" I ask Lucas and he laughs.

"I did this for one of the adventure dating nights." He shrugs and now it makes sense to me why Tahlia isn't bossing him around, telling him what to do.

"Is that how you two met?" Jasper asks, stopping his search for the moment.

"We can chitchat at dinner. Look!" I point to what he's supposed to be doing and he shakes his head.

"I think I can talk while I search." Jasper talks to me like a fifteen-year-old sassing back to his mom.

"Don't make me take you over my knee, Jasper," I say and laugh.

"Don't make me take you over mine," he snips back and everyone says, "Ohh."

He walks over to me and I roll my eyes in annoyance even though I'm anything but. "Get away." I squirm as he tries to take me in his arms, looking for somewhere to kiss.

"Oh, my God, I never thought I'd see the day. Lennon is a smitten kitten," Whitney says, her hands on her hips while she stares at me with amazement.

"I'm not a smitten kitten." I let Jasper put his arms around my waist and

kiss me.

“You so are,” she says back and laughs.

“Whatever.” I kiss Jasper once more before smacking his ass. “Get to work.”

He laughs and although I know he’d like nothing more than to smack my ass back, he heads to the desk, searching the drawers.

Cole finds the key and we all run over to the next door.

“Clues,” Tahlia says.

“Puzzles,” Lucas corrects.

“Okay, guys, I’m great at clues,” Tahlia says, practically pushing people out of the way to find some huge puzzle only she can solve.

“It’s puzzles,” Lucas corrects her again.

“And this isn’t *Survivor*. There are a bunch of puzzles we need to solve,” Cole says.

Jasper stays quiet during the whole exchange, which makes me happy because then I don’t have to worry about anyone’s head being bitten off. I love Whit and Tahl, but Cole and Lucas are pretty new to our group, too, and we just patched Lucas and Jasper’s relationship back together.

Four of us go from puzzle to puzzle, solving and cheering. There are only two of us who take a seat and chat about the good ole days—Jasper and Lucas.

Not that I’m paying too much attention, but I hear them recalling names back and forth between each other and laughing about this or that. Then as Cole and Whitney are arguing about how to solve one of the puzzles and Tahlia’s trying to make sure we have everything in order, Lucas asks, “Whatever happened to Gina Freemont?”

My entire body freezes. I doubt there were two Ginas. Yeah, I know it’s a common name, but something deep inside me says that’s her. Brady’s mom.

Jasper doesn’t miss a beat. “Last I heard she was down in Miami,” he says and for a second I think maybe I was wrong. It is a different Gina. “I’m sure you heard we had a child.” He just throws it out there.

Trying to act like I’m paying more attention to the puzzle in front of me than to their conversation, I tip my head further down.

“Yeah, I heard something about that right before I left, but I’d forgotten until just now.”

I turn around and shoot Lucas an annoyed look. He catches me and bites his lip. He forgot until now, my ass. Before Jasper can turn around, I move

my attention back to Cole, Whitney and Tahlia.

“Well, she’s out of the picture anyway. It’s just me and Brady and now Lennon.”

I think my heart just floated out of my body and right into Jasper’s hands.

I turn around and Lucas has a cheesy smile on his face, making Jasper turn around. He catches the sight of me and the smile on his face widens. He holds his arms out and I walk right into them.

It feels like home here, nestled into his hard chest. Home used to be a stranger’s bed, a bottle of booze and a hangover the next day. This home is so much better.

My arms wrap around his waist and he kisses the top of my head. I peer up to his face, needing his lips on mine. Then our kiss gets a little PDA-inappropriate.

“Yeah, I think I’ll join them,” Lucas says, rising from the chair and leaving us.

Jasper walks us back into a corner and we make out like a pair of teenagers falling in love for the first time.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Seven

I'M on Jasper's kitchen counter and he stands between my legs, his hands buried under the boxer shorts I borrowed from him last night, running along my ass. My lips are on his, our tongues gliding and sliding together while my hand ventures down to rub the hard erection tenting his pajama pants.

A door opens down the hall and little feet barrel toward us. I startle and Jasper turns to adjust himself.

"Brady!" I exclaim, hopping down from the counter. "You're awake," I say like I'm not pointing out the obvious.

"Yep." He climbs up on the breakfast stool. "Morning, Dad."

"Morning, bud." Jasper keeps his back to him, beating the eggs. I giggle inside because I'm sure he'd rather I was beating him at the moment.

I sit next to Brady. "What do you want for breakfast?"

"Chocolate-chip pancakes." He nods with confidence, the six-year-old's final answer.

"You got it." I walk around the counter and Jasper turns after finally getting his tonsil-tickler to relax.

"I'm making eggs," he says as though we have to make a choice.

"We'll have both," I say with a giant smile to appease him. I walk over and kiss his cheek.

"Not too close, I'm liable to rise to attention again," he murmurs and I glance at Brady, who's playing with his McDonald's toy from last night.

Who do you think got him that? Not Mr. Responsible, I can tell you that.

I peer into his pantry, finding the Bisquick, and since unlike my house I know he has eggs and milk, I figure all I need is chocolate chips.

“Well, color me surprised,” I say, pulling out a bag of chocolate chips.

“Daddy makes the best,” Brady says.

“The best what?” I ask, putting everything out on the counter.

“Cookies.” Brady smiles and Jasper sneaks a look my way, pouring the eggs on the griddle.

“Your dad bakes?” I ask with an I-don’t-believe-it tone and Jasper laughs, while Brady’s head moves up and down with a huge grin.

“Dad, make them,” Brady asks, but Jasper’s already shaking his head.

“How about tonight? We’ll watch a movie, and have cookies and milk?” Jasper offers, turning around and hitting Brady’s nose with the end of the spatula.

“A fort. We need to build a fort for Lennon.” Brady hops down from the stool, having already moved on to another thought. “I’ll go get the blankets.” His footsteps paddle down the hall again.

I measure and mix the pancakes, already knowing where everything is because as of this past week, I’ve been here more than my own place. I call that progress, ladies and gentlemen.

“Hmm... can I say, I’m surprised you’re so handy in the kitchen?” Jasper comes up behind me, his hands slowly moving down the front of my boxers. “Still wet,” he whispers.

I look down the hall to see blankets being thrown out of the closet.

“Well, that’s probably all you,” I deadpan.

His hand glides the wetness around my clit, making it swollen before that sweet ache sets in. It turns out you can have sex with kids in the house. You just have to wake up extra early. And by that, I mean I’ve been setting my alarm for an hour before Brady gets up. Seems an orgasm is just as effective as caffeine in the morning. Well, almost.

“There’s something sexy about knowing a part of me is still swimming inside of you.”

“Let’s hope there’s no egg for it to swim into,” I joke and he kisses my neck.

“Would that be so bad?” he asks, and I don’t turn around right away, but my whisk circles a little faster.

“What?” I ask in a squeaky voice.

“Never mind,” he says and steps away.

Leaving the batter on the counter, I step back until I see his eyes. Staring into his eyes, I ask my question once more. “What did you mean by that?”

He shrugs. "I'm not going to lie, Lennon. The thought of you pregnant has crossed my mind." He shrugs again and I can tell he doesn't want this to be a big deal.

"But will it stretch out my tattoos?" I whine and he continues to stare at me, no smile present. I hit his shoulder. "I'm kidding. I know I'm not a traditional girl, but you'll have to marry me first. And of course, you'll have to ask my dad," I say, hoping that scares him off for the foreseeable future. I'd be lying if I said I hadn't pictured the three of us as one big happy family and what it might be like in the future, but it's too soon to be talking about kids. At least for me.

"Speaking of your family, your brother called me yesterday."

Uh-oh. The whisk sinks down into the batter as panic flares and all my muscles tense. "Jacob?" I clarify.

"Yeah, he called about a client he wants me to meet with. Funny, but he didn't mention anything about me dating his sister." He turns around with a plate full of scrambled eggs.

I switch places to make the pancakes, not wanting to stay on this topic. I've yet to tell my brother I'm dating Jasper and I've yet to tell Jasper that I knew who he was before I met him. Surely he won't care at this point.

"Um, my dad has a retirement party in a few weeks. Why don't you guys come?" I offer the invitation that should've been extended weeks ago.

He steps up beside me and dips his face in front of me. "You've told your brother about us?" he asks, though the tone with which he asks tells me he already knows I didn't.

"I will. I promise. Before the party." I put up my Girl Scout fingers like I did when I was five.

"You better. I didn't mention anything to him because you said you wanted to tell him, but I'm not comfortable keeping it from him."

I let my hand drop. "I know. I'm sorry."

"I don't know why you're keeping it a secret. I'll tell him if you'd like." He drops the chocolate chips on top of the pancakes.

"It's fine. I'll do it. I'm sure he'll have no problem with it," I say, not believing my own words. "I feel like you're hiding me." I turn the tables to get the heat off of me.

"What do you mean?" he asks.

"Your parents. I've yet to meet them." I pop one of the chocolate chips from the bag into my mouth.

As though I wiggled my nose like Samantha from *Bewitched*, I hear a key insert in the lock and freeze in place. Jasper moves but before he can do anything, an older couple walk in and give Jasper and me the once-over.

“Mom,” Jasper says, with a warning in his tone.

“Grandma!” Brady screams and runs into the room with stacks of blankets. “We’re making a fort tonight for Lennon.” He places them on the couch.

“It appears she already spent the night.” Her eyes scan over my body slower than a CT scan, logging every tattoo, the fact I’m in Jasper’s boxers and my tight tank top.

“Dad.” Jasper shakes his dad’s hand and then he rounds the corner back to me. “Mom and Dad, this is Lennon. Lennon, these are my parents, Natalie and John.” He places his hand on the small of my back, as though he’s presenting me to them.

John smiles, and I can see where Jasper gets all those smiles I love so much. Natalie’s not so friendly, but I’ll give her credit for at least trying to cover up her scowl.

“Hello.” I step forward, offering my hand.

John shakes it like a man should shake a woman’s hand, a little loose but enough that it still shows his strength. Natalie on the other hand barely grips my hand.

Finally, Brady joins us, interrupting the awkwardness.

“Why are you guys here?” he asks and Natalie mocks offense.

“We wanted to see you. It seems you never come visit us anymore,” she says, her gaze veering over to me.

“I told you, we’ve been busy.” Jasper’s bitter tone can’t be missed, but no one says anything.

“I think I should go change,” I say quietly to Jasper, who nods in agreement.

“Don’t change on our account. We’ve always loved looking at art.” She smiles and I manage to keep my lips zippered shut, but this lady is going to challenge me.

I give a small smile and head around the breakfast bar and down the hall. I’m not sure I breathe until I’m behind Jasper’s bedroom door.

I turn on the shower because if her judgmental eyes will be on me, I’m going to be squeaky clean. A minute later, Jasper enters the room, just as I’m taking off my shirt.

His pajama pants begin to tent.

“Nope. Nope. Nope. Your parents are right outside,” I whisper-yell, pointing to the door.

He laughs and listens to me as well as a puppy would. “I’m sorry,” he says, and steps up to me, his hand cupping my cheek.

I look up to him, his face serious, his hazel eyes missing their usual gleam.

“You don’t have anything to be sorry for,” I say. “Your mother seems very... conservative.” I smile in a way that says, *See? I can play nice.*

“She’s a farmer’s wife. She grew up in a small town and judges those who are different.”

Man, does this man know his mother.

“Well, I am definitely different.”

The corner of his lips dip down when I say that.

I ignore his reaction and shimmy out of my shorts. He steps closer, his hands finding my ass before he pushes me against the glass wall of the shower, his erection throbbing against my pussy.

I can’t deny that I want him inside me. I want to know he doesn’t care that I’m not some farmer’s daughter who goes to church every Sunday and that I wasn’t a virgin until him. I’m in desperate need of the worship he grants me with his eyes and his body. I want the look that says he loves me, even if he doesn’t say it himself. The guy who told me he’d never hide me.

So I have a lapse in judgment.

My legs tighten around his torso and my heels push his pajama pants down until they fall to the floor. He steps out of them and his cock pushes past my opening. Locking me to the wall, he takes one hand and glides into me.

“Oh,” I moan and he covers my mouth, although the shower should help drown out our noises.

He plunges in and out of me fast and quick, and I’m surprised I’m still so wet, especially after the chill his mother brought in with her.

I hang onto his neck, my breasts smashed to his chest as he thrusts in and out of me. Faster and faster.

“You’re so fucking tight. I love the way you squeeze my cock,” he says, and that tingling between my legs burns hotter.

He fucks me like he’ll never get enough, as if I sate him completely and yet never quite enough. The way he takes me makes me feel like I’m it for

him.

“Jasper,” I sigh, the arousal peaking around me. “God, fuck me,” I whisper, the glass rattling behind me.

He continues and without any foreplay—no nipple tweaking or mouth around my clit—and even with the ice queen outside, I explode all over Jasper for the second time this morning.

A minute later, he follows me and my legs aren’t even down on the ground when I catch sight of his mom staring at us from the opened bathroom door.

“Oh, my God.” I cling to a very naked Jasper.

He looks up at me, that foggy, just-orgasmed gleam in his eyes until he registers the shock on my face. Turning his head, he must catch a glimpse of his mom.

“Mom!” he yells. “Get out!”

“I’m so sorry. We just heard glass banging and didn’t know. The door was unlocked and—”

John peeks in and then throws his hand over his wife’s eyes. “Natalie, what are you doing?” Then he turns his own head and says, “Son, a time and place.”

“Just get OUT!” Jasper screams and the two of them leave. I don’t move until I hear the door shut.

“That about seals the deal,” I mumble and we break apart. I open the shower door and step in.

Of course he follows me. Jasper isn’t one for space.

“Hey,” he says, pushing my hair under the stream of the water. “It’s fine. I have a son. It’s not like they didn’t know I’ve had sex.” He laughs, somehow thinking that his mother finding me pressed against a glass wall with her son’s dick inside me isn’t mortifying.

“She hates me,” I say, allowing him to place shampoo in his hand and lather up my hair. I take the bottle from him and return the favor.

“No, she just doesn’t adjust well to change.” He steps closer, nudging me under his shower faucet head. The shampoo suds drip down our bodies.

“I might be too much change for her,” I remark, grabbing my conditioner, but Jasper takes it from my hands and applies it like I told him to the last time we showered together.

“Don’t say that. You’re the best change. I know I’m happier than I’ve ever been and as much as it kills me to say it, Brady is too.” His hands

smooth through my hair, rinsing the conditioner.

He grabs the soap and my loofa, but my hands land on his. “Jasper, she could make you... I mean, she might not ever warm up.”

How can I fault her? Some days I’m not sure my own mom even likes me that much. How can I expect someone else’s to?

He grips my hands in his, staring down at my eyes.

“You’re second in my life,” he says. I smile, knowing I could never and never would want to top that place in his life.

“You’re second in mine too,” I say. “After my vibrator of course,” I joke and he laughs.

“I can’t lie to you. Brady will always be first, but he’s the only one who will ever come before you.”

I stare up at his determined and serious eyes, hoping to God his mom and I just got off to a bad start. Because feeling like I don’t fit in in one family is enough, I’m not sure I can handle two. If that happened there’s a chance it might not be Jasper who ends us. I could very well bolt.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Eight

AFTER JASPER and I dress we exit his bedroom. My hair is still a little wet, but I did my make up more conservative than usual. See? I'm flexible.

Brady's voice bounces off every wall in the condo, but when he sees us, he runs over.

"Grandma and Grandpa are going to take me to Dave and Buster's." He jumps up and down.

I look to Jasper, who looks at his parents.

"We have plans tonight to make a fort," he says, and then goes into the kitchen.

I'm not sure my face could match the color of Brady's Spiderman blanket more, as I try to follow Jasper without making direct eye contact with either of his parents.

His mom joins us while John plays with Brady. "Well, we just thought the two of you would like to be alone." Neither Jasper nor I miss her meaning.

Jasper turns around, plating food for Brady. "Brady, come and eat." His voice is short and curt.

I'd like to say, *Don't take it out on Brady*, but I sip my coffee, still hiding my eyes from her.

"Mom, we don't need alone time," Jasper says. "We've been managing fine."

"I was just trying to be nice, Jay," she says, taking the fork and knife to cut up Brady's pancakes.

He swivels around, eyeing Brady, still by his dad. He leans forward, his body stiff. “You ambushed us and you know it.” He looks over at me and boy, do I wish I could be like Alice in Wonderland so I could be ten sizes too small and hidden behind my coffee cup. “You purposely surprised us by coming here today so you can check out Lennon.” I realize now that he’s seething.

“Well, what was I supposed to do? The two of you have been seeing each other and Brady told me during FaceTime that she spends the night.”

Slam.

Jasper’s open hand smacks the counter. Unsure if I should leave or stay, I bury my head in the fridge as though I’m looking for something. *Smooth, Lennon.*

“You should have waited until we reached out to set a date. I was going to call you this week to set up a dinner, but you had to push your way through.”

“Jay, stop being like this,” she whines and I’m thinking that voice usually gets her her way.

“How am I supposed to be? You’re making the woman I love uncomfortable,” he says in a harsh whisper.

I smile at the pickles because he hasn’t really told me he loves me yet.

“Well, that wasn’t my intention,” his mom fires back.

Figuring I can’t keep my head in the fridge the entire time, I back up and close the door, pretending to put more milk in my coffee.

“Don’t force this,” Jasper warns, similar to the way he does with Brady. I realize that my mom and his mom might be a lot alike.

She slides onto a chair at the breakfast bar. “You’re right. I should have waited.”

Except for that. I’m quite sure my mom has never told me I was right.

“I’m sorry, Lennon,” she says and I look up for the first time.

“No apologies necessary.” I’m polite and mean what I say. Who’s to say I wouldn’t do the same thing for my own son some day? I’m not exactly known for my boundaries.

We each force a smile and Jasper grabs a cup, filling it with orange juice.

“Brady!” he calls out. There’s a specific tone Jasper has that tells Brady not to push that line and he recognizes it so he runs over, sliding up onto a breakfast stool.

“Would you like some coffee?” I ask Natalie.

“That would be lovely, Lennon.” She clasps her hands on the counter in front of her and I catch John walking over.

I go to the cabinet and pull out two mugs. “You must be here a lot since you know your way around the kitchen,” she comments. I don’t stop my movements because I’m pretty sure Jasper must be giving her the evil eye right now.

For the rest of the morning, that’s the way our conversation goes. She tries to dig for more information about how often I’m here, where we met, what stuff we’ve all done together, but I think what she’s really trying to figure out is how close I am to Brady. She asks nothing about what I do for money, my family, or my education.

We’re all seated on the couch and I glance to the clock to see it’s almost noon.

“We should get going,” John says, slapping his hands on his knees.

Jasper stands right away, ready to see them out. I’m thinking he’s as eager as I am.

Natalie holds her arms open for Brady and he kind of leans in, offering her his head. She kisses it.

“So we’ll have some time together next week,” she says and my stomach twists. Jasper hasn’t told her that he asked me to watch Brady next week while he has to go out of town for a night.

“Oh, about that, Mom. I’m going to have Lennon watch him.” He opens the door as casual as can be and her eyes dart to me.

Even John’s back stiffens, his gaze drifting between Jasper, his mom and me.

“Okay,” she says with no enthusiasm in her voice. “Well, leave my number in case she has any questions,” she says, offering me a tight smile.

“It was a pleasure meeting you, Lennon. Sorry for... well, sorry.” John holds his hand out to me, his face matching my own shade of red.

“Pleasure to meet you,” I say, my voice lower than normal.

Natalie waves from the doorway. “Bye, Lennon. We’ll have to make official dinner plans at some point.”

I put my hand up in the air to wave, but she’s already out the door. Jasper shuts the door, walks over to the couch, and plops down. He pats the cushion next to him and I join him. His arm swings behind my head and he pulls me to him, kissing my forehead.

“Sorry,” he mumbles, his tone truly apologetic.

“I’m going to get my sleeping bag.” Brady runs down the hall, clearly oblivious to the awkwardness that was the past few hours. His head is one hundred percent in fort zone.

I sit up and look at Jasper. His eyes are filled with distress. “Just have her watch him,” I say, because it’s not worth his mother feeling slighted. I have a feeling that will only come back to bite me in the ass.

“No.” His eyebrows crinkle. “She needs to get used to not being the only woman in his life.”

From his tone, I should let the topic go. But we all know me better than that by now, don’t we? “Just do it, it will make her happy.”

“End of discussion, Lennon. You’re watching Brady. Unless you don’t want to?” he questions.

I rest my chin on his chest, looking up to him. “I’ve already made our plans.”

A worried look crosses his face. “Nothing illegal?” he jokes.

“Nah, but do you think he’s too young for a tat? He did ask me for a Superman one.” I laugh and in one motion, I’m on my back and he’s tickling me.

“What are your plans?” he asks.

“That’s between us. We need to bond so it’s a secret.”

He tickles me more, okay that I’m not telling him what I’ll be doing with his son. Brady runs in and stops to stare at us. Both our faces turn to him.

“Tickle monster,” he screams and joins Jasper in the act of tickling as we all laugh.

I’m not sure how I got here, but I never want to leave.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Nine

“THIS IS THE BEST!” Brady screams, running down the pier with cotton candy in one hand and a churro in the other.

I’m pretty sure I’m the best babysitter, but the worst mom-in-training. Yes, I’ve decided to refer to myself as mom-in-training in my mind. It seems fitting.

His footsteps halt and he admires the Ferris wheel. “Can we, Lennon?” he asks.

“Like I’d say no.” I lead him over to a bench. “But you’ll have to finish your treats first.”

“Okay.” He chomps on the blue cotton candy, leaving a ring of sticky blue sugar around his lips. After he dumps it in the trashcan he takes a huge bite of churro and dumps that in the trashcan. “Ready,” he mumbles.

“Um, no, you’re not ready.”

Taking my cue from Jasper, I bought myself a water. So I go over to the funnel cake stand. Man, those smell good.

“I want one of those.” Brady’s eyes bug out and he points to the one loaded with a scoop of ice cream, strawberry topping and a pile of whipped cream.

“Maybe later.”

“You said you’d never say no.” His lips turn down.

“Maybe isn’t no,” I correct him.

“When Daddy says maybe, he really means no.” He stares into the window and I swear a dribble of drool drops from his mouth.

“Well, I’m not Daddy.” I pour water on the napkin and wipe his mouth.

“Good as new!” I tap his nose with my finger and he smiles, looking at me with love in his eyes. Oh, boy, I hope he isn’t getting a crush on me.

“Let’s go!” This little man switches gears fast, grabbing my hand and pulling me to the Ferris wheel.

We wait in line, Brady staring up the entire time the wheel stops and goes, letting people on and off.

“It’s high,” he says, his voice shallow.

“Brady, we don’t have to ride it.” I place my hand on his shoulder, but he shakes his head, never looking over at me.

He says nothing, which is odd. Brady’s like me, there’s always something to say. We hardly ever run out of words.

I crouch down and I catch sight of the middle school kids behind me. “Brady, let’s go on a different ride,” I offer and he glances at me, ready to take the bait.

“Yeah, this ride is for older kids,” one of the kids says, inserting himself into our conversation.

Brady’s face turns red and he looks down at the concrete, littered with gum and trash.

“Why don’t you mind your own business.” I stand up, narrowing my eyes at the little shit.

“Whatever, lady,” the punk says and I feel rage starting to boil in my veins. This kid with the spiky red hair and pig-shaped nose needs to learn a lesson.

Being the adult I pretend to be, I turn my attention back to Brady.

“Come on.” I grab the edge of his t-shirt sleeve and pull a little, but his feet stay glued to the ground.

He shakes his head. “No.” He steps up in line and I hear the kids behind us huffing and puffing.

“Okay.” I release a breath. If he wants to ride it, who am I not to teach him to face his fears?

A few minutes later, it’s our turn. The carousel guy holds up the stick to Brady, and Brady’s face pales slightly.

“Okay, hop on,” the guy says.

I let Brady go first, but he doesn’t step on.

“Come on,” the punk kid behind us moans.

Very explicit words rest on the tip of my tongue, but Brady glances behind me to him and I know I need to maintain my adult status here.

“Lady?” The kid continues to be the porcupine needle up my ass, causing me to be about a millisecond from losing my shit.

I turn around, my eyes probably resembling the dark sky right before a wicked storm. “I’m handling it. I get that you have some hot date with your right hand later, but relax.”

All his friends laugh and I regret my words immediately when his face turns red in embarrassment. Brady looks confused by my words for a second, then he goes back to looking at the Ferris wheel in fear.

The operator snickers his own laugh but raises his eyebrows to me, silently asking if Brady is riding.

“Yes or no, Brady?” I ask.

He stares up at me for the longest time and I’m about to step us to the side when he surprises me and steps into the cart. It rocks and he swallows hard.

“You okay?” I ask before stepping on.

He nods his head a few times and I feel like the worst mom-in-training at this point.

“Finally,” the kid groans.

I disregard him, still wishing I hadn’t said what I did. This mom-in-training gig is hard work.

The man brings down the bar and Brady slides his legs as close to the seat as he can.

“It’s okay.” I hold his hand tight with mine.

He nods, but says nothing. The strong and silent type.

The ride moves and the jackass kids behind us holler and rock their seat.

“Let your Momma swing it, baby,” the kid continues to razz us.

The ride moves us up a bit and Brady’s entire body stiffens. Figuring the hand-holding isn’t working, I place my arm around his shoulders and pull him close. His body loosens a little, but my idea is barely working.

“Lennon,” he says and I dip my head to see he’s crying.

“Oh, Brady,” I say, rubbing his arms. “It’s okay,” I try to soothe him, but we’re moving into advanced stages of mom-in-training and I’m still stuck in the orientation.

“I want to get off. I don’t feel good.”

Just then the ride starts going and there’s no way we’re getting off until it’s over. We swing by and I raise my hand to grab the guy’s attention, but he’s busy flirting with a blonde bimbo. Just my luck.

“Just keep your head in my side. It will be over in a second.”

We pass by again and I raise my hand, but he still doesn't look at me.

"Fuck," I mumble.

"What?" Brady asks.

Great, I swore in front of the kid.

"I told you this ride wasn't for babies," the kid says, like we're about to go over the hill on one of those crazy rollercoasters you see on Facebook that says, *Would you do this?*

I lean over, our cart tipping back a little, to finally shut this kid up. "Listen, right hand man—"

"Lennon," Brady groans, looking over the back with me. A second later, a stream of vomit leaves Brady's body, right onto the redhead's head.

I purse my lips to try to keep from laughing. *Nice work, buddy.*

"What the hell? I'm gonna kill you, kid!" He points to Brady, who is still throwing up.

Serves him right.

"You won't lay a hand on him," I warn and Brady looks up at me, the first smile crossing his face since the funnel cake.

Brady leans forward and finally the guy stops the ride after all the commotion.

"I'm sorry," I say to the guy and he looks at the cart and the kid behind him, snickering another laugh.

"Priceless," he says.

I dig into a purse, handing him a twenty.

"Not necessary." He hands it back to me.

I dig out my card instead. "Here, free tattoo on me." I eye his skin and that excites him.

"Thanks," he says and Brady hunches over again.

I get him off the ride, onto stable ground, and run him over by a trashcan, where he throws up again.

"Let's get you home, buddy."

We walk toward the car and once we're secure in the van, he looks over at me. "Thanks, Lennon." His head leans back on my seat cushion and his eyes drift closed. "I don't like unicorns," he mumbles.

I laugh to myself, driving down the street while sneaking looks at him. It's probably weird, but this is the first time I've felt like a *real* mom.

CHAPTER

Thirty

WE PULL into Jasper's designated parking spot, which he has informed me he's not thrilled about me using because though he doesn't want to change anything about me, he does want to change my car. I see his point a little. Were the unicorns a little drastic? Yes. Will Brady like it if I have to pull up to his school with unicorns shitting rainbows on the car that drops him off? Probably not.

I climb out of my car and then go around to the back passenger side to get Brady out. He's fast asleep already. I nudge him and he moves his head, blowing a stream of vomit breath right into my face.

A deep rumble flows up my throat and my breath is about to match his before I can swallow it back down. "Brady," I coo, nudging his shoulder again.

He sits up, looking around lost until his eyes focus on me. I smile and his shoulders fall.

"Let's go take a bath and get to bed," I say.

He holds his arms out to me and I stand there. Am I supposed to pick him up? Sure. I mean that's okay, right?

"My legs hurt," he whines and so I swing my purse over my shoulders and pick him up. He wraps himself around me like a koala bear and I struggle to make it to the elevator.

The occasional yoga class I take hasn't exactly prepared me to carry however many pounds this little guy is and my arms are aching by the time we reach the elevator. I press the button and my phone rings. There's no way I can answer it so I let it ring, figuring I'll catch it once I get inside.

The elevator doors open and after I struggle with the key in the lock, the door opens to a dark condo. Using my knee, I prop Brady up on me a little higher. This carrying a kid thing is really a dad's job. Sorry, feminists.

"Okay, we're home," I say to Brady, blindly making my way to the couch.

My phone starts going off again, but instead of answering, I go to the bathroom and start the bath.

"Do you want bubbles?" I holler out the door, but hear nothing.

I walk out, finding Brady curled in a ball with a blanket over himself, a corner of it still clasped to his hands.

A text message dings from my phone and since whoever it is is persistent I walk over to my purse near Brady and scramble to find my phone in the big bag. Pulling it out, I sit in the chair, seeing two missed calls from Jasper and a text message, asking me where we are. I poise my fingers ready to text him back, but my phone rings with his name flashing.

"We're fine," I deadpan.

"Where have you been? I've been trying to call." His voice is tense and scared.

"Sorry, Brady fell asleep on the way home and I was carrying him up."

"Where did you guys go?" he asks, his voice relaxing.

"The Pier. Remind me to tell you how your kid schooled this older kid who was making fun of him." I laugh, thinking about that redheaded prick's face as Brady was puking on him.

"I'm not sure I want to know," he says, and I hear a smile on his lips.

"I'm going to get him into a bath if I can get him up." I place my hand on him.

"Okay, call me after he goes to bed. I'm horny and hoping you can instruct me on how to stroke my cock. In explicit detail."

A tingling begins between my legs and man, do I wish he was here. "Well, I am the best," I say in a singsong voice.

"The only one who gets me off."

"Don't forget it down there in Los Angeles," I say, my insecurities coming forth.

He chuckles. "No worries on that front."

"Good."

"Talk to you soon."

I hang up and Brady still refuses to roll over. Having no choice, I start

taking off his shoes and socks, thinking that he'll start stirring once I make him uncomfortable.

By the time he's down to his boxers, he's only gotten up long enough for me to wiggle him out of his clothes. His forehead falls on my arm and it's hot.

Adjusting him so that he's sitting up, I place my hand on his forehead, thinking I must be wrong because he was fine an hour ago, but no, he's so hot.

"Brady?" I ask and his eyes float closed again.

I place his head back on the couch and run down the hall, scouring the bathroom for a thermometer. I should call Jasper. *And tell him what? That his kid is sick and you're panicking?* I listen to the devil on my shoulder and run into the ensuite.

Finally, I find a thermometer in the medicine cabinet with bottles of medication that all have the word 'children's' plastered all over them. I so have this. I look over the bottles, grab the acetaminophen and the thermometer.

At least I know how to use an ear thermometer. Thank you to Tahlia for getting the flu months ago.

I stick it in his ear and the seconds it takes for his temperature to register seem like forever. He hasn't moved an inch.

"103 degrees," I screech, clearing it and placing it in his other ear. As though that's going to have a different reading. A second later it beeps. "102.6 degrees. Same fucking difference."

I read the back of the bottle. Okay, apparently kids are dosed by weight. As if I know how much he weighs.

Jasper knows.

Weigh him, the devil on my shoulder urges.

So I run into Jasper's bathroom where I know there's a scale. I weigh myself and then run back out to grab Brady. Picking him up like I'm his mama bear, I walk us to the bathroom.

I step on the scale and I struggle to hold my balance. Bingo. *So, one hundred and fifty-two minus one hundred and twenty-five is, fuck, I hate math. Take one away from the five, making it twelve. Twelve minus five is seven. Four minus two is two. Twenty-seven pounds.*

"That can't be right. I can lift twenty-seven pounds." I put Brady on Jasper's bed and re-weigh myself.

Nope, one hundred and twenty-four. Maybe I lost weight with all this running.

Picking up a moaning and groaning Brady now, I clear the scale.

One hundred and seventy-one pounds. Here we go with the math again. *Take one away from the seven this time, making it eleven. Eleven minus five is six. Six minus two is four. Forty-six pounds. That makes sense.*

I carry Brady back to the living room and lean him up on the couch.

“We need to take some medicine, Brady,” I coax him, after pouring the right amount into the small shot glass.

He shakes his head.

“Come on, Brady, just a little.”

He shakes his head again.

“Here comes the train, choo choo.” I make the glass stutter along toward his mouth.

Hey, don’t knock it, I’m desperate.

He shakes his head.

“Please,” I beg and he opens his mouth. “Thank you.” I pour it into his mouth and then he lies down on the couch again. I place the blanket over him and sit down in the chair to call Jasper.

As I dial his number, I wonder if I should keep the fact that Brady’s sick to myself.

“I’m naked, and I’m fisting your favorite guy,” he answers and I laugh, wishing every limb of my body wasn’t depleted of energy.

“I do love that guy,” I say.

“Talk me through it, baby,” he says in a husky voice.

“Hold that thought for a second.”

“What is it?” His panicked voice returns.

“Brady has a fever.”

“How high?” The tension increases.

“103 degrees in one ear and 102.6 degrees in the other.”

“Okay, there’s some Tylenol in my bathroom. He takes a teaspoon.”

I shouldn’t be surprised that Jasper knows the exact amount. He’s not in training. He’s the real dad deal.

“Yeah, I weighed him and figured it out.”

He laughs. “Weighed him? I’m surprised, usually when Brady has a fever, he’s like dragging an elephant around on a leash.”

“I weighed myself and then I held him and weighed us together.”

His laughter bursts out and I'm sure if he was drinking it'd be spit out all over his room. "Seriously?" he asks after he's calmed down somewhat.

"Yes, seriously. I didn't know what to do."

"You could call me," he says.

"And make you think I couldn't handle it?" I lean back in the chair, my eyes on Brady.

"Baby, I wouldn't have left you with him if I didn't trust you could handle it."

His words calm me but I know deep down he's still on guard. "Do you mind if we wait until you get home tomorrow and I demonstrate the stroke for you?"

"You sound tired," he says and a yawn escapes me at the exact moment.

"Yeah."

"Parenting will do that to you. I'm sure I can find someone around here to stroke me." The teasing tone in his voice clear.

"Try it and you won't have anything to stroke," I warn and he chuckles.

"Man, that was scary. You made him turtle."

"Good night, Jasper," I say.

"Night, baby. See you tomorrow," he whispers and we hang up the phone.

I click on the television, turning on whatever will fill the noise of his quiet condo. I must doze off because when I wake up a few hours later, the television is going, Brady's still asleep.

Grabbing the thermometer, I take Brady's temperature to make sure it went down, but when my hand touches his forehead, he still feels hot.

"104 degrees," I say, my heartbeat picking up pace.

Clearing it, I take the other ear. "104.3 degrees."

No, no, no.

I look at the back of the bottle and sure enough, he can't even take another dose.

Picking up my phone, I call the only person I know can help. The phone rings and I glance at the cable box, seeing it's after ten, which means she's asleep.

"Hello," her groggy voice answers.

"Mom!" I say.

"What is it?" Her voice clears quickly.

"So..." I realize I've told my mom nothing about Jasper. I haven't even

talked to Jacob about Jasper. Fuck a duck. “I’m watching someone’s kid and he has a fever of over 104 degrees. I gave him Tylenol a couple hours ago and it hasn’t brought the fever down.”

“You’re babysitting,” she clarifies.

“Kind of, yes.”

“Okay, go get a cold cloth and put it on his forehead.”

I scramble into the kitchen, run a washcloth under cold water and come back and place it on Brady’s forehead. “What else?”

“You need to call the parents,” she says. “They need to come home and care for their child.”

My stomach plummets.

“Um. That can’t happen.”

“Lennon?” She uses the same tone she has my entire life. The one that suggests she already knows I’m in over my head. The one that says, *What crazy thing did you do this time?*

“It’s my boyfriend’s son and he’s out of town.” I ramble on as though she wouldn’t clue in.

“Boyfriend?”

Of course that’s the one word she pulls from my sentence. “Yes, and he’s in LA, so he can’t come back.” I glance down to Brady, my worry deepening. “Mom, my gut says this isn’t good.”

“How long ago did you give him the medicine?”

We start from the beginning and I even tell her how I let him gorge on sweets all night, for which I receive the disappointed sigh I’m so familiar with.

“I’m going to tell you to do something but don’t panic, okay?” she says, which makes me, guess what... panic. “Go to the emergency room.”

“Emergency room? Surely this can be handled at home.”

She sighs. “It’s a high fever and honey, I’m out of practice. You could call the pediatrician if your boyfriend left the number, but if the medicine isn’t working, I don’t think you have any other option.”

“Okay. Okay.” I straighten my back as though my inner mom-in-training is armed and ready. “I’m going.”

“Lennon,” she says before I have time to click her off. “I’ll meet you at Memorial. And call his dad.” She says the last part because she knows me well.

“Okay, see you at Memorial,” I say and as I’m hanging up, I hear her

repeat.

“Call the dad...”

CHAPTER

Thirty-One

I SWING my purse crossways over my body, pick up Brady and we head out of the condo, down the elevator and into my van. I'll never have to do another bicep curl in my life. My adrenaline must be pumping because Brady hardly even feels heavy now. I feel like I could compete in the world's strongest woman competition.

I hit Jasper's number on my phone and put it on speaker as I turn the corner on his block, heading toward the hospital.

"Did you get a second wind?" he says when he picks up and I so wish I could be in his bed right now, ready to seduce him with my dirty words.

"Jasper." The panic can't be missed from my voice. Tears prick my eyes because I'm a horrible mom-in-training.

"What is it?" His own tone matches mine now.

"Brady's fever hasn't gone down. I'm taking him to Memorial." My foot presses on the gas.

"How high?"

"104 degrees and 104.3 degrees."

"You gave him Tylenol how many hours ago?"

"Like two hours ago, maybe a little less."

He pauses for a while.

"Jasper?"

"Yeah, I'm just thinking. Go ahead. I'm going to see if I can catch a flight. If need be, I'll rent a car."

"I can handle it." Though it's not how I'm feeling right now.

A long breath flows across the receiver. This is the do-or-die moment.

Does he trust me enough? Hell, should he?

“As hard as this is, call me when you get word. I’m going to call his paediatrician. I’m hoping this is viral.”

Viral? I rack my brain for any medical jargon I know. I think there’s viral and bacterial. Damn Whitney for always distracting me in Biology. Actually, it was the other way around.

“I’ll call you as soon as I get him in.”

“Okay,” he says, and I can tell he’s distracted by his thoughts.

We hang up and I pull up to the emergency entrance, stop and round the car, pluck Brady out and walk through the sliding door.

“Ma’am,” someone calls out but I ignore them.

Walking up to the nurses’ station, I see the waiting room is packed. Well, I’m going all *Terms of Endearment* on their asses if they don’t get Brady in ASAP.

“Hello,” the exhausted nurse says to me. I’m assuming that based on the bags under her eyes and stench of irritation and impatience wafting off of her.

“He has a fever of 104 degrees,” I say, placing him on the counter so he can lean on my chest.

“Fill out the paperwork.” She plops a clipboard down on the counter beside us.

I glance down at the paperwork and slide it over. “I don’t think you’re listening. He’s six and has a high fever. I gave him medicine—”

“Lady, look at the room.” She points to the waiting area. “All those people are sick, too.”

I grit my teeth. “I don’t care about them. I only care about this boy.”

“Lennon,” my mom says, coming alongside me, surprise in her face when she sees me clutching Brady to my chest.

“Fill out the forms and we’ll get him in.”

My mom grabs the clipboard. “What’s his name?”

I tell her and we go through any of the information I do know. I don’t know the insurance information or even their paediatrician’s name.

“I’m a horrible mom-in-training,” I say, tears falling down my cheeks as Brady’s head rests on my shoulder.

“Mom-in-training?” my mom questions.

“Yeah. I mean he shouldn’t trust me with his kid. I took him to the Pier and let him eat all that bad stuff, he threw up and now he probably has some kind of virus because of me. I ruined his son. He’s going to hate me.” My

chest racks with sobs and my mom places her arm around my shoulders.

“You were having a fun time with him. Relax. This is completely unrelated.” My mom walks the clipboard back up to Nurse Jackie and then returns to her seat.

“Mrs. Banks,” the lady calls out and I look around to see who the other Banks here is.

“I think she assumes you’re the mom.” My mom nudges me with her elbow.

“Not if this little guy is lucky.” I stand, my mom follows. The nurse heads us back to a room where someone else takes his temperature. They nod and soon we’re being taken into another room. I place Brady on the bed. His body looks so small and helpless.

“Hi, I’m Marie. I’m your nurse.” She looks to Brady. “What’s up, little guy?” she asks and Brady stares up at her, the bright lights rousing him a bit when I laid him down.

She asks me to tell her what happened and I do. I sit on the bed next to Brady, holding his hand and comforting him. She takes the same vitals the other person did, confirming yes, his fever is high.

He looks over at me after she leaves saying the doctor will be in. “I’m tired,” he says and my hand moves to his hair, smoothing it out.

“I know, but we’re going to get you better.” Then I spot my mom staring at the two of us. I’ve been so wrapped up in Brady that I almost forgot she was here. “I have someone I want you to meet,” I say to Brady and his eyes scan the room. My mom rises to stand at the edge of the bed. “This is my mom, Mrs. Hart,” I say. “Mom, this is Brady.”

“Hi, Brady. It’s good to meet you. Now don’t you worry, you’re going to be okay,” my mom assures him. Brady nods and insecurity makes me think he almost believes the words from her mouth more than my own.

The nurse comes in a few minutes later and I see the concern in her eyes. “The doctor has asked that I put an IV in Brady to give him some fever-reducing drugs.” She gives me a small smile and we both know this isn’t going to be a cakewalk.

“What’s an IV?” he asks and my eyes shoot to my mom, who cringes.

“It’s going to make you feel better,” I say, disregarding the question.

The nurse washes her hands, puts some gloves on and sits on the edge of the bed. “Brady, did you want to watch something on television? Your mom can turn it on for you.”

Brady looks at me and I'm waiting for him to tell her I'm not his mom. But he just nods.

I click on the television and scan through the channels until I find some Disney show that seems appropriate and I leave it there.

"Mom, why don't you come up on the bed and hold him up to you," the nurse offers and again I glance to my mom, but I do as the nurse directs.

I climb on the bed and Brady has no problem cuddling up into me. In fact, he seems soothed by my close proximity.

She grabs his arm and he looks down at the needle that's about to go in and starts crying.

"No, no, no!" he says, trying to get his arm back, but the nurse is too strong, which I think freaks him out.

"It's okay, Brady," I repeat over and over again as his tears wet my t-shirt.

"Done," the nurse says a painful minute later.

Brady looks down at his arm and up to me in confusion.

"You know how you sip your medicine out of a cup usually?" I say. He nods. "She's going to give them to you through there."

He nods, before his eyes find the television again.

"The doctor will be in soon to evaluate him," the nurse, who I swear is younger than me, says.

"Thank you."

Brady watches television and my mom sits in silence while I'm sure a million questions are floating through her mind. Not long after, she turns to me.

"So who is his father?" she whispers.

I glance down at Brady, who's totally engrossed in the TV show. Now that's something I have learned... TV and kids equal tunnel vision. "If I tell you, it stays between us for right now."

Her head draws back and her eyes narrow on me as if to say, *Oh, no, Lennon. Not again.* "Fine," she says in a voice that says she's not sure if she can promise that.

"Jasper," I answer.

A wide smile crosses her lips. "Jacob's Jasper?"

My Jasper.

"Yeah, Jacob's mentor, Jasper," I clarify and her smile widens.

"Oh, my gosh. He's the little boy." A surprised look crosses over her

face.

“How many times has Jasper been over for dinner?” I ask, curious how well she knows him and also upset that no one ever called me to join them.

“Not for a while. Mostly when Jacob was working under him. It was only a few times and I think Brady might have been two or so at that time.” She smiles, as if this is a fond remembrance.

“How come I was never invited?” I’m upset because this entire time I was prancing around San Francisco a single woman and I could have met Jasper earlier.

“Well, Lennon, you were always so busy.” She shrugs and rolls her eyes. I nod, not wanting to get into drama. “So, if he’s trusting you to watch Brady, I’m guessing you guys are close?” she asks, prodding me for more details.

I eye her and then Brady. “Yeah,” I answer, not giving anything else away.

“Monogamous?” She continues sticking that shovel in the ground, digging for the worms.

“Yes.” I look down and Brady’s eyes beginning to drift closed. “I think I may even l—”

Her eyes widen and the corners of her mouth start to rise.

“Here you go.” The nurse from earlier enters the room and behind her walks in none other than Natalie Banks.

“Thank you.” She nods to the nurse and rushes over to Brady’s side. She feels his forehead, grips his hands and then pulls the blanket down to inspect his body.

“Natalie,” I say, rising to my feet and coming to the other side of the bed.

She looks up. “What did you do?” Her voice is venom and I almost fall back from surprise.

“Nothing.”

My mom, sensing something isn’t right, walks over to my side.

“I knew he couldn’t trust you with him,” Natalie says. I glance down to Brady, thankful his eyes are still shut. “You’re just trouble. I knew it the minute I set eyes on you. All you care about is fun and there’s not a responsible bone in your body.”

I won’t lie, her jabs hit their target and the pain comes swiftly.

“Why are you here?” I ask.

“Why do you think? Jasper called me because he knows you can’t handle this. You might be some fun toy he likes to sleep around with, but don’t fool

yourself into thinking you'll ever be anything more."

I blink a few times and my mom's hand lands on mine, gripping it tightly.

"I'm guessing you're Jasper's mother?" she asks, while I try to push away the vertigo from being mentally slapped side to side by this woman.

"Yes. And you are?" Her voice is nothing but mean and spiteful.

"I'm Eva, Lennon's mother. Now, I understand you're upset that your grandchild is sick, but the way you're talking to my daughter is not nice nor will it be tolerated."

I look over to my mom. Color me surprised.

"You raised her?" Natalie questions, her gaze directed at my inked skin.

My mom's back straightens and she tightens her grip on my hand. "Her father and I did."

"You stand there looking like you're proud of her. Look at her." She wrinkles her nose in disgust.

"Who are you to throw daggers?" I ready myself for a fight, but my mom squeezes my hand.

"Proud of her? Did you know that she attended Berkeley on an art scholarship? Now, she switched that major to business because she had the guts to find what she loves. She paid off her school loans after she lost her scholarship by tattooing her friends. Figure out how many hours that is in your small brain. Now she's getting a business venture off the ground all by herself. And that's just her career. You want to talk personal life? Did you know she sometimes volunteers at shelters, or donates her time to tattoo over the scars of veterans, or how she gives almost every homeless person she passes money, food or a drink? Or maybe we should discuss how she never judges anyone because they're different or misunderstood. You'd be so lucky to have your son love her."

Natalie rolls her eyes and a long sigh flows out of her mouth.

"But let me tell you a little secret as a mom with three boys, two of whom I've already married off."

Natalie looks like she could care less.

My mom leans over the bed to double-check that Brady's sleeping.

"You can't control who your son loves. And I personally think if he chooses Lennon, he's one lucky guy. But no matter if it's Lennon or not, you better be ready to play nice because those women call the shots and if you want a relationship with your son, you sure as heck better not treat her the way you just did my daughter. Otherwise, you can kiss your son and your

grandson goodbye.”

My mom draws back over to my side and puts her arm around my shoulder.

Natalie eyes me. “I’m sorry, you just aren’t responsible enough to take care of my grandson. One night and look, we’re in the hospital.”

A knock sounds from the door before I can respond.

“Greg,” Natalie coos, walking over to shake his hand.

“Natalie,” he says, shaking her hand and placing his free hand on her shoulder. “Jasper called.”

Greg is about Jasper’s age, maybe a few years older, with dark brown hair and a thin runner-style body. He’s in slacks, a button-down and his doctor jacket.

My mom and I stand there and I can’t help but feel like a third wheel.

“You must be Lennon Hart?” he asks me, holding his hand out. “I’m Dr. Bierdman, Brady’s paediatrician. I happen to be filling in for a shift. Jasper had me paged.”

“Yes. Nice to meet you.” I step out of my mom’s embrace and shake his hand. He gives a bright white-teeth smile. “This is my mom Eva Hart.” I place my hand on my mom’s back.

He extends his arm out to her. “Nice to meet you.”

“Now that all the introductions have been made, what do you think is happening with Brady?” Natalie sits down and grabs Brady’s hand.

Greg grabs the thermometer from the table and takes Brady’s temperature. “His temperature has gone down. Jasper says you gave him Tylenol?” he asks, looking in my direction.

“Yes.”

“Okay, I don’t think this is anything serious, but I’m going to look at his eyes and do a few tests.”

I step away from the bed, as does my mom, but Natalie stays put.

Greg coaxes Brady up and his eyes wander around the room.

“Right here, sweetheart,” she says.

“Where’s Lennon?” He sounds upset so I walk to the foot of the bed.

“I’m right here, buddy.” I grip his foot and shake it a little.

He smiles and Natalie turns her head and gives me the death stare.

Dr. Bierdman does his exam and he definitely has a way about him because Brady’s sucking on a lollipop and laughing by the time he’s done.

“He looks good. I think we just need to deal with the fever. Now, who

should I give instructions to?” he asks, looking between me and Natalie.

Natalie stares me down, almost baiting me to dare step up. I look to Brady and realize it’s his decision not ours. I want him wherever he’s going to be most comfortable.

“Brady, do you want to go home with Grandma or me? Daddy won’t be back until tomorrow afternoon,” I tell him and this devilish gleam gets in his eye.

“Can’t Grandma come home with us, Lennon?” he asks.

Damn it.

Mom-in-training note to self: Never let the kid have a say.

CHAPTER

Thirty-Two

BRADY'S asleep in his bed. Natalie isn't letting him out of his room, even though after his fever broke he was ready to wrestle. She's washed his sheets, as well as Jasper's. Cleaned out the fridge, washed, dried, and folded every stitch of laundry. Disinfected every light switch, door handle and drawer pull. You'd think that's enough, right? Nope. She's even dusted and vacuumed—the floor and the furniture, I might add. I mean, who vacuums the kitchen chairs?

What have I been doing, you ask?

Nothing.

I'm done trying to prove my worth to her. It's Jasper and Brady I'm invested in.

So, I'm sitting on the newly vacuumed couch, clicking through Netflix.

“Don't you have a tattoo shop to manage?” she sneers.

I stare directly at the television, clicking the buttons on the remote. “Brady said he wanted me here, so here I will be.”

She huffs like a thirteen-year-old girl who was told she can't get the brand-new jacket everyone else has and stomps down the hall. The sound of spraying bottles bounces back to me in the family room. I laugh to myself because I'm so over this woman even if she is Jasper's mom.

A half hour later and two clean bathrooms for Natalie, a door opens and small footsteps pad down the hall.

Brady rounds the corner, his smile appearing once he sees me. Grabbing the blanket swung over the chair, he snuggles into my side and I straighten the blanket over his legs.

“Did you sleep well?” I ask, touching his forehead. Lukewarm and a little clammy.

He nods, and I turn the station to the kids’ movie I saw while I was channel-surfing.

“Brady.” Natalie comes in and her shoulders slump before she rushes over, snatching up the thermometer on her way over. “Sit up,” she demands.

Brady does and she takes his temperature. In both ears, I may add.

“Oh, good. Your temperature is down.” Appeased, she goes to the kitchen. “I’ll make you some soup,” she says.

“I want chicken nuggets,” he whines.

“No, you need soup.”

“Shouldn’t we just make sure we feed him?” I speak up and her eyes narrow on me from behind the breakfast bar.

“Let me handle this, Lennon,” she says, so I turn around and shrug to Brady.

“I’d let you have chicken nuggets,” I whisper.

Was this the right move? Probably not. But since when do I ever do the right thing?

“Grandma.” He sits up on his knees and peers over the couch. “I want chicken nuggets and fries!” Jasper would probably have a fit if he heard the way Brady raised his voice to an adult.

I cringe internally, thinking I shouldn’t have talked to her like that. Respect and all that bullshit.

“Brady, chicken nuggets and fries are not what you need right now.”

He plops down on the couch, crosses his arms and stares at the television.

“I should have just said you,” he says, his voice angry.

This time I keep quiet, not wanting to rock the boat even more.

Minutes later, the bowl hits the counter and a spoon is being dug out of the drawer.

“Brady,” she says. “Come eat.”

Brady rolls his eyes, flings the blanket off him and stomps over to the counter.

“Gross,” he mumbles, staring into the bowl.

“Oh, stop it. You’ve eaten this a million times.” Natalie busies herself at the sink.

I walk over and sit down next to him. As much as I would hate to give Natalie a compliment, the soup looks good. And smells amazing. The ding of

the oven goes off and she pulls out a fresh loaf of bread.

My mouth waters, but I pretend not to be interested as it sits on the counter, perfectly shaped, the aroma filling up every crevice of the condo.

“Would you like a bowl, Lennon?” she asks, her voice the epitome of niceness with that twang of, *Try it and I drop a large sack of poison in it.*

“That’s okay,” I say, staring off toward the door, wishing Jasper would walk in.

“Come on, Lennon,” Brady whines, his spoon swirling around the broth, not scooping any of it up.

I look down at the little guy, run my hands through his thick hair that’s just like his father’s.

“For you... sure.”

He smiles and I give serious thought to whether Natalie would actually poison my soup.

Natalie begins to grab a bowl, but I rush over and take my own, ladling my soup up myself. She smiles, noticing Brady watching our interaction.

I sit down next to Brady again, while Natalie cleans as usual. I dip my spoon and bring the broth to my mouth. Okay, the woman’s got skills in the kitchen.

Shit. This is what Jasper grew up with. I’m totally fucking screwed.

“Try it, Brady. Your grandma makes good soup.” I nudge his arm and he rolls his eyes like I’ve seen his dad do more than a few times, but he scoops some up and brings it to his lips.

Natalie peeks over her shoulder and I want desperately to tell her I complimented her soup for the sake of the kid and not her, but I exercise self-control.

I cross my legs so I’m facing Brady while leaning over my bowl and eating small amounts of my soup in case I need to eat the whole bowl to actually keel over from Natalie’s poison. I’m kidding. Sort of.

A better surprise happens. I hear a key jiggling in the lock from the other side. My eyes shoot to the microwave clock. It’s only three. Jasper isn’t due until eight. Brady’s ears perk up hearing the same thing and we’re like two dogs waiting by the door with our tails wagging at max speed for our master.

I’m not sure I’ve ever wanted to see Jasper more—well, except for the first time we met. Who am I kidding? I’d knock Brady over and stomp on him if I was that kind of girl. Thankfully, I’m not.

Jasper enters, his suit jacket open, his tie long gone, a suitcase rolling

behind him.

Brady's off his stool in a second, running to his dad and throwing his arms around his dad's neck. Jasper's arms lock around his son's waist, bringing him up to hold him to his chest. His large hand splays across the back of his son's head as though he can't get close enough.

The image is so tender and caring that I have to fight the tears welling in my eyes. I've always known that Brady and Jasper love each other, but I've never witnessed this level of adoration.

Brady draws back and Jasper looks him over once more before hugging him tight again.

"I was in the emergency room," Brady says like it's a source of pride and not one of the scariest moments of my life.

Jasper nods and mumbles something I can't hear. When I glance to Natalie expecting to find her washing dishes, her eyes are set on me. She arches her graying eyebrows and I move my gaze away from her.

Once they're done, Brady hangs off his dad's neck as he walks over to me.

"Hey," he says, kissing my forehead. "Thank you for taking care of him."
I nod.

"She didn't do it alone," Natalie says, trying to make a joke, I think, but we all understand her underlying meaning.

"Yeah, your mom cleaned," I deadpan.

Jasper's eyes move from me to his mom and back to me. I should've tried to hide my annoyance more.

"And Lennon watched television," Natalie says with a condescending smile.

"Thank you both," he says, giving me another kiss. This time on the lips.

A little tongue would have been awesome, but since Brady is literally millimeters away, probably not a good idea. See, I'm getting this whole having-a-kid-around thing.

Brady slides off Jasper and onto the breakfast stool.

Jasper walks back over to the door and opens his computer bag, pulling out a brown paper bag. Anyone can tell it's from McDonalds and Brady's smile is bigger than when Jasper came home. Jasper places it on the counter and slides his bowl of soup over.

"Thanks, Dad. I asked Grandma but she said no." He gives her the stink eye and although we shouldn't laugh, we do. He tears the bag open, pulling

out the carton of chicken nuggets and fries out.

“Jasper.” His mom sighs.

“It’s been his go-to every time he gets sick. It’s our thing.” Jasper silences her and she listens, moving to the stove.

“Okay, but be prepared for him to get sick again.” She shakes her head, wiping down the counter.

“So, Mom, we’re good now. Go home to Dad.” Jasper walks over to her, stealing a slice of bread from over her shoulder. Okay, if Jasper survives, that loaf is mine.

“It’s okay, honey. I can stay for a while.” She pats his shoulder.

Jasper’s gaze shoots to me and I try to act indifferent, although I want to sneak him into his bedroom for at least a real kiss.

“I insist, Mom. Thanks for taking care of the insurance thing at the hospital. You didn’t have to come back here.”

She looks to me and then to Brady and back to Jasper. “Can I have a word?”

His head falls back and he shrugs off his coat, placing it on the back of a kitchen chair.

“How about tomorrow? I’ll call you,” he offers, dipping his bread into my soup.

Soup that’s gone cold now. Like my heart for this woman.

“It will only take a moment. In the hall.” She moves to grab her purse and overnight bag that she brought to the hospital.

Obviously, she isn’t taking no for an answer.

“Fine.”

“Bye, Brady.” She comes over and kisses the top of his head.

“Bye, Grandma.” He continues to play with the toy from his meal.

“Lennon,” she says in her usual curt tone.

“Bye, Natalie. Safe trip back home.” *To hell on your broomstick*, I don’t add.

“I’ll be right back.” Jasper shoots up his eyebrows with a tight smile, obviously not looking forward to his mother’s lecture.

“So, what did you get?” I ask Brady, trying not to think about what Natalie is saying to Jasper a few feet away behind a closed door.

Brady plays with his toy and my eyes stay glued to the door until the doorknob turns. Then I focus my attention solely on my soup as though I don’t care what his mother had to say.

“Brady,” he calls out, shutting the door behind him. “Lennon and I will be right back.”

Brady doesn't really answer, his mind still on his meal and toy.

I climb off the stool, slowly following Jasper to his bedroom. He walks in, leaving his suitcase by the door and then shuts and locks his bedroom door.

“What did—”

His lips slam onto mine as his body cages me against the door. My hands circle his neck, and I arch my back, needing his hands on me. Shivers run up my skin as his hands slide under my shirt, moving up my back until he undoes my bra.

Once it's loosened, his hands slide forward, squeezing both my breasts at the same time. A small moan escapes my throat as one leg wraps around his muscular thigh.

He tears his lips from mine. “You have no idea how hot it makes me that you took care of Brady. I've had a raging hard-on since I walked through that door and saw the two of you in my house, at my breakfast counter.”

I pull his mouth down to mine again, and his tongue wastes no time invading my mouth. His lips slide off mine, traveling down to my jaw and then my neck as he scoops me up in his arms and I wrap my legs around his waist.

He walks us toward the bed and then drops me on the mattress.

“Quickie?” I ask and he nods, unbuckling his belt and slacks until they fall to the floor.

I shimmy out of my pants and underwear, spreading my legs for him. He stares down at my pussy and his chest rises and falls with rapid breaths.

“Tonight, I'll take my time,” he promises and then yanks his boxers down, steps out of them and he's inside of me within three minutes of shutting that door.

CHAPTER

Thirty-Three

MONDAYS CAN SUCK IT.

As I walk into the office, with my three coffees on the tray perched in my hand, I glance at the names on the cups and laugh to myself.

Brittany's painting her nails when I place the coffees on the receptionist's desk. She looks up and, without saying anything, picks up the phone. "Mr. Banks," she says. "Miss Hart is here for Dr—Mr. Ashland." She catches herself.

At some point, hopefully, I'll be able to just walk past her and straight to Jasper's office so that I can spare myself the irritation of dealing with her.

"He said to go in, but wanted to be clear that you go to his office." She lifts her eyebrows, clearly insinuating that Jasper is going to have me bent over his desk.

Well, I'll show her—little does she know that it's me on my knees when it comes to Jasper's office.

"Thanks, Brittany." I walk down the hall, and catch Jasper on the phone when I reach his office. He waves me in and since his assistant isn't there, I walk through his door.

He holds up his hand so I place his coffee down in front of him and then grab mine, taking a seat on his couch. Circling the cup around, he laughs when he spots the words.

"Yeah, I understand. Okay, I said I'd handle it," he says, his tone about as irritated as I sound with his mom.

"Mom," he sighs.

Huh. I guess she has that effect on everyone.

“Yeah, if you could watch him overnight. It’s Lennon’s dad’s retirement party.” He rolls his eyes, and his head falls back in frustration. “I’ll drop him off. He can spend the night with you guys.” And almost a lifetime later —“Bye.” He hangs up, stands with his coffee and walks around the desk. He shuts his door, flicking the lock, and I grow wet between my thighs.

“I have to meet Drew, or as his cup now refers to him, Sugar Daddy,” I remind him but he pays no attention. Not even a raised eyebrow.

“He’ll understand if you’re late. I’ve had a rough day.” He sits down, his hand threading through his hair.

Under normal circumstances, I’d probably fall to my knees and work that irritation out of him. But I have to meet Drew and that has to come first today.

“Why’s your day been so bad?” I ask, afraid of the answer.

He looks at me and shakes his head. “Nothing. What are you and Drew going through today?” he asks, attempting to move the conversation along.

“Jasper?” I ask with a tone clear that I want an answer.

He shakes his head. “Nothing I can’t handle.”

“So, what does she want now? Me on a stake so she can set it on fire?”

He chuckles until he sees the seriousness on my face. “She doesn’t hate you.”

I cross my arms, similar to Brady when he doesn’t get his way. “Really?”

Now I’ve never told Jasper what his mom said to me at the hospital. Nor did I tell him what my mom told her. I’m not going to put him in the middle. I’m a big girl and I fight my own battles.

“She’s just protective.”

I huff. “Protective? She thinks I’m scum and that I’m completely incapable.”

He stares out this window, sipping his coffee. “I just got it from her. Can I not get it from you, too?” he asks, annoyance laced through his deep voice.

“Sure. I need to meet Drew anyway.” I stand and grab Drew’s coffee from the tray.

“Don’t.” He comes up behind me, his lips finding that magic spot halfway between the back of my neck and my ear. “I need you,” he whispers. “I want to be buried deep inside of you right now.”

“I want lots of things I can’t have, too,” I sneer and he chuckles, thinking I’m joking.

Don’t do it, Lennon. Don’t do it.

“You do know one day you’ll have to choose?”

You idiot, you did it.

His hands fall from my stomach, his lips leave my skin. “What?”

Say forget it and go to Drew’s office.

“Do you think I’m going to allow her to treat me like shit forever?”

He tilts his head and I’m guessing he’s wondering where this is coming from.

Apologize and say you lost your mind.

“I understand she hasn’t been the nicest, but eventually she’ll come around.”

“When? She acts like I’m letting Brady shoot up heroin and taking him out to the strippers when I’m watching him. She purposely undermines me in front of him. And you just sit there in la-la land.”

Okay, strike that last sentence. Tell him to strike the last sentence.

“La-la land?” he asks, his voice as cold and smooth as a bottle of vodka resting in a freezer. “It’s not her decision to decide who I’m with, Lennon. It’s mine.”

I shake my head. “That’s what you think. She continues to throw me under the bus and nitpick everything I do and you’ll start believing it. It’s inevitable, Jasper. One day you will have to choose between us.”

His hand slams down on his desk, his business card holder falling down. “Goddamn it! Don’t do this. Don’t make this an issue before it is one.” His voice rises and I swear I never thought this conversation would get this kind of reaction.

What do I do? What I do best. Get angry right back.

“If you heard what she said about me—” I shake my hand and raise my hand. “Never mind. I need to go.”

I turn around to walk out of his office. My one hand is on the doorknob, Drew’s coffee is in the other when his arms wrap around my waist again like they’ve found their home.

“Don’t,” he whispers in my ear and goose bumps ignite across my skin.

“I’m already late.” But I don’t move. Instead, I stand there while his arms tighten.

“We’ll figure this out. I’m sorry for getting angry,” he says, sounding a little desperate. I’ve never encountered this side of Jasper. Almost like he’s fearful I’ll leave him.

I swivel around in his arms, placing Drew’s coffee down on the side table

near the door. “Pretty soon my mouth is going to open and she’s not going to like what comes out,” I warn.

His eyes are distraught but he shakes his head. “I promise, it will never come to that.” He pulls me into him, his arms so tight that I fight to breathe for a moment. “Just give me some time,” he says softly.

I will, but after the hospital and his condo, I’m unsure if we can ever co-exist. I hate the thought of putting both Jasper and Brady in the middle almost as much as I hate the thought of having to deal with her bullshit for eternity.

CHAPTER

Thirty-Four

“SO, HIS MOTHER SAID WHAT?” Whitney says, her mouth hanging open.

“‘Fun toy’ were her exact words.”

“Well, she doesn’t sound so fun herself.”

“Sorry, girls.” Tahlia runs in with ten bags hanging from her arms. She drops them on the neighboring table and sits down in front of the coffee we already bought for her. “Whatcha chatting about?”

“Jasper’s mom’s a monster,” Whit informs her.

“Oh, my God, have you ever seen that movie *Monster-in-Law*?” Tahlia asks.

“Of course you have a movie to compare it to.” I roll my eyes.

Whitney laughs. I’m not sure there’s a romantic comedy that Tahlia doesn’t know.

“Her mother-in-law was such a bitch. Did you know it has Mary Fiore in it?” Tahlia asks us.

“You mean J-Lo?” I correct her.

“I only see her as Mary Fiore,” she singsongs.

For those of you who don’t know, Mary Fiore was the main character in *The Wedding Planner* and since Tahlia’s wanted to be one since forever I’m guessing she’s got a little girl crush going for J-Lo. Me? I’ll take J-Law any day. She’s much more my speed—a say-what-you-think-and-not-take-things-too-seriously kinda gal.

“You realize your obsession with Mary Fiore isn’t actually healthy.” I sip my coffee.

“Hello? You used to look up to that Kat woman who has her own tattoo company and was dating Jesse James, remember?”

“Um, Tahlia...” Whitney cringes, knowing she did not just school me.

“Kat is a real person who really tattooed people. Jennifer Lopez played a wedding planner along with a dancer, an abused wife, and Selena.”

Tahlia shakes her head as if I’m not telling the truth. I won’t completely burst her bubble today. Especially since I feel like my love bubble is slowly depleting of air the more Mrs. Banks wedges her way between Jasper and me.

“Forget all that,” Whitney says, waving her hand at Tahlia, “what does Jasper say?”

I shrug. “He says it will take time. That he’s sure she’ll come around.” I roll my eyes, because I’d put money on hell freezing over first.

“Hmm,” Whitney murmurs, agreeing with me.

“It could happen. She’ll see how great you are with Brady. She’s probably worried.” Tahlia offers her glass-half-full advice.

“No.” I shake my head. “This woman wants me out. I doubt anyone would be good enough for her son, but I’m her worst nightmare.”

The side of Whitney’s mouth lifts, attempting to show support. “Well, I’m sure Jasper will choose you.”

I sip my coffee and place it down on the table. “That’s the thing. I don’t want him to choose. I mean, Brady loves his grandparents. Even if Jasper did choose me, he’d end up resenting me.” I tell my friends the truth.

“God, I’m glad I don’t have to deal with that. I’m sorry.” Tahlia pats my hand.

“Cole doesn’t like his family any more than I do, so it has yet to be an issue with us.” Whitney places her hand on top of Tahlia’s and I’m wondering if we’re about to say, “Go, team,” and disperse.

“You’ll prove it to her,” Tahlia says and they each take their hands off of mine.

“That’s the thing, I don’t want to prove myself to her. Actually, the more she expects me to kiss her ass the less I’m inclined to. You know how I am.”

They both laugh.

“Yeah, we know, but you have to remember... you’ve never had this much to lose.” Whitney’s eyebrows lift.

Lose. Yeah, my heart aches thinking about losing Jasper and Brady. When the hell did that happen?

“Well, if they can’t love me for me, they aren’t worth my time.”

“Classic Lennon.” Tahlia shares a look with Whitney.

“What?” I ask.

The two share another look and then Tahlia’s gaze meets mine while Whitney sips her coffee.

“The more you care, the more you’ve got one foot out of the relationship. The problem this time is we’re not just talking about some fling with a guy who will eventually move on. We’re talking about a kid...who wants a mom.”

“Maybe that’s not me,” I say and they each shake their heads as though I’m a lost cause.

“I think all three of us know you are, Lennon,” Whitney says. “For the first time in your life, you might have to let that defense mechanism of indifference fall. I think you’re just scared that if you give your whole self to someone, they might not choose you back.”

I push back the feeling that I’m not good enough, not strait-laced enough, not in the box enough. It’s a feeling I’ve worn like a second skin my entire life and if I’m honest with myself, maybe there’s something to what Whitney’s saying. But I don’t want to be honest with myself. Right now, I have a whole other mess to deal with.

“I better go. I’m meeting my brother at his office to tell him about Jasper.” I change the topic fast and rise to my feet.

They each huff again.

“Lennon, we’re talking,” Tahlia says.

“Right now, I don’t plan on seeing that woman for a while,” I say, grabbing my purse.

“Why doesn’t your brother know about you and Jasper?” Whitney asks, letting the topic of my insecurity fall to the wayside, for which I’m grateful.

I slide my chair into the table and grab my coffee cup. “Remember, he refused to introduce me so I took matters into my own hands?”

“He *still* knows nothing about you two?” Tahlia asks.

“Nope. So I’d better hop to it before the retirement party. Don’t want the surprise to be on Jacob.” I try to laugh but cringe instead, thinking about how pissed he’s about to be at me.

“Well, good luck.” Tahlia leans back, worry creasing her brow.

“He either accepts it or he doesn’t.” I shrug like it doesn’t bother me and truthfully, it’s Jacob’s problem if he can’t accept that I’m happy with Jasper. “Bye, girls. I’ll see you there this weekend, right?” I ask and they both nod.

“Yep. We’ll meet you there.” Whitney nods. “And Lennon?”

I turn back around.

“Don’t let the issues with his mother get between you and Jasper,” Whitney says, smiles and leans back in her chair.

“Thanks, Mom.” I roll my eyes and then do what I do best—bolt.

CHAPTER

Thirty-Five

“JACOB? Where the hell are you? Call me.” I click the phone off, dropping it on the bed.

I went to his office that day.

He was out. Probably screwing Megan.

I’ve called him no less than five times every day, texted just as many and... nothing.

What the hell?

Jasper walks into the bedroom. A low whistle leaves his lips and when I look behind me, I find him leaning against the wall, ankles casually crossed and his gaze slowly moving up and down my body.

“Are you just going to gawk?” I ask, putting my other earring in.

He pushes off the wall and I hear the clicking of his dress shoes on the hardwood floor until his warm hands wrap around my bare shoulders. As always, his lips find that sweet spot between my shoulder and neck.

“I’d like to eat you up, but we’re going to be late,” he whispers, his hands sliding down my body until they rest on my hips. “Tonight though, I plan on sliding this zipper down. Don’t tell me what’s underneath. I want to be surprised.”

“What makes you think there’s anything underneath?” I ask. He chuckles. “I’m looking forward to being able to use my vocal cords tonight,” I say.

He grinds his already hardening erection into my ass and I close my eyes on a moan.

“I plan on making you hoarse by tomorrow.” He kisses that spot one more time and then trails his lips down my shoulder until he hits the spaghetti

strap of my dress.

“And I look forward to it.” I dip my head back to his chest and his hands graze up my torso until his palms are massaging my tits.

“We should really get a babysitter more often.” My own hand slides between us, rubbing his erection. “How were your parents anyway?”

He steps back from me and I wobble until I regain my balance.

“She didn’t say anything,” he says, walking to his dresser and placing his watch on.

“I didn’t—”

“Didn’t you?” he fires back before I can even finish my sentence.

From his reaction, I know that she did say something. Witch.

“I just wondered if they were excited to have Brady for the night,” I say, lying through my teeth because truth is, I do want to know what she’s saying about me every time he talks to her.

“Lennon.” He says my name with an exasperation that reminds me of my own tone when a bachelorette party comes into the tattoo parlor. He turns around, shoving his hands in his slacks. “I don’t want to talk about my mother tonight.”

“Fine.” I grab my clutch, smooth out my dress and walk out of the room.

“Let’s not do this, please,” Jasper begs one step behind me. “We’re kid-free, and it’s the first time I get to meet your family as your boyfriend.”

I stop at the breakfast bar, taking a swig of Jasper’s open Stella Artois. “Fine, it just bothers me so much because she doesn’t even know me.”

He cages me in, his hands clamping on either side of the breakfast bar, then sighs and stares down at me. I meet his gaze, his own as exhausted over this topic as I am. We continue to stare at each other until a smirk crosses both our mouths. “So, no more talking about her until tomorrow morning.” He places a hand out in front of me.

I give it a half-ass shake. “Can I really trust your handshake?” I flutter my eyelashes.

He smiles, one of those rare full-wattage ones that reach his eyes. Dipping down, he takes my lips and plunges his tongue in, kissing me with so much want, I’m unsteady and heaving for a breath when he’s done.

“Deal,” I say faintly and he chuckles, grabbing his keys and walking to the door.

My own heels click on the floor and I smack his ass on my way out to the hallway. He locks up his door and we wait by the elevators.

Shortly after we step inside he turns to me. “Hey, is your brother back yet?” he asks and I stare up with ruffled brows. “He was in Europe. London, I think, on business.”

“I had no idea.” I stare down at my feet, my stomach gnawing with the fact I have to hurry up and corner Jacob as soon as I get to the party.

“I had to call his office and that’s the only reason I knew.” His hand lands on the small of my back and usually that ignites a rush of goose bumps, but my blood is running so hot right now, it’s numb. “You have told him, right?” He peers over to me.

Ding.

The elevator saves the day.

“Oh, we’re so late.” I point to the clock in the lobby, but before I can completely escape, he grabs my arm.

“Lennon?” he questions, his eyes telling me he already knows the truth.

“I tried, but I guess he was in Europe. How was I to know?”

You’d think I was a five-year-old making excuses for hitting my brother. Easy to put myself there since I used to beat up on Jacob a lot. Hey, give me a break. Three brothers? I had to show them not to mess with me.

“You’ve had more than just this past week to tell him.” He does the whole head-tilt fatherly thing he does to Brady when he’s saying maybe it’s not a good choice to jump off the furniture when your arm is in a cast.

“As soon as we get there, I’ll corner him. It’ll be fine.”

As long as Jacob keeps his mouth shut before I can tell Jasper how exactly I ended up at that bar. No, I should tell him tonight. I was planning to do it in the morning, but maybe pushing up the timeline is a better idea.

I look up at his love-soaked eyes. Now, I should do it now. “Jasp—”

My phone rings and I dig it out of my purse to see my mom’s name flashing across the screen. Jasper covers my hand, wanting me to ignore it, but nobody ignores my mother.

I hold my finger up. “One sec.”

He steps back, fishing his keys out of his pocket. I nod for us to start through the doors and he releases a sigh before ultimately moving forward.

“I’m coming,” I answer.

“Lennon. You are late and if you’re late, your father will leave. You know him.” I can hear the chatting of many people in the background.

“We’re picking him up right now.”

“You and Jasper?” she asks, excitement in her tone. She probably always

assumed I'd end up with a starving artist, or a freeloader. I'm not even sure I saw a man like Jasper as a possibility.

"Yes," I say.

"Brady?" she asks.

"No, he's with the evil witch." I can say that since I'm tucked into Jasper's car and he's in front of the car waiting for a line of traffic to pass before getting in on the driver's side. "Hey, Mom, don't tell Jacob about Jasper."

"Lennon," she warns.

"Relax. What does he care anyway?" I cross my legs, laughing at Jasper's quick Frogger movements as he dodges the traffic.

"Lennon, you should have told him."

Jasper hops in the car and a long sigh leaves his lips.

"Watch out for those lily pads," I say, muffling the phone.

"It was the alligators that worried me." He smiles, turns the key in the ignition.

He so gets me.

"Gotta go, Mom. See you in a bit." I hang up, still hearing her call out my name.

"Your mom?" Jasper asks.

"Yeah. Hit the gas because my dad is probably about five minutes from leaving the station."

The last thing I want to do is screw up my dad's surprise. The list of my screw-ups is already long enough.

CHAPTER

Thirty-Six

FIFTEEN MINUTES, after an amazing job by Jasper, we pull up outside the police station my dad works at. He's outside laughing with some of his friends. That's the problem with civil jobs, some of his closest co-workers can't come to the party because they have to serve and protect San Francisco.

I climb out of the car and walk toward my dad. "Hi, Dad," I say, leaning in to give him a kiss on the cheek.

His hand lands on the small of my back and he leans in, allowing me to kiss him. "Lenny," he says his nickname for me. "You remember Cal and Nikki?" He opens the conversation to a man and woman who must be partners in the force.

"Hi," I say. Do I remember them? No. But they don't need to know that.

My dad's eyes shoot to Jasper's Range Rover. "Who's Daddy Warbucks?" My dad cocks his eyebrow.

"It's my boyfriend, Dad. Be nice."

My dad looks over for too long of a beat. Jasper's probably pissed that I made him double-park so he has no choice but to stay in the car. Just as I'm about to tear my dad away, a car parked in front of a parking meter drives off and Jasper slides into the space.

Nikki observes Jasper climbing out of his truck, inserting money into the meter and sauntering over to us.

"That's your boyfriend?" Nikki asks, her eyes still glued to him.

Can I blame her? No. He's nice to look at for sure. But he's mine.

"Mr. Hart," Jasper says, holding his hand out to my dad.

My dad looks down at his hand and then to me, his eyes wide. Finally, he shakes his hand.

“Your boyfriend is Jasper?” my dad asks, and I’m shocked my mom kept this secret.

“Nice to see you again.” Jasper does the whole nervous meeting-the-dad thing to perfection. He turns his attention to the other officers. “Jasper Banks.” Cal shakes his hand while I think Nikki’s breathing might have stopped.

Cal slaps her on the back and she jolts, finally blinking. “Pleasure,” she says.

“Well, let’s get this over with,” my dad says, shaking hands with Cal and Nikki.

After he starts walking to Jasper’s car I rush to catch up while Jasper is telling Cal and Nikki how nice it was to meet them. Kiss-ass.

“Dad?” I question and he stops at the passenger side of Jasper’s car. The spot that should be mine, but I’ll take a backseat to my dad.

“The party?” he deadpans.

Everyone knows my dad hates parties.

“Yeah,” I answer and he shakes his head.

“How many people?”

“One hundred, I think.”

“Great.” He couldn’t sound more unenthused.

The doors unlock and Jasper comes over with the key fob in his hand.

“Nice guy.” He nods to Jasper and a smile forms on my face.

Jasper comes over and opens the door for me. He is a nice guy.

Once I’m tucked into the backseat, next to Brady’s car seat, Jasper goes to the front and starts the car.

“So, Jasper, how have you been?” my dad asks and Jasper laughs.

“I’ve been good, Ben. You ready for the party?” Jasper asks.

“No, but what Eva wants, Eva gets. And she wants a party, I guess,” my dad says.

Jasper starts the car and pulls into the traffic.

“So, you never told your brother, huh?” my dad says and Jasper gives me the stink eye from the rearview mirror.

“You know me, I like to surprise people.” I use my singsong voice as though my insides aren’t tumbling like a dryer full of laundry, worrying about Jacob’s reaction.

“Don’t we all know it,” my dad deadpans.
Here goes nothing.

CHAPTER

Thirty-Seven

WAY TO DISGUISE A PARTY. We pull up outside the restaurant and Jasper can barely find a parking spot.

“Why don’t I drop you two off?” Jasper offers and I’m all for that plan. It gives me time to drag Jacob off to talk. “I’ll sneak in and find you.” His eyes find mine in the back seat and my stomach purrs before it drops.

I need to find Jacob first and then we can live happily ever after. “Perfect,” I remark.

Jasper stops outside the doors.

“Here goes three hours I’ll never get back,” my dad complains and opens the door, climbing out.

“See you in there,” I say, leaning forward to kiss Jasper’s cheek. “Thank you for always understanding.”

He could throw a fit that I’m putting him in a bad position, but he understands that’s just how I roll. I wait until the last possible moment to do what needs to be done. I just hope he’s as accommodating tonight when I tell him about how I ended up at the speed-dating evening where we met.

Once we’re out of Jasper’s truck and he pulls away, I slide my arm through my dad’s and we walk toward the restaurant doors.

“He really is a good guy, that one,” my dad says and I smile, knowing my dad doesn’t mix words, so, he really does believe Jasper is great.

As do I.

“We finally agree on something,” I joke, leaning into my dad and laughing.

“Only took twenty-six years.” He smiles and opens the door for me.

“So I have to answer a call. You enter first.” I roll my eyes and he lets out an exaggerated sigh.

“Yeah, have a nice call.”

We both know what’s going on and he walks in through the private room in the back of his favorite restaurant to an enormous rendition of *For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow*.

My mom runs over and he smiles and laughs and hugs her close to him. He loves her that much that he puts himself through hell for a few hours to make her happy and pretends to be surprised. My dad is a pretty great guy.

I walk in right after and my mom hugs me. I resist the urge to say, *Ha, I did it. I got him here and you all thought I couldn’t do it.*

“You look gorgeous,” my mom says.

I glance at her lovely red dress and think many people wouldn’t even believe she was my mother with her youthful appearance. Then I spot Jacob talking with some friends.

“You too, Mom.” I smile down at her.

“Where’s Jasper?” she asks.

“He’s coming,” I say. “I need to catch Jacob though.” I don’t wait for her to respond. Instead I run over to Jacob.

I dodge all the family and friends who try to stop me to talk. Later, later, later.

“Jacob,” I whisper to interrupt him, but he ignores me.

Typical.

I wait patiently for a few more seconds while Jimmy Twendle from grade school, rambles on and on about baseball.

Who gives a shit, seriously? So you’re some superstar ballplayer. Whatever. Some of us have more pressing issues.

“Excuse me.” I hold my hand up.

“Lennon, man, you’re looking hot,” Jimmy flirts and I look to Jacob, rolling my eyes.

“Too bad you’re not,” I remark and they all laugh, thinking I’m joking.

Truth is Jimmy was my crush in high school. Along with Whitney and Tahlia’s. One night after my brother went to bed, Jimmy Twendle joined me on the couch. He kissed me and then got a little handsy. That is until I kneed him in the nuts and broke his nose.

“Oh, Lennon, always a joker,” he says and gives me the once-over.

“How’s your nose?” I ask and he turns beet red, his eyes suddenly finding

his beer. Jacob looks between us, puzzled, because I never told him about what happened and I don't have time to worry about any of that right now. "I need to talk to you," I say to him and drag him away by his arm.

"What the hell?" he complains.

"Why didn't I know you were out of the country?" I ask.

"What?" His face contorts like I'm a fly buzzing around his food.

"Anyways." I wave my hand in the space between us. "I need to tell you something, and try to act mature about it."

He stares down at me, with a bored look on his face. "I am the mature twin," he deadpans.

True.

"I have a date with me tonight." Let's ease into this.

He focuses forward over my shoulder. "Why is Jasper here? Did Mom invite him?" He touches my shoulder to move me out of the way, like we weren't just having a conversation. "I'm going to say hello."

I step in his path, my hand on his chest. "Um, Jacob."

He glances down and then back up to where I'm guessing Jasper is. "What?"

"He's here with me," I say, my voice losing all its usual confidence.

"What!" he yells and I push him back into the corner to get away from the nosy family members now looking our way. "Lennon, I told you to stay away from him."

I hold up my hands. "It has nothing to do with that. We met and... I don't know, a spark kind of ignited." I smile, thinking about how happy I am when I'm with him.

"A spark? You? Give me a break, Lennon." He grabs my arm and guides me to a small alcove where the wait staff gets drinks. "I can't believe you'd do this. He is not one of your usual boy toys." There's so much anger in his voice that venom could slide through his clenched teeth and singe me.

I shrug my arm from his hold. "I like him, Jacob."

"You like him?" He laughs a hollow and empty laugh.

"Yes."

"You like his money. You like his connections. You like what he can do for you," Jacob accuses.

"I like him. All of him. It has nothing to do with his money or his connections." I fight back, glancing out the small cut-out section in the wall, finding my mom introducing him to people.

“God, Lennon, this is an all-time low for even you. I told you to stay away from him, and now you’re saying you like him. You bring him to Dad’s retirement party. Did you even know he has a son?” Jacob’s voice is rising and his face is growing redder.

“Yes, of course I’ve met Brady and I love him.”

He rolls his eyes. “You’re seriously demented. You aren’t capable of loving anyone but yourself.”

“Listen, I might have gone to Jasper to get him to invest in my business, but things changed.”

“So you admit that’s the entire reason you met him? To get him to invest in your company?” Jacob clarifies.

“Yes, but if you would have just introduced m—”

“Don’t pin this on me. You sought him out.”

Jacob’s right. I know it, but we’re twins. I’m not going to let him know it that easily. I let out a deep breath. “Yes, I saw on your phone that he was going to be at some bar, so I went there that night to get him to invest in my company.”

“What?” Jasper asks behind him and my entire body freezes.

I spin around to find his face pale and that sparkle that’s always in his eyes missing.

“No, it’s not what you think,” I say.

“Classic Lennon. You never even told him your meeting wasn’t coincidence but a calculated plan on your part.” Jacob shakes his head and slides past me. He clasps Jasper on the shoulder. “I’m sorry, man. I wish I could say I was surprised.”

Jasper disregards him, his gaze remaining solely on me.

“You knew who I was the entire time? This whole thing was a charade to get me to invest in you?” His hand flies through his hair.

“No.” Why won’t my words come out now? Tears well up in my eyes that he’s this upset with me.

“And I fell for it all. I set you up with Drew. Were you just going to be with me until your business succeeded and then you’d kick Brady and I to the curb?” he asks and begins to leave, but I pull on his coat sleeve.

“No, Jasper. Don’t leave.”

He shrugs me off and turns around, staring down at me, his hands tucked into the pockets of his slacks.

“You pretended to be as surprised as I was to find out we had Jacob in

common. Tell me you didn't plant your friend to call about the sex toy when we were together, knowing that I'd bite. Tell me you didn't show up at that Starbucks before the speed-dating to have a leg up."

"No, I didn't."

"So, I'm imagining all those things or I misunderstood somewhere along the way?" he questions. His tone and his body are all calm and collected while my mind is bouncing around like a deflating balloon.

"Yes and no. I knew you were going to be there at the bar that night, but Starbucks was not planned and when I realized there was something between us I gave up asking you about the business," I fight back, finally finding my words.

He leans down and lowers his voice. "In the end you got what you wanted, an investor for your business. Maybe you should've been fucking Drew this whole time and not me." He shakes his head and looks at me with disgust. "I hope your dildos keep you warm at night and screw you as well as I did, because I'm out." He turns around and I cling to his sport jacket, ready to fall to my knees, but he shrugs me off, leaving me in tears.

I wait for him to return. Because if he loves me like I love him, how can he just leave me?

He doesn't come back.

CHAPTER

Thirty-Eight

IT'S BEEN TWO WEEKS.

Two weeks with no word.

He hasn't reached out and I haven't reached out to him.

I sit on a bench at the park, watching Brady play across the street at the school. He's there for day camp and I wonder where he thinks I've gone. Did Jasper tell him that I was away on business? Or did he break his heart and say I wanted to leave? The thought of Brady thinking it has anything to do with him has brought me to my knees sobbing more than a few times.

He's running around, playing tag with a group of kids. He's full of life, running and laughing, which means that he might not know anything.

"What are you doing here?"

I think I could pinpoint Natalie's voice from across the Bay Bridge. I turn to find her glaring at me with her hand on her hip. Boy, am I ever glad I wore my 'Friday Is My Second Favorite F-Word' shirt today. Not.

"I was just walking by," I lie. I came here on purpose, needing to see Brady. To see if Jasper told him I'm out of their life for good. I figured I'd be able to tell by the look on his face. Or maybe that was wishful thinking. Maybe he just as easily tossed me aside as his father did.

"Another lie? Shocking," she says. "Haven't you done enough?"

She must know. Jasper told her.

"I had to see Brady. I'll go now." I stand and spin on my flats and start walking down the sidewalk.

"Stay away! You're no good for them," she calls out and I glance to the playground, finding Brady still playing with his friends.

When I turn back around, my eyes fix on her. “You know nothing about me. I love both of them.” I push back the tears that have been threatening to fall all afternoon. “I understand you think that because I look a certain way and because I’m not Suzy Homemaker, I’m not good enough for your perfect boy and grandson. You’ll probably run off every woman who ever wants in their life, and if you win kudos, but all you’ll do is make them unhappy in the long run. I love your son and your grandson. I would’ve made them happy.”

“But you screwed it up, didn’t you?” she asks.

My head falls between my shoulders and I try to slyly wipe the tear from under my eye. He never told her. “I did.”

With my admission, I turn around to walk away from the Banks for good this time.

“Brady is getting his cast off this afternoon. Jasper is out of town. Would you like to say hello?” she hollers and my footsteps halt.

“Really?” I ask, not sure if I should see Brady. It might only piss off Jasper more.

She smiles. The gesture looks foreign on her. “Brady and I had a long talk the night of your dad’s retirement party.”

I walk back toward her, unsure if I can really trust her. I mean, this is the first time I’ve even seen the woman smile.

“You did?” I ask and she nods.

“He asked me why I hated you.” Her head falls and she shakes it while walking back to the school building. “I’d been giving Jasper hell for being with you and I never realized Brady would see it. You need to understand how much it broke my heart to see Brady’s mother just toss him aside like he didn’t mean anything. Her own child.”

She pauses and presses her lips together, gathering her emotions, I think. For once I know when to stay quiet.

“I may be his mother, but I know how Jasper must look to single women. He’s handsome, successful, he has more than enough money, and he’s a good person. I’ve always been afraid that some money-hungry woman would try to swoop in, take what she can from him and then leave them both behind. I didn’t want to see either of them go through that again.”

I nod. I can understand why she might have felt that way, but it still doesn’t excuse the way she treated me.

Her hand lands on my forearm and I look up at her. “I want them to be happy and you seemed to make them happy. I don’t know what happened

between you two, besides the fact that Jasper told me you lied to him. But, I believe you when you say you truly love them.”

These are the words I’ve been longing to hear from her, but they’re too late to make a difference. “You’re right. I messed it all up.” Tears well in my eyes again and I blink a few times to get them to stop.

“The one thing about my son, he’s forgiving.” She pats my arm and we enter the school.

“I’m not sure.”

She shakes her head. “Then you don’t know him at all.”

She signs the form from the office to get Brady and a few minutes later, he runs out with his backpack bouncing on his back.

His sneakers skid to a stop when he sees me. “Lennon,” he says so quietly and with such disbelief that my heart shatters. “Lennon!” His voice picks up and he runs into my arms, gluing my shattered heart back together.

I hug him tight to my body, picking him up. God, he feels so good in my arms.

“I missed you,” I say softly and then I hear the quiet sobs and a hiccupping from his chest.

“You left,” he whispers and I shake my head.

“I’m sorry, Brady,” I say, setting his feet back on the ground.

“Hi, Grandma,” he mumbles, looking away.

“Are you surprised to see Lennon?” she asks.

He nods, a smile crossing his face and the tears fading. I wipe my own wet cheeks and he grabs my hand. “Are you coming to see my arm?” he asks and I laugh.

“I hear you’re getting your cast off.” I stare down at him. “I’ve never seen your entire arm.” I nudge him with my hip and he laughs.

“So, you’re coming?” he asks.

“No.” I look over to Natalie. “I’m not. I just wanted to say hello.”

“Come,” he whines, both his hands on my arm now.

I should have predicted this.

Natalie’s lips are sealed together, watching from afar.

“I can’t, buddy. I wish—”

“Did Dad tell you not to come?” he asks and my shoulders fall. I squat down to his height, taking both his hands in mine.

“No. He didn’t. I just—” I trail off, unsure what to say. I could kick myself for coming here. I’m only going to make it harder on him.

“Then come. I want you there,” he whines and I look to Natalie who nods.

I stare up at the ceiling. I could see him get his cast off and then say goodbye the right way. Maybe we just need some closure.

“Okay, I’ll come,” I say. He screams, jumping up and down. “But”—I hold my hand up—“I have to leave right after.”

He nods his head. “Okay, okay.” He runs over to Natalie. “Did you hear? Lennon’s coming.” He grabs both of our hands, bridging the gap between myself and a woman I never thought I’d have a kind thought for. But it must be a full moon because I feel like I understand Natalie a little better now. If things had worked out differently perhaps we might have been able to have a cordial relationship.

Now I’ll never know.

CHAPTER

Thirty-Nine

FORTY-FIVE MINUTES later we're all in his doctor's waiting room. Brady seems super nervous and Natalie and I have both tried to calm him down. But he's quiet and from the small amount of time I've known Brady when he's quiet, he's anxious.

"It's okay, bud, I promise." I smile, but he sits on the table not looking like he truly believes me.

The nurse knocks and comes in with the doctor. "The day is here, Brady, are you excited?" The fifty-something doctor who dresses trendier than Drew walks in the office with a smile on his face. He quickly explains that Dr. Bierdman was called away on an emergency and asked him to take over.

Brady stares over at him.

"He's a little nervous," Natalie says.

"Oh, it's easy. You'll feel nothing." The doctor logs onto the computer and starts typing in things and scrolls through Brady's information.

The door opens again and I assume it's another nurse, and it isn't until Brady yells, "Daddy," that I look up, finding Jasper in the doorway.

His wrinkled suit hangs off him and he grips the doorknob, probably wondering if he has the right room. The eyes that used to look at me with such love are flooded with hatred.

"You think I'd miss this?" he says to his son.

I slide off the bed, giving him room to say hello. He goes to the other side, taking Brady's hand, and kisses the top of his son's head.

"Okay, are you ready?" the doctor says, pulling out a huge pair of scissors.

Brady stiffens and the doctor looks between us. “Maybe if Mom and Dad each take a side.” He glances between Jasper and me.

“She’s not his mother,” Jasper says coldly.

Brady’s eyes are fixed on the scissors, not really paying attention to what’s going on around him. Natalie remains quiet.

“Well, then Dad, hold him tight,” the doctor says and slides the metal scissors under his cast.

Jasper does that and as I sit there watching Jasper calm his son, telling him it will be all right, getting him excited for everything he can do now that the cast is off, I realize—this isn’t my place. Not anymore.

“Done,” the doctor says and the nurse gives Brady a lollipop.

“My arm is so small,” Brady says, staring down at his wrinkled arm.

“And smelly,” Natalie says, ruffling her grandson’s hair.

“Your dad will have to wash it good tonight,” the nurse adds, taking wipes and sliding them down the length of his arm.

Brady, calm now, looks up to me. “Now you’ve seen all of me, Lennon.” He beams and a pang of regret hits me that this is the last time I’ll probably get to see that expression on his face.

“Yep. I’m so happy for you, but I better get going,” I say. Jasper slides over on the bed as though he’d catch the flu by being near me. I bend down and kiss Brady’s forehead. “Bye, Brady.” My voice cracks, and I push back that tingling in my nose and the wetness pooling in my eyes.

“Wait,” Brady says before I can leave the door.

I turn around, smacking on a fake smile. Jasper looks over to me, but then concentrates on his phone.

“Grandma, can you get me my backpack?” Brady asks and Natalie smiles, handing it over to him.

“Here you go.” She opens the pocket he wants her to and his healthy arm digs into the zipper and he pulls something out.

The pin.

A heart-shaped pin with fake pearls and rhinestones glued to it.

“This is for you,” he says, placing it in my palm with a smile.

Jasper looks up from his phone, his mouth hanging open, his eyes flashing between me, Natalie, Brady and back to me.

“It’s beautiful.” I smile, pinning it to my shirt. “I love it.”

I lean over again and hug his small body to mine. My tears, unable to stay away, fall freely down my cheeks now. “Thank you so much,” I say. “It’s the

best present anyone has ever given me.”

“Don’t cry, I didn’t want you to cry,” he says and I shake my head.

Natalie laughs.

“I’m crying because I love it so much. They’re happy tears.”

Okay, I may have just half lied to him, but I’ve been skipping mommy training classes lately.

“I’ll see you soon,” I say. Another lie.

I run out of the room as fast as I’m able, feeling bad for not staying with Brady, but there’s no way I can remain in that room with Jasper either. I stop in the lobby to compose myself for a second.

“Lennon,” Jasper calls after me and I look up, the tears that were waning rushing back.

I turn and he’s standing there with his hands in his pockets.

“I’m sorry,” I say, unpinning Brady’s gift from my shirt. “You save this for when you meet his real mom.” I hold it out but he doesn’t take it from me. “Just take it, Jasper.” I hold it out a little firmer this time. When he still doesn’t take it but remains silent, I slip it into the pocket of his shirt.

“Lennon. Stop.” His voice is cold and nothing like the one I’m used to.

“Just so you know, I did love you. I know I lied and deceived you, but my feelings for you and Brady are real. So, please, never doubt that.” I step forward and press my lips to his cheek.

His hands never leave his pockets and I fall back to my heels.

“How can I ever trust you?” he asks in a ragged voice.

I shake my head. “I guess you can’t.”

I turn around and run out of the doctor’s office and it isn’t until I’m in the elevators that I’m able to release the sob I’ve been holding in my chest.

CHAPTER

Forty

“YOU'RE INSANE. Don't do this,” Whitney says through the phone.

“I can't in good faith take this deal.”

I'm on my way to Jasper's office because Drew has some huge deal that came through for me. It looks as if one of my patents is going to come through and one of the largest distributors of adult products in the country wants to license the product.

“Yes, you can. Who cares. If the prick can't face the fact that you love him and accept your apology, screw him.” Whitney has a fierce side that many don't see. But when she feels strongly about something it's hard to get her to back down.

“I'm fine. Really. It's for the best. I'll figure something else out.”

Maybe I'll be tattooing forever, but who cares? At least I'll have proven to Jasper that I wasn't with him for his connections. It won't change the outcome, but I'll feel some satisfaction knowing that when he thinks of me, it's not to think that I'm a gold-digging opportunist. If he even thinks of me at all, that is.

“Oh, Lennon.” She says it like I'm attending a funeral.

“Whit, I'm fine. This is the last time I'll have to maybe run into him. And I can try to get past all this.” My subconscious nudges me, knowing that'll never happen, but a girl can dream.

“Call me when you're done,” she says, defeat thick in her voice.

“Will do.”

I hang up and shove my phone into my purse. My stomach knots and I

release a breath as the elevator rises. I step off and open the doors to the office. Brittany smiles and picks up the phone.

“You better be calling Drew.” I point my finger, my feet moving faster.

“Mr. Banks.” She shoots me a tight smile, but I reach over the receptionist desk and press the button to end the call.

“No. No Mr. Banks. I just need to see Mr. Ashland,” I say as nicely as I can manage and she scrunches her eyebrows and then nods.

“That explains Miss Schmidt.”

Miss Schmidt? Jasper’s seeing someone else already? I ignore the twisting in my gut.

She picks up the phone. “Hi, Sue, Miss Hart is here to see Mr. Ashland.” She pauses for a second. “Okay, I’ll just send her back.”

She hangs up just as Jasper comes out into the reception area.

“Brittany, why did you han—” He stops when he sees me.

Brittany’s gaze moves back and forth between us. “Awkward,” she says, her teeth clenched but her eyes fixed on what she thinks will be a show.

“Sorry, it’s not Miss Schmidt.” I walk by him, the smell of his cologne filling my senses, and I lose my footing for a second, but get back on track.

“What?”

I ignore him and continue down to Drew’s office. Sue smiles when she sees me approach. “He’s ready,” she says, holding her hand to the door.

“Thank you, Sue.” I smile and grip the doorknob.

“Are you joining them, Mr. Banks?” she asks and I glance over my shoulder, finding him in the hallway, his narrowed eyes on me.

He shakes his head. “No.”

I open the door, no longer able to look at him. It only brings me pain and I’m so tired of being in pain.

Drew sees me enter and smiles before he rounds the corner, wrapping his arms around my waist and swinging me in a circle. “Congratulations!” he says so loudly I wish he’d quiet down.

A second later, there’s a knock on the door, and Jasper comes barging in, finding me in Drew’s arms.

He huffs. “I see you move fast,” he sneers and slams the door.

Drew sets me back down. “What is he talking about?” His forehead creases and he scratches the side of his head.

“I’m not taking the deal, Drew.” I stomp out of Drew’s office, down the hall and into Jasper’s.

I slam the door behind me and he's there waiting for me, leaning back in his office chair, his intent gaze on me. He knew I'd follow and fuck if I didn't take the bait.

"What is your problem?" I ask, my hands on my hips.

"I just find it convenient that we break up and now you're in Drew's arms. You can sure shift gears fast."

My blood boils. I love this man, but I'm done being a punching bag. "Fuck you, Jasper."

He stands up, his hands pressed on the desk in front of him. "Been there. Done that. First you fucked me, then you fucked me over." The anger and hurt in his voice shakes every bone in my body.

"How many times can I say I'm sorry? I wasn't expecting to meet you and feel something for you."

"But you went on a date with me to try to get me to invest in your company?" he asks, leaning on the edge of his desk, and damn if I don't notice how impeccable he looks in his suit.

"Yes, but when I accepted I decided at that point that I wouldn't approach you on the business part of it."

"You could've been truthful with me from the start."

My shoulders fall. "I can't excuse my behavior. I said I was sorry, but I don't have a time machine to go back and change what happened."

"When do you think you'll grow up?" he asks, raising his eyebrows.

I hold my hands up. "Forget it. I'm out. Enjoy Miss Schmidt."

I walk toward the door and his fist pounds on his desk. "Goddamn it, Lennon."

"What?" I turn around. My eyes lock with his angry ones. "There's nothing else I can say or do."

He blows out a breath and steps forward. "Stop running."

I fall to my knees and place my hands in prayer. "Is this what you want, Jasper? Please forgive me. I was wrong, I promise to never do it again."

He grabs me and pulls me up from under my arms. "Don't make a joke out of this."

"I'm not." Tears fall down my cheeks once more. God, when will they stop? "I don't know what you want from me. I'm sorry, I *don't* wish I could go back to that first night and tell you exactly how I ended up there, because what if you would've walked away from me? I can't say I truly feel that way because what we have..." My head falls. "Had." I take a deep breath at

hearing us referred to in past tense. “As much as it hurts, I love the time we spent together and I would never want to change anything and risk that it wouldn’t have happened.” I wipe the tears from my cheeks. “I fell so madly in love with you and Brady... I can’t regret anything that made that time happen.” He looks away and I take that as my cue to leave. “I am sorry that I hurt you. You just snuck into my heart and I was too afraid of losing you both.”

I grip the doorknob. “Take the deal, Lennon,” he whispers.

I shake my head, turning around, tears blurring my vision. “It’s just not important anymore.”

I open the door, passing Drew and Sue, who look like they’ve been out here listening to our argument.

Drew catches up to me at the elevator. “You have to take this deal, Lennon. We’re both going to make a lot of money.”

I press the elevator button and give him a sad smile. “I’m sorry, Drew. I appreciate everything you’ve done.”

I step into the elevator and leave behind all the hopes I’d had for my future behind the steel doors.

CHAPTER

Forty-One

I'M in my curtained-off room in the back of my tattoo parlor eating a quesadilla when Michelle peeks her head in. I startle and a drop of salsa lands on my 'I Hope You Step On A Lego' shirt.

"Shit," I say, using a napkin to wipe it off. I really like this shirt. I saw it a while back but until I actually stepped on one of Brady's Legos, I didn't really get it. After experiencing the kind of catastrophic pain at the hands of a child's small plastic toy I went and brought it the next day.

"Lennon," Michelle says. "Your appointment is early."

I put my food down in the takeout container and shove it on the counter then begin to wash my hands. "Send him in."

"Okay."

She disappears and someone walks in behind me. I take the paper towels, drying my hands.

"Hi, I'm Lennon." I turn around to find *him* on the table.

You know which *him* I mean.

Jasper Banks.

"I have an appointment," I tell him, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Me."

"You?"

That playful smile crosses his lips. "Yes, me. See, I figured I could come here and grovel. I could fall on my knees and beg you to take me back. I could apologize for storming out or for not running after you at Brady's doctor's office."

I swallow past the dryness in my throat and try to act like the words he's

saying aren't exactly what I've wanted to hear since we broke up.

"Most of all I could tell you how deeply your words reached me. How you not taking the deal showed me how much you loved me. And how ashamed I am that I would need that reassurance to know you love me because when I'm with you... I *feel* it. I fell in love with you long before you ever chose to admit you loved me, but I found comfort in knowing that you loved me, too. When I thought it was all a sham... I was hurt and pissed off at myself that I put Brady in the position to lose someone again."

"And now? You said you could never trust me again."

He hops off the table, stepping into my personal space, and places his hand on my cheek. Instinctively, I lean into his strength, somehow still needing it.

"I'm giving myself to you."

"Oh, sweetie, but you already did that." Sarcasm drips off my words.

His hands drop and he backs away from me. A devilish gleam in his eye, he lies down on my table. "I'm yours."

"You came to apologize and beg me to take you back by letting me have sex with you?" I ask.

He rolls to his side, propping his head up with his hand. He could be on a commercial. "No, my body." He shakes his head. "You tattoo me, whatever you want."

I stare at him for a moment. "Anything?"

"Anything." He doesn't flinch.

"Maybe I'll put a unicorn cock on you," I say, sitting on my chair.

He crooks his finger to me. "I'm not even sure what that is, nor am I sure I want to know." He chuckles. "Come here," he says and I roll over to him. "I trust you. This is me showing you that I trust you. That I'm ready to put it behind us and move forward."

"You're giving me all of the control?" I ask, still unsure exactly what his point is.

He nods. "Some would say I'm crazy, but I like to think I'm crazy for you." He chuckles.

"Okay." I hold my hand up in the air. "Where is Jasper Banks?"

"I'm right here." He laughs like I'm talking gibberish.

"Me tattooing a unicorn cock on you isn't going to put a Band-Aid on the problem."

He sits up and pats the seat next to him.

“Jasper,” I sigh.

“Come here.”

I climb on the table, my legs swinging back and forth. “I need to tell you the whole story,” I say, my voice small.

He slides closer, his hand landing on my knee. “Why don’t you tell me while you ink me?”

“I can’t tattoo you, Jasper,” I say.

“Yes, you can.” I look over and his hand tightens on my thigh. “Come on.”

I look into his eyes. He’s serious. If he thinks this will put it all behind us, I’m game. “Give me a few to draw it up.”

“I’ll just lie here.” He lies down on my bed once I hop off and roll my chair over to the table. “And admire you.”

I glance over my shoulder and that grin on his lips makes my stomach flip. He truly is the most gorgeous man I’ve ever seen.

“How’s Brady?” I ask, searching on my phone for exactly what I want the tattoo to resemble.

“He misses you. He hasn’t said much to me after the doctor’s office. I messed that up pretty big.”

My gut wrenches thinking about Brady, an innocent victim in all this.

“He’ll be happy to have you back,” he says, full of confidence.

“Jasper,” I sigh because he hasn’t heard the entirety of what I did. How premeditated my actions were. There’s a possibility he won’t be able to move on and I don’t want to get my hopes up.

“You almost done? I’m eager to put this behind us.”

“You’re relentless,” I say, standing up to take my picture to the front to get the stencil made.

“That’s why you fell in love with me.” He winks and my face heats.

“I’ll be right back.” I walk past Sebastian, my next-door neighbor, who’s piercing a girl’s tongue. Weaving by the open tables in the front, I slide by Michelle to make the stencil at the thermal fax machine.

It scans and I look out the window while I’m waiting. Can we really move on?

“He’s hot.” Michelle taps her pen to her lips.

I stare blankly, not about to give her the gossip she’s looking for. I’ve kept Jasper away from this place except for the time I brought him here one night after coffee. Michelle wasn’t here then and there’s a reason for that. She

tends to flirt with anyone with a twig and berries between their legs.

“He yours?” she asks, the pen cap hitting her teeth.

“Nope.”

“Hmm,” she mumbles. “He didn’t seem interested when I tried to flirt with him earlier.”

“So you figured he was with me?” I ask.

She smiles. “That and the fact he had this look in his eyes when he asked for you.”

“What look?” I roll my eyes, wishing this antiquated piece of equipment would hurry.

“I don’t know how to explain it. He actually looked me in the eyes.” She purses her lips, her head dipping to the cleavage busting out of her shirt, seeming confused why it didn’t work on Jasper.

The machine finally finishes and I pat her on the shoulder. “Don’t think too hard, otherwise you’ll lose those brain cells.”

She says nothing, still trying to figure out why her secret weapon didn’t work for her.

I walk back through the curtain to find Jasper is now shirtless, lying on his back with his phone in his hands raised above his head.

Seriously, this man is temptation with a capital T.

“Making yourself comfortable?” I ask.

He peers at me through the opening of his arms, placing the phone down by his side. “I assumed you’d tattoo my chest or back.”

“You assumed wrong, making you an ass. So drop the pants and bend over.” I busy myself grabbing all the supplies.

“What?”

“I doubt you want a big old rooster with a unicorn horn on its head on your pec. I’m throwing you a bone by putting it on your ass.”

I keep my voice even, which is hard with the expression on his face. I turn back around to ready my supplies and a thud hits the floor. I peer over my shoulder to find his jeans in a pile at his feet and one side of his boxers exposing an ass cheek.

“Can you do my right? Because you know I’m going to want to spoon you tonight.” He winks and if I wasn’t so speechless at the sight of his perfect ass, I’d have a comeback.

“Pull them up, hop on the table again and give me the inside of your bicep.”

I wash my hands and put my gloves on while he does as I direct. Sitting down, I roll over to the table he's on and wash the surface. "You're sure?" I ask and he nods, not a worry line etched on his face.

The stencil goes on perfectly and as I stare down at it, I find the excitement I had when I first started. Back before tramp stamps and tribal arm bands were all the rage. When customers allowed the artist to draw and use their talents. Those customers are rarer than you think.

I prep my gun and buzz it for a second. "Ready?" I ask.

"Go for it," he says.

I hold the needle over the skin and he waits patiently for me to start. He's always been patient with me.

"I knew you before I knew you," I tell him as I press the needle into his skin.

"Glad to know I'm notorious." He laughs, but I look at him and he stops.

"Jacob told me about you, but refused to set up a meeting between us. He was embarrassed that my business was sex toys and thought you were too straight an arrow to ever be interested in something like that. Little did he know what you can do with a string of anal beads."

I smile at him, remembering the first night he used them on me. He meets my smile and raises it a few notches.

"Anyway, I was at his office, desperate because my grandma's inheritance was dwindling and this company was going to be dead in the water. He refused again and then you happened to text him. He was too busy to notice and I saw the time and place you'd be at that bar."

"And you made sure to meet me there."

I nod. "But I didn't know it was you. All my Google searches gave me nothing. Not one picture or any personal info about your life."

He blows out a breath of air and I don't know if it's because of the needle or something else. "I pay someone to check the internet and remove any personal information about me. You were desperate to get in contact with me, right?"

"Yeah."

"So are a lot of other desperate people whose dreams are failing. I can't take on everyone and there are people out there who are disgruntled. The last thing I want them to find out is where I live, or that Brady even exists. Nor do I want his mother deciding to suddenly pop into his life unannounced."

"That's why you have no pictures of him in your office." I swear

someone just turned the light switch on in my brain.

“Yeah. No one needs to know anything about my life.”

I nod, thinking all that makes him a wonderful father.

“The Starbucks thing was a coincidence. I had no idea who you were then. Not that you showed me a ton of interest.” I raise my eyebrows, wiping the ink off his skin.

He laughs. “Believe me, I noticed you and I wanted nothing more than to fuck your brains out that night. But Brady had just left for camp and I’d promised myself that I needed more than just fuck-and-chucks. That I needed to look for something more serious. Hence, the speed dating. You know how I spent that night and who I was thinking about.” He makes a hand job gesture with his hand.

I shake my head, a rush of heat to my cheeks and between my thighs. “Thanks for the reminder.”

He winks and my stomach flips.

“I felt something both times we met and after the speed-dating night I didn’t want you to think I was with you only for the business. I still think if I had come clean that first night you would’ve stopped what was happening with us.”

He nods and I go back to tattooing him. “Probably.”

“The longer we were together, the more I couldn’t jeopardize losing you. I was scared of losing both you and Brady.” I finish the tattoo and sit back so he can see me. “Whit calling me about the vibrator wasn’t planned. I was never going to bring the business up to you after we’d slept together. I swear.” I hold up my Girl Scout honor sign and he moves to come over. “Not yet.” I wipe it down one more time. “Go look in the mirror.”

He stands up and I rise from my stool, waiting to see what he thinks. This is always the most nerve-racking time for a tattoo artist, when you’re waiting to see if your client loves it.

He stares at it for a long time and then finds me in the mirror. “What does it mean?”

“It’s the Celtic tree of life. Trees signify strength and longevity. The leaves represent rebirth and the roots and branches are strong and resilient. It’s how I see you.” A tear slips down my cheek and Jasper turns, his hand the perfect fit for my cheek.

The next tear can’t fall because he catches it with his thumb. “I love you, Lennon Hart,” he says.

I look up into those eyes that have nothing but more love for me. “I love you. And Brady.”

“Can you do me a favor?” he asks and I nod. “Can you add a colored leaf to the tree? One for each member in my family?”

I smile. “That’s a great idea. Sit back down.”

He lies down in the same position again and I grab the bright green ink container from my shelf. It only takes me a couple of minutes to add the two leaves. One big one for Jasper and another smaller green leaf to represent Brady. I wipe away the blood and excess ink and sit back to admire my work.

“It looks perfect now,” I say.

“No, it doesn’t,” Jasper says, shaking his head.

“Is there something you don’t like about it?” I ask as I examine it again to see if I missed something.

“You forgot to add another green leaf.”

I crinkle my forehead. “No, I didn’t. I’ve got you here and Brady right here.” I point to both spots and Jasper grasps my hand in his.

“If we’re really going to put this behind us, we need to add your leaf on there too, Lennon.”

My heart swells with joy and I think it might be in danger of bursting through my chest.

“So, can we put this all behind us?”

I gaze into his eyes and know that with all the love and affection I see there, I’ll never feel like I’m not enough again. I nod slowly and then go about the business of making myself a permanent mark in the lives of the two boys I love most.

Epilogue

IT'S BEEN two months and Jasper's tattoo has healed nicely. Brady went back to talking to him—once I moved in.

Yep, I'm out of my hellhole of an apartment and living in Jasper's condo. At first it was scary because what if we don't make it? I mean do the research, many couples don't. But I like to think there's something special between us. And Brady comes first, before us, that's the agreement we made.

Speaking of, Brady's hand slides into mine as we walk down the sidewalk, all three of us exhausted from another day spent at the zoo.

He looks up to me, eyeing the pin on my shirt, and then falls back to my side. I made a mistake giving Jasper the pin back and I'll never hurt Brady like that again. Jasper had returned the pin to him and explained why I felt the need to return it at the time. The first night after we reconciled, I tucked Brady in before Jasper came to read him a story and I told him how much it means to me that he gave me the pin and that I was sorry I hadn't kept it.

Like most six-year-olds, he was able to forgive easily with no hurt feelings, but he checks up every once in awhile, wanting to know where it is.

"Coffee," I whine as we approach a Starbucks.

"There's nothing there for me," Brady says.

"How about a cookie?" I bribe and he smiles.

"Cookie? On top of the popcorn, pretzel, and nachos at the zoo?" Jasper's back to his stick-in-the-mud status, but he's my stick in the mud. "You're cleaning up the puke," he says as I open the door to my nirvana, letting the aroma of coffee beans infiltrate my veins.

"I've done it once. I think I can handle it again," I say with confidence I

really feel.

“It truly is a sick obsession you have with this place,” Jasper says, passing by me. “Sit down and I’ll get the coffees.”

Brady and I don’t object, finding a table by the window. We talk about the elephants, the lions and how exactly the momma kangaroo gets that baby that’s in her pouch.

“Um, I’m not sure,” I lie because surely I am not the one who should be having this conversation with him.

“One day it just shows up?” Brady asks and I check on Jasper who’s paying the cashier.

“Well, the mommy and daddy...” I start, realizing that’s a bad path to go down. I look up to the ceiling.

“So you and Daddy will have a baby who shows up one day?”

“Okay...” Shit. Where’s the *Parenting for Dummies* book now?

“People say you’re half your mom and half your dad. What does that mean?” he continues on.

I pat his hand, about to rip the cookie from Jasper’s hands as he chitchats with the barista, pointing to things in the glass case.

Seriously?

“Lennon, are you my mommy?” he asks and my eyes shoot to him.

In the months that I’ve been with his father, he’s alluded to it, but never asked.

“Because Sara at school asked if I had two dads when I told her I didn’t have a mommy.” He smiles proudly. “I told her I had a daddy and a Lennon.”

I smile back at him, wetness filling my eyes. “I will always be *your* Lennon.”

“But not my mommy?” His lips turn down slightly but he’s not in full-on pout mode.

I glance over and Jasper’s waiting for the coffee. “Jasper!” I call out and he smiles, holding his finger up. Understanding that he’s useless in this moment, I look at Brady for a minute. “Technically, according to the law, I’m not your mom. I can’t be your mom until your daddy and I get married. Well, if we get married.” *Treat the kid like an adult*, I tell myself. *None of this ‘hoo-haa’ and ‘dinky’ shit. Call it what it is, a vagina and a penis.*

“So once you get married, then you’re my mommy,” he clarifies and I give it to the kid, he’s inquisitive.

“Yes.”

“Do you want to marry my dad?” he asks and of course, *now* Jasper’s finally coming over with the cookie.

He’s almost to us and I smile, eager for Brady to have his cookie so the spotlight can be removed from over my head.

“Mr. Banks,” the barista calls out and he stops.

No! I need the cookie.

He turns back around, grabs his coffee and moves to the station and then waves me over because his hands are overfilled with the entire collection of bakery treats.

It’s an exit and I’ll take it. “I’ll be right back. You stay here,” I say to Brady, thankful for at least some time to think of answers.

Jasper’s getting his coffee ready, stirring the sugar as he focuses on Brady behind me.

“You complain about a cookie and then buy all this,” I comment, scooping all the baked goods in my hands.

“Leave those, just grab your coffee when she calls your name.”

“Speaking of which, I’m very disappointed by your choice of name. Tell me we haven’t lost the spark already,” I joke, my hip resting on the coffee station.

“Cut me some slack, it’s been a long day. I promise to knock your socks off the next time.” He bends down, kissing my lips.

“You’re off the hook for today only. But you still have to woo me,” I call out as he passes me by and I wait for my coffee.

Not only does he not do the name thing, but he gets his coffee first. If this is what relationships are about, then I understand why people complain about them.

A lifetime later—okay, not a lifetime, but it feels like it—the barista comes over to the counter and I step forward, knowing it’s for me.

“Mrs. Banks,” she calls out and places it on the counter.

Oh, my God, is Natalie here? We’re getting along better these days, but she’s not the type of surprise I’d appreciate.

I scan the small cafe, but no one is getting up and I don’t see Natalie anywhere. Glancing over my shoulder, I see the table where Brady and Jasper were is empty. Just the pile of pastry items and one lone coffee sit there. Brady must have had to go to the bathroom.

So I wait and watch the coffee cup sit there.

“Are you going to get your coffee?” Jasper says from behind me, his

voice soft and loving.

I turn to find him and Brady on bended knee.

“What?” I ask, looking down at my cut-off shorts and tank top that says ‘Jesus Loves This Hot Mess.’ Not exactly ready to be proposed to.

“Lennon, we love you.”

“Yes,” Brady adds.

“We want you to spend the rest of your life with us.”

“Yes,” Brady says.

“We promise to put the toilet seat down and not drink out of the cartons.”

“Yes,” Brady says, slowly leaning to the side, growing tired of being on his knee.

“We promise to worship you. To love you. To protect you.”

“Yes.” Brady nods and loses his balance.

“Will you marry us?” Jasper asks and the few people in the cafe all “aww.”

“I have to take both of you?” I joke, staring between them.

“Afraid so. Package deal.” Jasper smiles.

“What if I only want the little one?”

Jasper looks down to a smiling Brady and shrugs.

“Then I’ll be heartbroken.” He covers his heart with his hand.

“What do you say? Do we let him live with us?” I say to Brady. “Can I be your mommy and his wife?” I turn the tables and Brady runs over to me, and I squat to catch him. His arms are so tight around my neck I’m almost terrified of finding my next breath.

“You’re my mommy first,” Brady says softly.

Jasper comes over and wraps his arms around us. “I’ll be second place this time.” He kisses my temple and then finds my lips, giving me a nice, short kiss that still makes me tingle from my head to my toes.

We both stand after a minute and Jasper picks up the coffee. “So, I have no ring. I wasn’t planning on this until I walked up to that barista. I saw you and Brady and somehow I knew. You’re our missing piece.” He holds it out to me. “So do you accept your coffee, Mrs. Banks?”

“Every morning for the rest of my life.”

Brady finally unwraps himself from me and I let him down. He runs over to the table of goodies.

“You pick the date and in the meantime, I’ll make sure you have one hell of a rock on that left finger,” Jasper says, clearly surprised himself about the

impromptu proposal. I'd have it no other way.

"Why not now?" I ask. "I mean, why wait? All I need is you and Brady there. We can do a reception or something for friends and family some other time."

Jasper looks down at me, unsure if I'm serious.

"I'm serious, Jasper. Let's just elope. The three of us can go somewhere."

His full of life smile spreads across his lips.

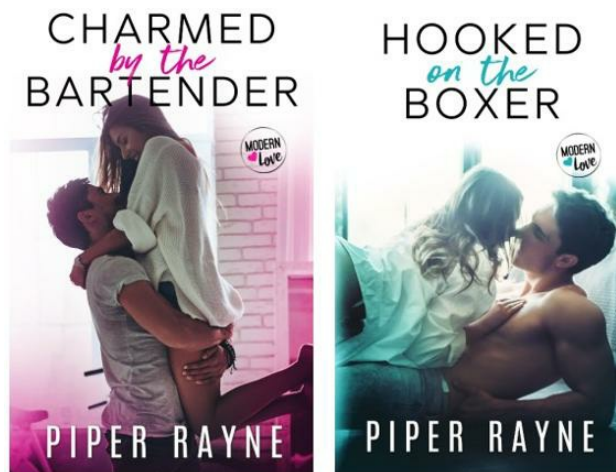
"Let's go, Mrs. Banks." He holds his hand out for me.

I take it and he grips mine in his much larger one and I know I'm never letting go ever again. He's stuck with me for all eternity.

"Lead the way, Mr. Banks."

**Be sure to check out the other books in our
Modern Love series today!**

[CLICK HERE](#)



Acknowledgements

WE HAVE TO ADMIT, we're a little sad that this series is coming to a close. This gang has been so fun to write and we hope you enjoyed seeing the softer side to Lennon as much as we enjoyed writing it. But if you head into our next series (The Single Dad's Club) you're going to see some cameos from your favorite Modern Love couples. Oops! Were we supposed to keep that a secret? Oh well.

If you made it this far in the series we're going to take a guess and say, "You like us! You really like us!" Sally Field's Oscar speech anyone!? No? Anyway, we were blown away with how open and accepting readers were of the new (but not new) kids on the block. We didn't anticipate all the enthusiasm readers have shown us and to say we're grateful is an understatement. This is a tough, tough market and it's near impossible to get noticed and having you shout your praise from the rooftops has helped so, so much! Each and every one of you is a special unicorn to us. *throws unicorn glitter on all of you*

We have to thank the team behind Mad about the Banker
RBA Designs, our Cover Designer

RJ Locksley, our Editor

Behind the Writer, our Proofreader

Linda Russell, our PR from Sassy Savvy Fabulous

Give Me Books, our promotional company

Blogs, who carved out scheduling time to promote us and/
or read and review the book

IndieSage PR—Our Web Designer

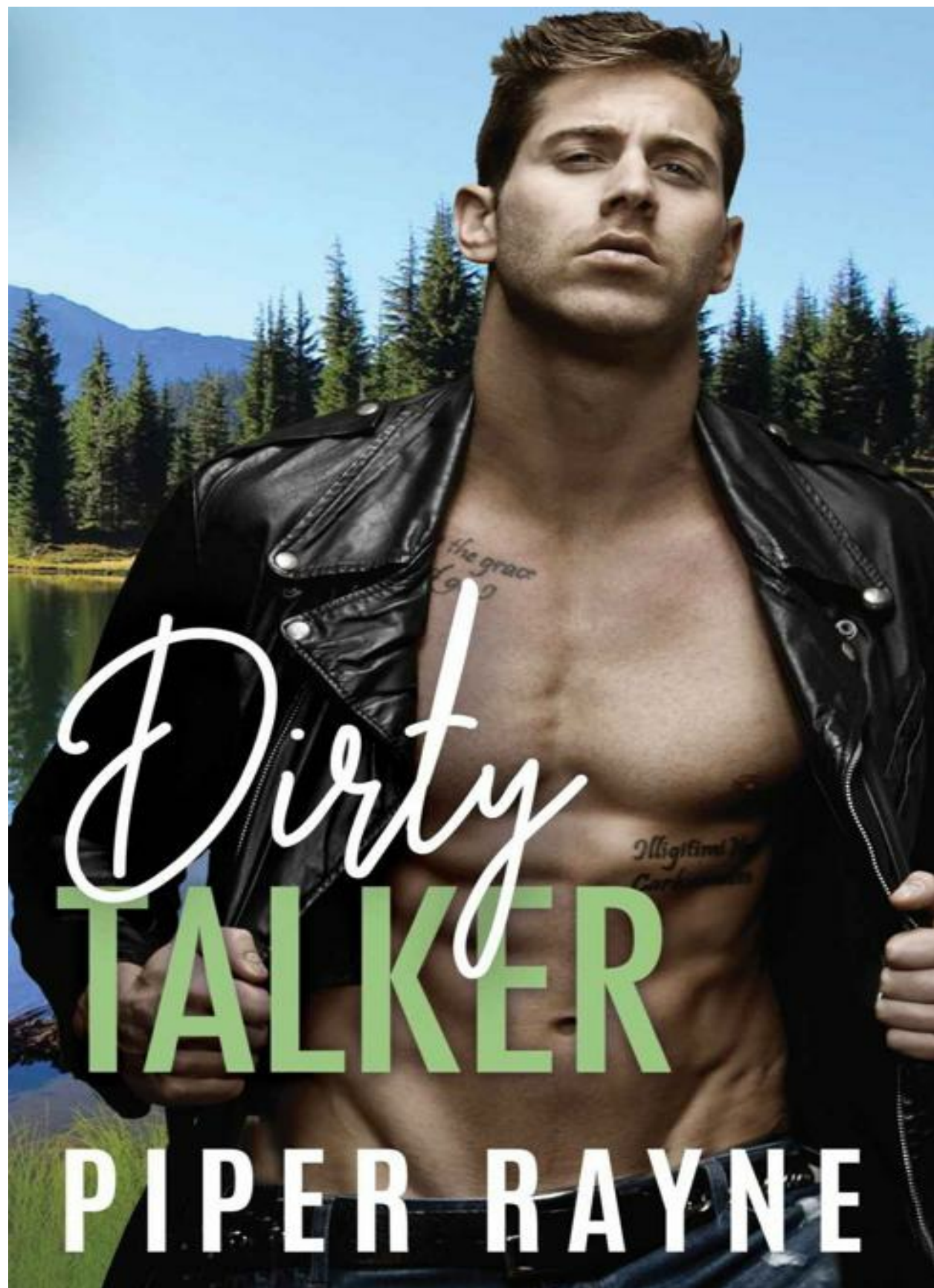
Michelle New—Our graphics gal extraordinaire
Type A Formatting—Formatting the paperback
First Readers—Heather and Angela

And, of course . . . we thank each other. Because two heads are better than one. (Lennon just popped in and is dying to make a double penetration joke at that but we'll resist). ;)

Thank you again! We can't wait for you to meet our single dads—
Marcus, Dane and Garrett!

xoxo

Piper & Rayne



Dirty
TALKER

PIPER RAYNE

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

© 2017 by Piper Rayne

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever.

Cover design: MadHat Covers

Model: Zack Salaun

Photographer: Wander Aguilar

Line Editor: Love N Books

Proof Reader: Shawna Gavas, Behind The Writer

About Dirty Talker

Turn-ons...

Party girls.

Platinum blondes.

Zero expectations.

I used to think that if you could combine all three into one female, you'd have the perfect woman.

Then why the hell does Ava Pearson—an outdoorsy girl, a brunette, and a woman who screams stability and responsibility—seem to be the only woman on my mind lately?

I've got enough obligations without adding any complications to the mix—my son, my bar...well, that's about it. But that's enough for a guy like me.

It's the cupcakes. It's gotta be the cupcakes she bakes that keep me coming back for more. The way to a man's heart is through his stomach, right? Apparently, it's a direct target to his junk, too.

Did I forget to mention that she's my buddy's daughter... another member of the Single Dads Club's daughter?

Ava might say she can handle being friends-with-benefits, but I'm not sure she can. Unfortunately for her, I'm too selfish of a prick to care—until I do.

Dirty
TALKER

Dedication

To all the women who love the fun loving bad boys with soft hearts.

CHAPTER

One

DANE

TYPICAL GHOST TOWN.

Monday nights at my bar, Happy Daze Tavern, always are. With summer about to start and no Monday night football, it's empty of all the townies who'd normally be hanging around. And though it's not good for my business, the tourists will be inundating my small town, Climax Cove, again next year so I'll enjoy it while I can. I love the silence.

If you knew me at all, that statement would confuse you.

I'm the fun guy, the one who has a smart-ass comment for every situation thrown my way. There's not much I take seriously—the polar opposite of my buddies, Marcus and Garrett. Isn't that the beauty of friendships though, you each bring something different to the plate?

"You want another?" I ask the cute brunette drowning her sorrows in my special for tonight—watermelon martini.

She's had three so far. The last one I made weaker than the drinks I make for the twenty-one-year-olds who come in here to celebrate their birthdays.

Hey, I was the loser who passed out on his birthday after two hours of drinking and if I can help it, I'll save someone else from waking up with a black dick drawn on their face. I consider it my civic duty.

She shakes her head, her gaze fixed to the bottom of her glass.

"Wanna talk about it?" I ask, drying the few glasses that were used tonight.

She raises her head to look at me and I can see the fear in her hazel eyes when they meet mine across the mahogany lacquered bar top.

"Oh, you're the dive into my problems and fix them type of bartender?"

She chuckles to herself, swirling the red liquid in her cup.

“Hey, sweetheart, I have enough to do, you just seemed like you needed to get something off your chest.”

And don't think I haven't noticed what a nice chest it is.

I shrug and swivel around to the row of bottles lined up like soldiers behind the bar, starting to take stock of what I have left.

“Well, since you so kindly asked, my mom is getting married to a class A douchebag and has decided to sell my childhood home and move to Norway. What a woman from Kansas has in common with someone like *him*, I have no clue.” She raises her glass to her plump lips and downs the rest of her drink.

“You're upset because your mom has decided to live her life? What were you expecting? To come home in five years and have your mom make you tomato soup and grilled cheese? Maybe play with your Barbies and look at your ribbons from the third-grade spelling bee?”

I lean back on the bar and cross my arms, watching her jaw drop lower and lower and lower until her plump lips form the perfect ‘O’.

I'm trying really hard not to picture what she'd look like with my dick in it. I swear I am.

“Seriously? That's you consoling your customer?”

My tongue smacks off the roof of my mouth. “See that's where people have it all wrong. Bartenders aren't for warm hugs and pats on the back, they're for making you see reality. Yours is that your mom has raised you and now it's her time to live a little.”

“What the hell does a guy like you know about it?”

Her eyes roam up and down my body. My worn-in jeans and ratty Happy Daze Tavern t-shirt probably don't make me appear like an upstanding single dad. She likely just sees an incredibly fit, attractive guy in his prime and though she won't admit it, she's seconds away from drool dribbling out of the corner of her mouth.

What? I'm just being honest.

I push off the bar and rest my crossed arms on the bar top right in front of her. “Let's just say, I know plenty. You look like you were well taken care of, so, I'd say your mom did her job. It's time for baby bird to leave the nest.”

Her narrowed eyes stare into mine, testing me to see if I'll break. Little does she know that I was the champ of the fourth-grade staring contest. Poor Jenny Geiser became cross-eyed because of her super competitive nature and

trying to beat me out on the playground.

“You might have a point, but you could say it nicer.”

She blinks and I back away from her personal space, secretly scoring another point in the win column in my mind. Juvenile, I know.

“Why? It’s the same end result.” I shrug.

“Because being nice to someone—”

“When was I not nice? I spoke the truth, that’s all.” I nod to her glass.
“Another?”

Her gaze moves to the clock. “No, I shouldn’t.”

“Okay.” My hand moves to take her glass but she slides it away.

“You probably have some hot date later?” she asks.

Now, I want you to take note of what just happened. She thought I was an asshole two minutes ago when I was giving her some tough love. Now, she’s either looking for lust or love.

“No date.” I keep my reply short.

“Your girlfriend waiting for you?”

Girls have no idea how easy they are to figure out. If she just asked me if I wanted to go back to her apartment and fuck, I’d say yes. We don’t need to waste time on the mental gymnastics.

“No girlfriend, and before you ask, no wife.”

She sits there silent, watching as I dry a glass for a moment. “Well, thank you for the advice.” She lays down a twenty on the bar top and stands to leave.

“You from around here?” I ask, not really wanting this sweet, young thing to leave.

“No. I mean, it’s complicated. I’ve been here before but I just returned for the summer.”

I set the now dry glass back in its spot under the bar. “You probably shouldn’t be driving home.”

She waves me off. “Yeah, I know. Don’t worry I’m not going to.”

I pick her twenty up off the bar. “You want me to call ol’ Mo to drive you home? He’s the town’s unofficial taxi. Fair warning though his cataracts are getting pretty bad and he’s half deaf.”

She scrunches her eyebrows at me. “That’s okay. Thanks for your...advice.”

I put her money in the till and when I turn back she’s already at the door of the bar. “Sure thing. Have a good one.” I wave my hand and hear the door

shut behind her.

Fifteen minutes later, I'm closing up the bar when I spot the same girl staring into the window of Bread Box Bakery. Her long hair is twisted up in one of those messy buns all the girls seem to wear now, exposing her neck.

I will not think about what it would be like to run my tongue along the skin there.

I will not think about what it would be like to run my tongue along the skin there.

Damn, I just thought about it.

Oh well, sue me.

"Do you not have a home?" I call across the desolate street.

She startles and swivels around, finding me already crossing the street.

"Yes, I have an apartment. I was just looking."

"Have you been?"

She crinkles her eyebrows obviously not understand my question.

"Norma makes the best pies. My favorite is the chocolate. Those little chocolate shavings." I close my eyes and rub my tummy, as though I just popped one in my mouth. "Delicious."

She clears her throat. "No. I've never had them."

"Well, make that a pit stop this summer because..." I lean in close and lower my voice. "Rumor is she's closing shop at the end of the season."

For the first time tonight, the gold flecks in her eyes sparkle. "Really?"

"Why would I lie?"

She turns her body back to the window case, her hand plants on the glass.

"Listen." I look around seeing no one in sight, which isn't unusual at eleven o'clock on a Monday night. "I'm fairly sure that the last crime that happened in Climax Cove was when Ross McGee sold a library book at his garage sale, but I have this manly obligation to make sure you get home safe."

She grants me her attention, narrows her eyes and crosses her arms over her chest. She's cute with her jeans and Chucks, though her t-shirt could cling a little more if you ask me, but she's got curves and a stellar ass as I just happened to notice when I approached from across the street.

Oh, give me a break, I'm a male, aren't I?

She cocks a hip and puts her hand on her waist. "What makes you think I'd let some bartender walk me home and find out where I live?"

I hold my hands up in the air. "Okay, then you can come to my house." I

grin.

“What about *all* your responsibilities?”

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, please take note that she doesn't immediately tell me to piss off. She could've shot me down by now, but she hasn't.

“Lucky for you, I'm done for the night.”

I don't go into specifics that my son, Toby, is at a sleepover. Rule number one in the Single Dads Club is you don't tell a girl you're a dad right away. Especially if you're just looking for a one and done.

“Lucky for me? Maybe lucky for you.” She arches one of her dark eyebrows.

I step closer, my hand landing on the glass beside her head. “Either way, you haven't declined my offer. I could make those troubles go away.”

Her eyes meet mine and I do my best to let her see that I'll light up her world one orgasm at a time. She shifts her stance. Her tomboy vibe doesn't scream that she's a one-night stand kinda of girl, but I can tell she wants me nonetheless.

“Don't sugar talk me like I'm some bimbo without a brain. I know the score if I go home with you. Right now, I'm just trying to figure out if you're worth it.”

I pull my phone out of my pocket. “Should I call some references for you?”

She rolls her eyes. “Spare me.”

Weaving out from under my arm, she walks straight toward my car.

“How did you know the Mustang was mine?” I ask.

She walks backward now in order to face me. “I didn't need to score a thirty-five on my ACT to know you're the type of guy who buys a sports car in this town.”

A smile overtakes my entire face. I like this girl. She's a little spitfire and it seems like she can go toe-to-toe with me. Not many can.

She's quiet the entire ride and except for a text I notice she sends someone, she stares out the window as we wind through downtown to my house on the beach. It's not much, but it's made a home for Toby and myself for the past five years.

I park in my driveway, and she climbs out of the car. Usually, I don't take girls back to my place, but I can see she wasn't about to ask me to hers and after the shit I dealt with today down at the county office with permits and

crap, I need to bury myself in someone tonight.

Yeah, yeah, don't be all holier than now. I didn't tie her up and kidnap her. She came willingly.

Click.

I blink at the light and when the round circles disappear I see that she's fiddling with her phone.

She smiles, tucks it into her back pocket and strolls up to my front door.

Woman on a mission. I like it.

"Sorry, that was a precaution. If you're thinking of doing anything to me, my friends will hunt you down and take pliers to your penis now that there's evidence on my phone. Even though," her eyes roam up and down my body again, "I can probably take you."

I squeeze by her on the front porch, inserting my key into the lock. Take that last part for the euphemism it was.

"Take me? Have you not noticed I'm about a foot taller than you and weigh probably sixty pounds more?" I cock my eyebrow and open the door.

She slides under my arm and walks right into my house before I've even opened the door all the way.

"For someone who thinks I might murder them, you sure are in a hurry," I say.

The door closes behind us, and I take a quick glance around ensuring there's no sign of Toby or his existence. Thankfully I forced him to clean up his stuff this morning so there's really no sign of him living here like when he was little.

"What can I say, I'm eager for some fun." She toes out of her Chucks and wiggles her toes at the same time she strips off her shirt.

Well, damn, I don't have to worry about her finding out about Toby, this girl is ready for the bedroom already.

I push my own shoes off, reaching down to take off my socks and when I strip off my t-shirt, her eyes zero in on my number one asset—the groin cleavage.

"You're a fan of the cleavage?" I smirk at her.

She scrunches her eyes, trying to figure out what I'm talking about.

"The V shape of my torso. Groin Cleavage?" I point to the deep indents of muscle near my hips that lead down to the big prize. "It may be one of my best features, but I promise, that's not all I offer."

I stalk toward her, unbuttoning my pants and letting them pool at my feet,

stepping out of them never breaking my stride.

Practice, ladies, practice.

She walks backward, clearly taken back by my aggressive behavior and it's guaranteed, she doesn't do this very often. It's my job to show her how great sex without strings can be.

CHAPTER

Two

DANE

MY FINGERS MOVE to the button of her jeans as my lips descend on hers. A small moan escapes, causing my balls to clench and I press against her, just enough so that she's pinned to the wall behind her.

With one push, her jeans fall to the floor and I pull away from our kiss to look her over.

Damn, I am one lucky mofo.

She's in a pink matching panty and bra set that fits like a glove to every one of her curves. My dick rises to full salute and I'm at war with myself because though I definitely want to see her naked, I'm hesitant to take them off her because she's rocking this look.

"Damn, you're hot," I mumble.

She places her two hands on either side of my head and pulls me into a hard kiss. I can't remember the last time I had a demanding girl who knew what she wanted and wasn't afraid to use and abuse me. Here's hoping she scratches and bites, too.

Climbing me like a tree, her legs wrap around my waist, and my hands slide under the panties covering her ass. When I squeeze her flesh in my hands, it draws another moan from her throat.

"Bedroom?" she whispers in my ear and then her teeth nibble on my lobe and pull.

"I like the way you think."

Her tits are pressed against my chest, the hardness of her nipples poking through her bra, teasing me with what I hope will be in my mouth in less than two minutes.

We reach the bedroom, and I toss her on the bed, strip down my boxer briefs, and climb toward her.

She spreads her legs and I nestle between them, letting my dick tease her center.

Her fingers flex over my shoulders, and I pull down one of her bra cups, sucking her nipple into my mouth.

“Oh,” she pants. “More.”

I scrape my teeth along her nipple before drawing it into my mouth again, then release it with a loud pop.

“Tell me, how do you want me to play with your tits? Do you want me to squeeze them, bite them, tweak your nipples between my fingers...fuck them?” I rub my thumb along her nipple, my chin resting on her chest, staring up at her.

“What you’re doing is fine,” she says a little breathlessly.

“Fine isn’t a word in my vocabulary, babe. Earth shattering is though.” I raise both eyebrows in question.

She shifts under me, looking a little confused and I realize that this girl has no idea what turns her on. I grin at her, happy to be the one to teach her.

“Want me to find all the spots that make you wet and boneless with pleasure?” I ask.

A smile turns up her lips and my dick twitches wanting the attention, the attention of said beautiful mouth.

“Sure.”

I reach under her and undo her bra, sliding the straps down her shoulders to leave her bare for me.

“You have perfect tits. I’m gonna enjoy playing with them using my tongue and teeth.”

Another sigh out of her.

Palming her left tit, my mouth devours her right, making good on the promise of my words. By the time I move to her other one, she’s squirming and wiggling under me. Her legs lock around my waist, and she grinds against me, looking for any type of friction to give her some relief.

After one last bite to her nipple, I look up at her. “You want me?” I ask.

She nods enthusiastically. My kinda girl.

Enthusiasm goes a long way in the bedroom, ladies.

“Do you want my cock inside of you? Stroking you so deep that you’re clenching around me while you come?”

“Mmm...” She moans and bites her plump bottom lip.

I inch farther down, casting a row of kisses down her flat stomach. When I reach the apex of her thighs, her hands bunch the sheets in her fists.

“Tonight, this pussy is mine, and I plan to feast until I get my fill.”

Her eyes widen at my crude words, but she doesn't try to move me away.

Pushing her thighs up, I situate myself between her legs. I inhale deeply and lock gazes with her over her mound. “You smell like heaven.”

Her face flushes red and her back arches. Damn, she looks so sexy lying under me, allowing me to pleasure her and do as I see fit.

First, I suck the satin fabric of her panties into my mouth using my tongue to moisten them thoroughly and let her feel just enough to push her to the good side of crazy. Eventually I pull the fabric aside and swipe my tongue along her slit.

“Oh...” She tilts her pelvis, silently begging me for more.

“Perfection.” She smells and tastes a little sweet and musky at the same time, like the black currant martini I made in honor of the Fourth of July last year. I'm never going to be able to make another one of those drinks without sportin' wood again.

Another red blush fills her cheeks. Damn, a man could get used to that sheepish innocent type seduction. Any man other than me.

Rip.

I rip each side of her panties, and a low groan escapes her.

“I need all of you and these,” I hang the fabric off my finger, flinging them across the room, “would have taken too long to get off.”

Without any further discussion, my head finds its new home between her legs, licking and sucking every drop she'll give me. She tries to close her thighs when I twirl my tongue around her clit, but my hands are too fast, pressing them to the mattress below her.

“Oh my God. You're so good.”

I peek from one eye to see her head fallen on the mattress and her right hand now fondling her tit. I contemplate bringing her all the way to orgasm, teasing her until I plunge into the depths of her pussy just to feel the clench around me.

I have a feeling this girl has never had sex where you masturbate to the memory for days and since I'm a giver and everything, I'm going to deliver.

Relieving her thigh from my hand, I thrust two fingers into her warmth and she bucks so hard, I'm afraid her pelvic bone will knock my teeth in.

“I knew you’d be good, but seriously, what have you taken, sex mastery classes from some guru or something?”

My mouth leaves her now wet and dripping pussy to find her eyes zeroed in on me. “If you can form a coherent sentence, I’m not doing my job.”

I push the threshold of her depths arching until a low inaudible sound ruptures from her throat. There you go. That’s it, baby, give it to me.

My tongue twirls making her clit my own plaything until she bucks again, her thighs tense, her back arches and she grips the sheet so tight in her fists her knuckles turn white. I don’t relent the pace of my fingers or my tongue until her defeated body falls to the mattress and her fingers weave through the strands of my hair.

Checking up on her, I rub my chin along her stomach until we’re face to face.

“Would you like to find out how delicious you taste?”

I don’t wait for her to answer. Instead, I bend down and kiss the rest of her breath from her lungs. Her fingers continue to fiddle with the strands of hair on my neck as my dick now gets teased with how wet and waiting she is for it.

She moans when I break the kiss and reach across the bed to my dresser. Her hands explore my body while I dig to find the condoms I hide so Toby never finds them. Finally, with my dick begging for relief, a foil packet miraculously is in my grasp.

“Feel honored, I haven’t worked that hard for a condom in ages.”

She giggles, the first sign out of her that she’s the innocent girl I pegged her for back at the bar.

The giggle fades quickly and she rolls me on my back, taking the condom wrapper from my grip.

“Allow me.” She smirks.

I clasp my hands behind my head. “I like this.”

“Well,” She rips the foil open. “I do like to repay favors.”

No way this girl has had a lot of one-night stands, but she knows how to put on a condom, which means I’m not her first bull. Thank fucking God.

“I’m sure we could work out a payment schedule.”

She giggles again. This heart spurring, warming laugh that does something to my stomach.

Then she straddles me, guiding my dick inside her and this time *my* head is the one that falls back into my pillows.

“Shit, you’re as tight as a fist.”

Those gold flecks in her eyes sparkle again and her hands land on my chest as she rides me like a professional cowgirl. Give the girl the bull-riding prize.

“And these tits are so fuckable, I can’t keep my hands to myself.” I cup each one, massaging them in my palms. Nothing like a good set of C’s.

When I buck up, she cries out. “You feel amazing,” she says, arching her back and letting her hands land on my thighs.

“Your pussy is meant for my dick. Perfect. Fucking. Fit.” I punctuate the last three words as I thrust up into her.

She eyes me below her, a redness in her cheeks that could be from the compliments or the fact she’s expending all her energy on top of me. Her hips rotate faster, her hands gripping my thighs.

Reluctantly, I move my hands to her hips to keep the rhythm we’ve established and my gaze zeros in on her tits as they sway and bounce with every movement.

We grind, our fucking fast and desperate. I can’t get enough of her, and I find myself inventorying the many types of booze behind my bar in order to slow myself down and let this moment last longer. She’s soft under my hands but her touch is firm and tense as though she’s thinking what I am—how the hell can we prolong this?

Needing to get as deep as I can, I flip her over onto her back. She rolls over one more time and doesn’t delay getting onto her hands and knees.

That’s what I’m talking about.

“Perfect tits and a perfect ass. How’d I get so lucky?”

My fingers mold to her hips and I thrust my straining cock into her fast and fierce. I draw myself out and slam back in. We both groan. Needing to be closer to her, I slow my movements, my chest resting on top of her back while I plant open mouth kisses along her skin. She arches her head back giving me access to her neck. But it’s not enough, I crave her kiss, so, I reach across and turn her chin toward me so I can ravish her mouth while my cock grinds in and out of her.

The spark between us ignites into an inferno. We both part from the kiss. My pace increases and her hands fist the sheets while her forehead rests on the bed.

“You ready to come all over my cock?” *I sure as fuck am ready for her to.*

“Yes.” Her voice is breathless and the tone I expect from a woman when I’m fucking her.

“I’m gonna come, but I’m a gentleman.” I smack her ass. “Ladies first.”

The minute my palm makes contact with her ass cheek, her pussy clenches around me, her back arches, her arms straighten.

I pump one more time then still inside of her, half wishing I wasn’t wearing a condom so that I could feel her scorching heat on my own skin. I’ll be imagining tonight while I’m stroking my stick for at least a week. If she stays and I can have her again tonight, it’ll be two weeks worth of material for my beat off wheel footage.

Her trembling body falls to the mattress, and I slide to the side of her, catching my own breath.

She looks over at me with brown strands of hair sticking to her sweat covered forehead. “I’m a little scared to ask how many partners you’ve had since you’re that good.”

I slide down the bed. “Stick around and I’ll show you a few more tricks.” I wink and walk into my bathroom, dispose of the condom in the trash and head back into the bedroom.

She’s already positioning her bra back over her perfect rack.

“I should get going. How far away are we from town?”

I lean my back along the headboard. “Stay awhile.” I slide the strap of her bra back down her arm.

“Isn’t the point of a one-night stand that you leave after?” She lets a nervous chuckle escape.

I eliminate the distance between us, my lips hovering over hers. “The point of a one-night stand is to fuck *all* night long and then you leave in the morning and we never see each other again. I think I have at least three more orgasms in me. You?” I smirk and her lips turn up in a smile. “Is that a yes?” I pepper open-mouthed kisses along her collarbone while my hand slides the other side of her bra down.

“You do make a convincing argument.” Her hands slide around to the back of my head, locking me in place.

I’m true to my word, proving my argument three more times while we fall asleep, wake up and bang throughout the night.

When I wake up in the morning, she’s gone, and so is my Mustang with a note.

To the great and powerful O guru,

Last night was fun. Had to get to work. I'll park your car outside the bar for you and tuck the keys under the mat.

*Yours screaming,
So Satisfied*

What kind of one-night stand takes your car the next morning? It's called the walk of shame, not grand theft auto.

CHAPTER

Three

DANE

Three Months Later...

“**DAD**, it wasn’t my fault, I was just joking around with her!” Toby’s excuse rushes out as soon as he walks through Happy Daze doors.

I know, kids shouldn’t be in bars, but Happy Daze Tavern is now Happy Daze Tavern and Grill, so technically this is a restaurant too.

“First day of school and the principal calls me?” I continue handing out the drinks to the Single Dads Club crew for the meeting tonight. None of them will judge me on the fact that my kid decided to act like he was going to kiss a girl in his class.

What can I say? The apple didn’t fall far.

“She was all drama. I mean, I wasn’t actually going to kiss her. I don’t even like her.” He sits on a stool and plops his backpack on the bar.

I grab him a juice box from the fridge and place it in front of him.

“Just stay away from her.”

He pulls out a stack of papers, and I sign the letter sent out to say we’ve discussed the problem.

“She’s dumb.”

We exchange worksheets and notebooks until I’ve seen all the assignments he’s brought home and provided all the required signatures. Seriously, schools these days do not trust kids. I have to mark off whether he read, initial his planner and acknowledge what grades he got on any and all

tests. You'd think I was Michael Jordan based on the number of autographs I scribble every day.

"That's not going to help your case. Just play with Cooper and the boys."

His eyes roll to the back of his head and then his forehead thuds to the bar. Who knew eight-year-old boys had such a flare for the dramatic. I didn't even punish him.

"Cooper is the one who started the whole thing! He dared me to kiss her."

I hold my hand up in the air. "What? You just said you were never going to kiss her."

He lets out an exasperated breath as though I'm the annoying one in this exchange.

"I wasn't! Jeez, you just don't understand."

"Parents never do," Charlie adds as she slides behind me to work her shift. After securing her apron, she leans over and rustles his mop of brown hair. "In ten years, you can escape him," she whispers loud enough for me to hear.

"Nice," I comment, and she shrugs, bouncing on the balls of her feet down to the other side of the bar. Of course, she's in a good mood, Garrett's sitting over by the dartboard and she has an unrestricted view.

"Hey, I'm always on your side. Remember that." Now it's my hands rustling his hair, but he quickly slides back so I can no longer reach him. I swear I was all about Legos and riding my bike at eight. I don't remember all these hormonal mood swings.

"After I do my homework, can I go over to the new bakery?"

My gaze goes to the window and to the bakery across the street. They opened their doors today and it hasn't escaped me that there's been a constant flow of customers in and out. I hadn't been by yet, but Marcus brought over some cookies from there and they tasted okay.

"Yeah. Sure. I have the meeting and then we'll be heading home anyway."

He nods, knowing the drill. I wish Toby had a normal childhood and not a dad who owns a bar, but I grew up as a bar owner's son and look at me—I turned out more than okay. The difference is, I had a mom who helped to raise me. But the last thing Toby needs in his life is his mother.

Leaving Toby to do his work, I walk toward Charlie who is currently pretending to be wiping down the counter. The only problem is that her chin rests on her hand and she's mindlessly buffing the same circular pattern into

the bar top below her rag while her gaze fixates on Garrett. Not that he notices.

“Why don’t you just ask him out?”

She startles, straightening her back and tossing the rag under the counter.

“What? Who?”

I raise my eyebrow, crossing my arms over my chest. “Let’s not play dumb,” I say.

“What’s up with Toby? What happened at school today?”

I wave her concern off. “Just messing around with some girl. Nothing huge, but nothing like having to speak to Principal Bundy on the first day of school. I’m sure she loved that.”

“Well, you do still hold a reputation at Climax Cove Elementary.” She laughs.

“They should make a plaque.” I position my hands in the air. “Dane Murray, Most Detentions.”

“Not exactly something they want to broadcast.” Her eyes veer through the front windows of the bar. “Did you see the new bakery?”

“Clever name, Mad Batter,” I remark.

“I know, right? She loves Alice in Wonderland.”

“You know the woman who bought it from Norma?” I ask.

A couple months ago, Charlie brought in cupcakes that literally melted in my mouth. Then all of a sudden, she stopped and when I asked her about it, she said she’d ask for more. She never did bring any more in and as time went on, I must’ve forgotten about them. My mouth waters at the memory.

“It’s my friend. The cupcake girl.” A smirk crosses her lips.

“Really? Shit, I’ve wasted a whole day.”

I walk away, rounding the bar top. “Let’s go get a cupcake and then you can finish your math.”

Toby jumps off, the pencil rolling off the bar and onto the floor. I don’t have to repeat myself. Toby and sweets are like peanut butter and jelly. Never one without the other.

“Dad, I’m old enough.” He shrugs his hand out of mine as we’re crossing the street.

When did eight become thirteen?

Placing my hand on his elbow, I guide him through the cars driving through downtown.

Pink, blue and green balloons are on either side of the bakery and a sign

that says, 'Now Open' hangs above the door. Inside, cute white tables are filled with moms and their daughters eating cupcakes and drinking tea or coffee.

Not in the mood to chitchat, I walk to the case where there are still a few rows of cupcakes in different flavors lining the glass case.

"Toby, do you want a sample?"

We both look down at the small voice, finding my buddy's daughter, Lily, holding a tray full of little frosted cakes.

"You got a job?" Toby asks Lily and she smiles.

"I'm helping. Cat said she'd buy me the new Barbie if I did a good job."

Toby laughs and grabs a sample.

"You look adorable," I say to Lily who is dressed up as Alice in Wonderland. Her blonde hair a perfect match to the real thing.

"Thanks."

Then she's gone, and I'm trying to see over the crowd of customers who Charlie's friend is. First Charlie, and now Lily. I have my suspicions, but I could be wrong. It does happen on occasion.

Finally, a lifetime later, Toby and I are at the counter and Cat stands there with her blonde hair pinned back and an apron that says, 'We are all Mad Here.'

"Cat?" I ask, peeking my head around her, trying to see through the four by six cut-out window into the kitchen area in the back.

"Dane!" She says my name loud enough for everyone in the restaurant to hear and a clatter of something dropping in the kitchen rings out into the front part of the bakery.

"Miss Cat. Is this your bakery?" Toby asks beside me, and she shifts her gaze to him.

"Hi, Toby!" Again with the loud talking.

I know before I even see her who it is. I may not have known her name the night I took her home, but I sure as shit know it now because she's been on my jock ever since she found out I was the single dad of Toby Murray, a camper assigned to her over the summer.

"No, I don't own it, but you know who does," Cat says in a sugary sweet voice.

"I do?" he asks, clearly confused about what's going on.

"Mad Baker," she calls over her shoulder. "There are a couple people here to see you."

A second later, a pink-cheeked Ava Pearson walks out from around the corner with a red and black checkered apron wrapped around her stamped with ‘Do you want to pet my white rabbit?’

Is she fucking kidding me? There’s kids around and she has on an apron inviting any Tom, Dick and Harry to pet her rabbit?

“Miss Ava!” Toby pushes me into the counter to get to her.

She opens her arms and wraps them around his body into a tight hug. Since summer camp, they’ve had a bond. He might have been a hellion, but after I distanced myself from her and stopped trying to get her back into my bed, it got better for Toby. His needs come before I do. See what I did there?

“You bake all this?” he asks, and she nods, her gaze finding mine across the room.

“Congratulations,” I say, trying to act as though I don’t want to smash my fist into the glass case like The Incredible Hulk and crumble them all in my mouth like Cookie Monster.

“Thank you.” She looks to Cat, whose eyes are bouncing between us with a fucking smirk on her lips. She’s so wrong with her assumption, but then again, she probably doesn’t even know that I’ve had Ava already. A few hundred times if you count all the showers I’ve beat off to using my memories of her.

“Cat, give them anything they want.” Her gaze flicks to mine for a microsecond. “On the house.”

“What’s ‘on the house’ mean?” Toby asks, as Ava tucks the longer strands of his hair behind his ear.

“Free. You pick whatever you want and it’s free.” She smiles down at him and his eyes light up.

“Thanks, Miss Ava!”

He runs over to the case, and Cat opens up a box ready for his order.

“So, you’re the one.”

“Excuse me?” She walks over to her display shelf, straightening some teacups.

“Charlie used to bring your cupcakes into the bar. They’re amazing.”

She nods, her attention staying on the ceramic teapots for sale. “Good to know you enjoyed them. I love seeing people’s expressions when they’re eating my goodies.” She turns around, shoving her hands in the pockets of her apron.

I avoid the obvious joke she’s led me into since I’m not sure she’d

appreciate it. Still, there's about a million different ways our re-acquaintance could play out here.

"You cut me off." I don't ask because it's clear she did.

She nods once to confirm my suspicions. After our two times together, and stealing my car, we've had a love-hate relationship that teetered more on the hate side. Especially after I found out her dad was the camp owner, Vic Pearson, my half-Brazilian buddy I know could sure hurt me if he wanted to.

"You act like I'm a dealer."

"Those cupcakes might as well have been crack."

I won't tell her, but I went through withdrawal, sampling cupcakes at every store only to find nothing comparable. I even ordered them online and had them delivered. Nothing was the same as those gooey, moist cupcakes Charlie had brought in. Which now I find out were made by my secret fling, if you can even call it that.

She smiles, obviously flattered by my cupcake crack addiction.

"So, why'd you do it?"

She shrugs. "I really need to get back to work." She turns, but I take her elbow and swing her back around.

"I thought those nights together were mutual?" I whisper, so we won't be the town gossip. Marcus and Cat's affair is down to embers now and the gossip queens of Climax Cove are looking for new material to fill their text boxes.

"They were. Don't worry, you didn't break my heart or anything." She shrugs.

I stare at her, and those gold flecks that seem to spark with any type of strong emotion she's feeling are void.

"Well, good. I like to make it clear that nothing more will happen." I shift my weight on my feet.

She smiles, one that doesn't reach her eyes. "You were crystal clear, Dane. Especially when you blamed me for not telling you that I was Vic's daughter. If I recall, you weren't too worried about my name that first night." She disappears into the kitchen, and a feeling of guilt and shame slips into me from my subconscious. The argument a few weeks into camp after I found out she was Toby's camp counselor floating back to my conscious. Yeah, I was a dick, but she wasn't exactly a sweetheart like the real Alice in Wonderland either.

"Here you go," Cat hands me a box. "I did an assortment, but make sure

you try the Neapolitan one. I think you'll like it."

I take the box from her hands, my gaze still on the kitchen where clanking and pounding echoes out of.

"Do me a favor?" My eyes flick to hers, and she straightens her back. "Tell the Mad Batter I'd like to order two dozen chocolate cupcakes with whipped cream frosting and chocolate shavings."

"Oh, I'm not sure she's doing special orders," Cat insists, already shaking her head.

"I'll be here tomorrow to pick them up."

"Dane..."

I turn around and spot Toby chomping down on a chocolate and white cookie near the door. "I'll pay double for the inconvenience."

Not bothering to see Cat's reaction, I tap Lily on the head on our way out.

"Keep pushing."

She smiles, and the door chime sounds as we push open the glass doors.

CHAPTER

Four

THE DOOR CHIME rings and I send a small prayer up that it was Dane leaving.

I glimpse out the cut-out into the storefront and catch him and Toby crossing the street.

“What’s going on with you two?” Cat asks, popping up in front of me and blocking my line of vision.

“Nothing.” I circle back around to hide in the kitchen.

I asked for Cat’s help because come on, she’s like sugar on a stick. Sweet and sophisticated, she could talk anyone into buying my goodies. Baked goods, get your mind out of the gutter.

The door between the kitchen and the storefront swings open and Cat pushes through to join me. “I think you’re lying. You’re always so angry around him. Why?” She saddles up on a stool in front of the frosting station.

“He’s a condescending asshole who always gets what he wants.”

She nods. “That about sums up Dane Murray, but why do you care?”

She’s fishing, and I don’t blame her especially since she’s all in love and stuff with his best friend Marcus now. The fact we’ll be thrown together is inevitable. She probably doesn’t want it awkward for everyone.

“The way he acted during camp this summer. I mean he propositions me at the lake with the other campers there, including his son. Constantly undermined my authority with the kids, coming in and stealing the show when he picked Toby up. I mean, I feel bad for Toby having a father who feels the need to be the center of attention all the time.” I pick up the pink icing bag to finish the cotton candy cupcakes I had a special order for.

“Okkkaaayyy,” Cat purposely draws out the word, and I know she doesn’t get it because she doesn’t know the crux of the situation. I slept with him and I felt weird about it since the second I woke up the next morning.

“Obviously not weird enough not to go back for seconds.

My subconscious sneers at me. Whatever.

It was my first one-night stand. I’m not upset that I did it. Dane Murray is clearly an expert on pleasing a woman which is the only reason I went back for round two.

It was the week after when he made me *really* regret my decision.

I had worked that entire week on my cabin to make it fun and educational. I needed to prove to not only my dad but also my peers, that I could do this. My dad, Vic, owns the camp and started it years ago for children of single parents to spend the summer doing fun activities so their parents could work. Then one weekend out of the month the parents are welcome to spend the night with their camper and fish, swim or hike in the mountains.

Since it was my first year, I got a day group, the eight-year-olds. Thankful I wouldn’t be spending the night in the cabins and could have my own apartment. I was excited for what the summer would bring. Then my mom lobbed the grenade, telling me that after the summer, I’d have no home to return to. That it was time I grew up and decided what I wanted to do with my life. She was marrying her boyfriend—whom I hated—and moving to the other side of the world.

Which landed me on the stool of Happy Daze Tavern with Dane serving me drinks. He thinks he got one over on me, making my last couple drinks virgins, but I knew. That was one of the only reasons I went home with him—because instead of plying me with drinks to make me an easy lay, he did the opposite.

That night could very well be the best sex I’ll ever have in my life. Not that I’ll ever boost his ego even more by confessing that.

A couple of weeks later there was Dane, dropping his son off to my cabin for his day at camp. Something fueled inside me and I’m not even sure what. The fact he took me home when he had a son? When I replay the conversation, I do recall him implying he had something big he was responsible for, but he wasn’t specific.

I greeted Toby, told him to join the other campers and then politely asked

to speak to Dane alone outside the cabin.

“Do you steal the car of everyone you bang or should I feel special?” He had his cocky grin splashed across his face, and his hands tucked into the pockets of his black track pants.

I swallowed hard when I thought of the groin cleavage hidden under the white t-shirt. The memory of my fingers exploring the curves and crevices of that perfect V were front and center in my mind.

“I borrowed it and I did it so I wouldn’t disturb you.”

He chuckled, rolling back on his flip-flops. “I appreciate it, but next time call Al’s Taxi.”

I might have been new to town, but everyone knew Al only does pick-ups and drop-offs between seven and seven. Most of his clientele are residents of Forest Hill Retirement Home.

“There won’t be a next time.”

That grin grew wider and cockier. My hand itched to slap him. His eyes flowed up and down my body, igniting my skin like an uncontrolled wildfire.

“I have to say this whole you being Toby’s counselor puts a damper on it, sure, but I think we could hide it. Though, from what I remember you’re quite the screamer.” He licked his lips.

My hands clenched at my sides for a second. “Not going to happen.” I placed my hands on my hips.

“Hey, sweetheart. Dane.” My dad walked by the cabin with his group of teenage survivalists.

“Hey.”

“So, that’s it then.” The grin left his lips and he huffed a sarcastic laugh.

“What?” I ask.

“You’re already taken.” He raised his hands up in the air. “Listen, I don’t take another guy’s chick and sure as shit don’t take Vic’s.”

He started backing up and I should have left well enough alone. Let him believe what he wanted, but I spoke up, which twisted things more.

“He’s my dad, asshole.”

His eyes widened, and he stumbled to the side as though I just shot him with a tranquilizer. “You’re Vic Pearson’s daughter?”

“Yes,” I answered, and he stepped back farther than he did when he thought I was my dad’s girlfriend.

He looked at me long and hard. “I see it now. The resemblance. Fuck me. Listen, I’ll keep quiet if you do, but why the fuck didn’t you tell me?”

“Excuse me, I don’t recall you telling me you were a father.” I crossed my arms over my chest, and his eyes dipped to my breasts. I didn’t change my stance because he could look, but he was never touching again.

“Fuck, let’s just make sure we keep our distance from now on, okay?” He was practically half way up the hill by then.

“Fine with me! You weren’t that memorable anyway.”

Why did I have to stir the pot?

He barreled back down the hill and leaned in really close to me.

“Don’t undermine what we shared. You and I both know what happened in that room. We just need to keep it in the beat off reel now, got it?”

A shiver ran up my spine with him so close to me.

“Got it.”

He nodded and then all but jogged away where I spied him meeting up with another dad at the top of the hill as they disappeared into the woods toward the parking lot.

Stupid me sought him out at the bar a few days later because I couldn’t get him off my mind. What happened in his office is still burned into my memory as is my discovery the next day. Then we had our rip-roaring fight after Toby got in trouble at camp one day and that sealed the deal. Dane Murray could go to hell for all I cared.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” Cat interrupts me.

I place the final pink cupcake in the box.

“Dane wants two dozen cupcakes for tomorrow.”

“I’m not taking special orders.”

Cat’s gaze flicks to the box I’m covering and taping.

“From him,” I finish, and she places an order sheet down on the table in front of me.

I read the order. Chocolate with whipped cream and chocolate shavings. What the hell is he up to?

“Do you have his phone number?” I ask Cat, and her eyes widen.

“Um, let me see.” She pulls her phone out, but we both know she has it. “Yeah.” She scribbles it down on the order form and slides it back over to me.

I wipe my hands on my apron and pull my own phone out, texting.

Me: For a special order, I need a full day's notice and half the deposit.

The three dots appear instantly. Does this man have nothing better to do in his life?

Dane: Okay, I'll pick them up in two days. I'll send Toby over with the deposit. Unless you'd rather me hand deliver it? I'm good with my hands...as you know.

I tighten my grip on my phone and ignore his innuendo.

Me: Toby can drop off the deposit and pick up the cupcakes.

Dane: Toby's running it over right now, but sorry, you'll have to see my smiling face for pick-up.

Me: You need help.

Dane: Just need the cupcakes, but thanks for the advice. Want me to offer you some?

Me: I'm perfectly fine.

Dane: Ever consider anger management?

My thumbs press hard on the N and O and I add a zillion exclamation points.

Dane: See what I mean? Don't take life so seriously, Mad Batter.

Me: Wednesday afternoon you can pick up your cupcakes.

Dane: Looking forward to it. We could close for lunch and have some fun with frosting.

Me: You're seriously demented. I'm stopping this texting now.

Dane: Or we could sext! Let me visualize you in only the apron for a moment.

Dane: Okay, I'm ready now.

I can just imagine him over at his bar, smiling away like he's got one over on me. Not likely.

Me: I stripped off my apron and I'm standing in the kitchen wearing a chocolate peanut butter bikini made of frosting.

There, that should do it.

Dane: Damn you don't play fair. Someone must've told you my favorite cupcake. It warms my heart that you remembered.

Me: Bye.

Dane: See you tonight...in my imagination while I'm fisting my dick.

My stomach flips and I place my free hand over it to reprimand myself for reacting to his dirty talk.

I toss my phone on the table and clench my fists.

"Fondant, I need fondant." Anything to beat and knead to get that man out of my head.

"You're so red," Cat comments. "You're flushed." The door chime rings and Cat peeks around the corner then turns and points at me. "One day, you're going to fess up."

She disappears out front and I collapse to the stool, inhaling a deep breath. Hours of kneading and stirring and frosting go by and the only thing on my mind is Dane.

Why am I finding myself attracted to him again? Because you opened a bakery across from his bar, dipshit. How did I think I could continue to dodge

him? I knew I'd see him eventually, but I honestly didn't think he'd want anything to do with me. After all, he was the one who was so appalled that I was Vic's daughter.

Speak of the devil, my dad walks through the swinging door into the kitchen area.

"What a success, huh?" He takes a seat on the stool Cat just got up from. "You look hot, sweetheart. Maybe you could open the back door? I could install a screen so no bugs would get in." He stands up and makes his way to the back to check out the door.

"I'm okay, Dad. Thanks."

"You don't look okay." He swings the back door open. "I was at the Single Dads Club get-together across the street and Dane brought a box of your cupcakes in, but he refused to share. That's a great sign, huh? I think you made the right choice by buying Norma out."

My dad, my forever cheerleader.

His silver hair shines under the florescent lights.

"Yeah, time will tell."

"Sweetheart, I don't think you need time, this place is going to make it. I feel it."

I cross my fingers and hold them up in the air. "I hope so."

He kisses my cheek. "Don't worry, you're living your dream. And the best part is we can see each other everyday now."

I nod. "Thanks, Dad." I pat his hand that's resting on my upper arm.

If only I believed in myself as much as my dad does.

CHAPTER

Five

DANE

“**WHY ARE** you trying to start something up?” Marcus asks the next day during a lunch at Double D’s Diner.

I chomp down on my double cheeseburger, trying to hide my smile. As I chew, it takes a lot more effort to hide my amusement at the fact that I’m pissing Ava off. I’m not even sure why I’m doing it. Something to do in this small-ass town maybe.

Once I swallow and wash it down with a sip of my Coke, I lean back in the booth. Garrett and Marcus both stare directly at me from the other side.

“I’m helping her out.” I shrug. “Starting a business can be hard.”

They share a *yeah-right* look but don’t argue. All three of us own our own companies in Climax Cove and know how difficult those early days can be. Garrett had the biggest uphill climb but he also didn’t have his dad breathing down his damn neck all the time like I do.

“She doesn’t like you though,” Marcus comments, dipping his fry into ketchup and popping it into his mouth.

“Why is that exactly?” Garrett chimes in.

Usually, I’m the first one to brag about getting laid, but with Ava, I kept it quiet because she’s Vic’s daughter and I do not want that to circle back to him. We’re acquaintances more than friends, but I have a lot of respect for the guy and I’d hate for him to think less of me.

“Somehow she’s immune to my charismatic personality.” I pop my own fry into my mouth.

Dennis, the owner of the diner, must have finally changed the oil in the fryer. This grub is better than usual.

“I’d say half of Climax Cove is immune to your unique personality.” Marcus sips his drink and studies me for a second. “Cat told me something interesting last night.”

Garrett shifts his attention away from his BLT double bacon sandwich.

I roll my eyes. “Whatever it was, I’m sure she’s wrong.”

Marcus’ eyes stay zeroed in on me while Garrett’s gaze moves in my direction, questioning.

“She said Ava was so squirrely after you left, she kneaded ten batches of fondant. Cat thinks you two might actually like each other?” He raises his eyebrows, revealing the blue eyes so many women swoon over.

“Really?” Garrett leans back, crosses his arms around his chest like he’d rather hear me admit I like her than eat his sandwich. If you knew Garrett, you’d know how huge that is. The guy is like a big, beefy mountain man. He needs a lot of fuel to stay upright.

I crumple up my napkin and toss it on the table. “Please. Ava Pearson screams commitment, and I think you both know by now, there’s only one person I’m committed to and he’s about this high.” I stick my arm out of the booth and raise it a little above my shoulder.

Again, they each share a look of *whatever*. “You do understand you committed to your dad when you took over the bar,” Marcus smiles and digs back into his plate.

“You also committed to this town by helping with the Fourth of July parade and the carnival at the end of every summer,” Garrett says, then sips his iced tea, waiting for me to agree.

“That’s different, and you both know it. I’m talking about anything beyond a hit and split.”

Garrett shrugs and picks up his sandwich.

“Neither one of you can talk,” I say.

Marcus tilts his head.

“Okay, you’ve committed to Cat now, but Garrett.” He never even looks up from his sandwich because he knows what I’m going to say. “You don’t commit.”

“He also doesn’t go on search and rescue missions for pussy either.” Marcus pushes his plate forward having devoured his Reuben sandwich.

“Anything else boys?” Debbie picks up Marcus’ plate.

“Thanks, Debbie,” he says.

“Hey, did you guys change the oil in the fryer?” I ask. “The fries taste

awesome today.”

Debbie takes her free hand and slaps me on the back of the head. “I swear if I didn’t still see the cute sandy-haired boy with pinchable cheeks, I’d kick you out of here.” Bending over, she takes her forefinger and thumb grabbing my cheek and squeezing harder than I remember her doing when I was little.

She mumbles to herself as she walks toward the kitchen. I place my hand on my now sore cheek. Marcus and Garrett laugh sharing a look that says, ‘what did I really expect to happen?’

I shrug and dig back into my meal. Charlie’s covering the bar, but I need to head back for my appointment with the vodka supplier.

“What are you going to do with two dozen cupcakes anyway?” Marcus asks after finishing his meal. Not that I have a clue how he’s finished when all he’s done during lunch is stick his nose into my business.

“I’m going to sell them to my customers as dessert.”

Marcus’ forehead crinkles. I swear if we did a line up in a police station for someone to pick who out of us is a dad, they’d pick Marcus for sure. He’s got all the dad looks mastered like he’s practiced in a mirror or some shit.

“She doesn’t need to know. I’m experimenting with something. If it works, believe me, it’ll only benefit her and her company.” I wipe my mouth with my napkin, crumple it up and place it on my plate.

“You’re playing with fire if she already doesn’t like you.” Garrett finishes his own meal, digging into his pocket for his wallet. He’s on a deadline to get two cabins finished before winter hits so he can make bank by renting them out. The guy might just be a secret millionaire who buys stock in flannel shirts since that’s all he ever seems to wear.

“Hey, for those of us like me,” I point to myself, “tourist season is drawing to an end and she just opened up a business. Happy Daze makes the majority of its profit from April to October.”

They each stare blankly at me. I’m sure they assumed that was the case, but it was a hard lesson I learned the first year I took over the business from my dad—a lesson that almost closed our doors.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say you’re *very* committed to Climax Cove.” Marcus laughs and Garrett soon joins in.

I shake my head, slide out of the booth and walk over to Debbie to pay my bill.

“Oh, don’t be so sensitive, Dane,” Marcus is behind me now as I pull out my money and focus my attention on Debbie.

“You know I was joking, Debbie. I wouldn’t be your number one customer if I didn’t love your food.” I walk around the counter and hold my hands out for a hug. She tries to get away, but I wrap my arms around her shoulders and pull her snug against me.

“Salad for you next time.” She’s laughing, knowing the day I eat a salad is the day I can’t bring a fork to my mouth. Not going to happen.

“I love you, Deb.” I smack my lips on her head and make the exaggerated noise as I back away from her. “See you tomorrow.”

I walk by Marcus and Garrett as I head for the door. “Jackasses.” I nod to them and walk out of the diner and head straight to the bar. And I somehow manage to do all that without sneaking a look at the bakery.



Later that night after I’ve closed up Happy Daze, I’m going through my mail on the bar when something catches my attention out of the corner of my eye. Investigating where it’s coming from, I stand up and look across the street. It’s pitch black in the bakery except for a flashlight in search of something.

I jump over my bar, swiping my keys from the counter on the way. Hustling out of the bar, I glance up and down the street. It’s once again vacant of anyone, which proves my point to Marcus and Garrett. Tourist season is already drawing to a close as October approaches. I lock the door and peer over to the bakery. The flashlight is still there.

Clicking Ava’s name on my phone, I hear the faintest ring of her cell, meaning she’s in there somewhere. There’s no turning back now even though I only have my fists to protect myself with. Hopefully, I can channel Bruce Lee or something.

The glass door to the bakery opens when I pull on the handle and I mentally pocket the advice to tell Ava to lock her doors when the business is closed. Climax Cove police officers earn their paychecks by directing traffic during the summer.

I slide in and search for any sign of the spunky brunette who’s always on my case. She’s nowhere to be found, so I tiptoe further back, noticing to my dismay the cupcake case is empty.

A thud echoes throughout the quiet space. “Fuck!” There’s some more grumbling I can’t make out and then, “Where the hell is it? Stupid, Ava, so

stupid. Why did you ever think you could do this?”

I should let her know I'm here.

“Hello? Yes. This is Ava Pearson from Mad Batter.” Another pause. “My power just went out. Yeah. I don't know where the fuse box is.” The flashlight moves and shines right past me.

You're being a dick. Let her know you're here and help her, my inner self keeps repeating.

I click the green button on my phone again.

“Ugh. Hold on a second.” The lighted phone pulls away from her face, she presses ignore. “Ugh, asshole.” Then places it back to her cheek. “Sorry, where would I find the fuse box?”

“My guess is back in the storage room,” I say.

She jumps so far back, she trips over something and falls, her phone sliding across the floor.

I bend down and pick it up.

“Ma'am? Ma'am?” Frank's never sounded so scared.

“Hey, Frank. It's Dane. No, I got it, no need for the fire department to come down. Yeah, I saw from across the street. We'll call back if we need you guys. Yeah, see you on Trivia night.”

I click the red button and turn on the flashlight on her phone.

She's getting to her feet, brushing off her ass after tripping on a bag of flour.

“Here.” I hold my hand out for her, but she refuses to take it.

“I'm fine. Knocking would be the polite thing to do.” She blocks the light from the flashlight with her arm and I lower it a little.

“Well, I'm an asshole so you shouldn't expect much.” I shrug, taking her phone with me into the storage room.

“You don't have to help me. I'm sure the fire department would be willing,” she rambles as she follows me.

“They should be available for *actual* fires.”

“I imagine fires are like crimes in this town—almost nonexistent.”

I turn around, flashing the light toward my face so she can see me. “You'd be wrong then. Forest fires.” I tap my head and all I hear is her huff.

“You think you're so smart.”

She's embarrassed, I get it, so I don't rub in the fact I am fucking smart.

“Would you rather me not know how to fix your breaker?”

She hems and haws for a second. “I don't understand. I was in the middle

of making a huge batch of frosting and then total darkness.”

“Was that your way of asking me for help?” I open the box, purposely not touching any of the breakers.

“I didn’t know I had to ask since you took it upon yourself to sneak into my shop, scare the crap out of me and then walk to the storage room.”

“And I haven’t even told you to keep your doors locked when you’re closed yet. But most people say please and thank you when they need a favor.” I give her a wide, condescending smile just to piss her off a little more.

“I’m not most people.”

I nod. “Agreed, but I have to believe that Vic taught you manners.”

“Seriously, you have my hands tied and you’re going to play this game?”

I step closer to her, the firmness of her breasts now pushing against my chest. Damn, she feels good and I don’t even have a hand on her.

“I can tie you up *and* play games if you like.” I raise a brow.

“Ugh. No. I’m not interested in your games.”

She says no with those plump lips of hers, but it doesn’t escape me that she’s still pressed up against me.

“I thought we played pretty nice together. No?”

All I’m able to hear in the darkness is her unsteady breathing—in and out as though it’s a struggle.

“I really need to finish this cake so that I can maybe get three hours sleep tonight.” Her voice is so low and tense. She’s stressed and I’m only adding to that state.

“Say please and it’s yours.”

“Please, Dane.” She even includes my name and by some small miracle, she didn’t even use a sarcastic tone.

I click the button and the lights flicker on. Her eyes widen and a genuine smile tugs at her mouth like I just pulled her up on my horse and rode us away from the monsters.

That smile could be addicting.

If you were a different type of guy.

“Thank you.” Her hand pats my arm and her chest lets out a long tension filled breath.

“So, Vic did teach you manners?” I smile and step away from her after handing her phone back to her.

“Yes, he did and your dad must have taught you how to fix things.” She

follows me back out.

She slides by me once we reach the kitchen and starts working again.

“If you keep up this work schedule, you’re going to burn out,” I say.

A smirk crosses her lips as she looks up at me from the cake she’s decorating.

“You’re a business owner. I’d think you’d understand.”

I jump up on the counter to sit down, and she eyes me for a second but doesn’t ask me to leave.

“Who’s getting married?”

She scrunches her nose still concentrating on the cake.

“The cake. White tiered cake with buttercream. Wedding?”

She nods, her hands continuing to squeeze the icing onto the cake.

“It’s just something to take a picture of so I can use it for promo, show what I can do.”

“You’re telling me no one is actually going to *eat* that cake?” I hop down from the counter, bending over to get a better look.

She giggles, that heart lightening sound that makes me immediately want to hear it again. “Nope. I need to develop a portfolio, which means, I make and bake them, and they go uneaten.”

“That’s wasteful.” I frown, knowing that cake is way too delicious to go untouched.

“Would you rather I fed it to you?”

“As long as you were naked and we were enjoying it during post-coital bliss.” I raise my eyebrows up in a challenge.

She shakes her head. “Do you ever think of anything besides sex?” This time there’s no judgment or annoyance in her tone, more like mild curiosity.

“Around you? Not often.”

Her cheeks flush the lightest pink, matching the small flowers in the bowl next to the cake.

My phone rings in my pocket and I pull it out.

Shit. The babysitter.

I press the small green button on my screen. “I’ll be there in ten. Sorry.”

Ashley says it’s okay, that Toby is already asleep, but she was concerned because I’m usually home by now.

“Well, I gotta go. My babysitter must have some hot date. Teenagers. Can’t keep their hands off each other.” She places the icing down on the counter and wipes her hands on an apron that says, ‘Every adventure requires

a first step.'

"Thank you for your help. I'm worthless in the electrical department."

"You're welcome. Do me a favor though and call an electrician. Norma was supposed to get that fixed. It's happened more than once in the past year." I open the glass door.

"Okay. I'll call in the morning."

I nod and hesitate in the doorway though I have no idea why. "And lock this door after I leave."

She smiles and salutes me. "Yes, Dad."

My gaze tracks every curve of her cute-ass body. She's even sexier when she's covered in flour and icing.

"Oh, I like that. Call me daddy though." This time I can't bite down my laugh.

She shakes her head, laughing lowly and takes my shoulders turning them toward the sidewalk and pushing me out.

"Good night, Dane," she says, and flicks the lock on the door.

I leave knowing that when I picture her underneath me while I'm getting off later, she'll be calling me daddy.

CHAPTER

Six

“**I LOVE** the Alice in Wonderland theme, but I don’t think we want to teach the children these sorts of things.” Charlie picks up a cookie with Eat Me iced on it.

“Get your mind out of the gutter. There’s also Have One and Try Me.” I pipe the icing on the last of Dane’s cupcakes.

After he had come in like a savior last night, I felt bad I’d pushed off his cupcake order, so I made him an extra dozen with more chocolate shavings than I’d usually use.

“You’re practically saying try my pussy and lick my tits. There’s sexual innuendos all over these things.” She winks and props herself up on the counter, chomping down on an Eat Me cookie. Crumbs fall to her breasts and she brushes them off.

“Um, no. The kids that come in here do not have dirty minds like you.” I point my icing tube at her.

“I teach kids about sex for a living. Believe me, the days of using hoo-hah and dinky to describe their private areas are long gone. Kids are growing up fast. Just wait until Lily asks Cat what a cock is.”

I laugh, making my icing bag move out of position, resulting in the icing oozing out and off the cupcake instead of on it. Charlie’s gig as a counselor is only part time so she works at Happy Daze to make up the difference.

“Looks like your cupcake pre-ejaculated,” she says. “No one likes a dishonorable discharge. Quick shots are for chumps.”

“Using the official terms now, huh?” I ask her, grabbing a spatula and wiping the cupcake clean.

I am a professional you know.” Charlie raises her shoulders and straightens her back, crossing her legs like she’s ready for high tea.

“If Lily ever says cock in front of Marcus, I have to be there. Cat will probably sit her down and explain the whole baby making process while Marcus cries in his office.”

We both laugh, but I’m careful this time not to make my cupcake look like it can’t hold its icing.

Cat walks in with Lily standing at her side, her big blue eyes on the cookies.

“What’s so funny?” Cat asks, grabbing an apron from beside the fridge.

“Nothing. Just thinking how fast kids grow up these days,” Charlie comments, grabbing a cookie for Lily and handing it to her.

Lily turns to Cat, and she scrunches her mouth.

“I don’t know,” she tells Lily, but Lily’s puppy dog eyes beg. “Your dad said you’re eating too many sweets.”

“Here.” Charlie hands Lily a Have Me cookie and when I quirk an eyebrow she shrugs. “Safest of the three.”

“Fine, but that’s it for today though, okay?” Cat’s hand brushes down Lily’s hair and the two share a look like it’s going to be their little secret.

“Mallory said she’s coming here today so I’m gonna go wait.” Lily takes her cookie and walks out of the kitchen.

Cat fastens her apron behind her back and moves to the sink to wash her hands. “What do you need me to do today?”

I’m not even sure why Cat wants to help so much. I mean, she has her own paintings to work on, but she’s been here every day since I opened.

“Um. Can you box these? Charlie’s taking them to Dane.”

“I think you should deliver them yourself,” Charlie says, stealing another cookie from the tray.

“I’m busy.” I grab the chocolate chunk and grater.

Charlie looks through the cut-out and back at me. “I don’t see people piling in, plus you have a whole glass case full of goodies for people to choose from.”

Charlie doesn’t take no for an answer easily.

“If it’s such a bother for you, I’ll just call him to pick them up. I mean I didn’t add a delivery charge.” Even I know what I’m saying is complete bullshit and the fact that neither of my friends calls me on it, says they’re back to assuming something happened with Dane.

“I’m sure he’d love to pick them up.” Cat shares a look with Charlie and the two stifle a laugh.

I picture he and I last night and can’t help but remember how good he smelled. I had to squeeze my thighs together when he cornered me. I’m not sure I would’ve objected if he’d tried to kiss me on that sack of flour.

“Bossman took the day off,” Charlie says, and the pit of my stomach weighs heavy with disappointment at her words.

Which is ridiculous because what do I care if I won’t be seeing Dane Murray today?

“I thought Dane never took a day off?” Cat questions and Charlie shrugs, jumping down from the counter.

“Not unless it’s something to do with Toby.” She pulls her phone out. “Which reminds me, I need to get to the bar because Toby’s coming after school and I get double the pay to watch him until Dane returns.” Tucking her phone back in her pocket, she grabs two cookies off the cooling sheet.

“You do know that’s how I make a living, right?” I call out to her and her laugh can be heard until the doorbell chimes.

“Seriously, that girl has a bigger sweet tooth than Lily,” I comment, finishing up the last cupcake with chocolate shavings. “And she left without taking the cupcakes.” I blow out a breath and sit down on my wooden stool, flexing my hands.

Cat secures the lid to the box and taps the bottom. “She did it on purpose.”

“Yeah, but if he’s not going to be at the bar anyway, then I don’t have to rush. She could’ve mentioned that when she first came.”

Cat organizes the boxes and sets them on the completed side, then works on arranging the cookies on a plate.

“Um, Ava, we should keep this G-rated, don’t you think?” She holds the cookie up in the air with a smile.

I shake my head. “Both of you have dirty minds, I swear.”

She laughs, positioning them on a tray to put out in the glass case. “I’ll deliver the cupcakes to Dane once I see his Mustang pull up. No worries.” She leaves the kitchen with the tray as I sit there, realizing for the first time how much work this bakery thing really is.

Especially when I’m trying to keep things going because I opened after the summer rush.

An hour later and I've cleaned the entire kitchen because tonight I promised myself I would snuggle in bed and watch TV until my eyes eventually give out. The after-school rush of parents and their kids have come through already. Cat is sitting with Lily helping her with her homework at a table by the door and other than the soft music I put on over the speakers, there's no other sounds.

I close the blinds to block the sun from streaming in when his car pulls up along the curb. My heart picks up pace, and my hand freezes on the wand of the blinds watching him step out of his sports car.

I'm prepared to see his jeans and t-shirt, my mouth already salivating from the anticipation of seeing how the cotton stretches over his shoulders or how his jeans hang low on his hips. Then a pair of brown dress shoes land on the road and he rises out of the car like an Adonis. I swear every woman in a ten-mile radius senses him. His light brown hair gelled so that every strand is perfectly in place. A crisp white shirt lies under a blue suit jacket and matching blue slacks in a slim fit showcasing how strong his thighs are.

Not that I need to see him in those pants to know how strong they are. I felt them the night he held me up on his lap while he plunged in and out of me.

My body warms from the memory and my pounding heart thuds in my ears.

Standing in the window like an idiot, I don't realize he's swiveling on his dress shoes and heading my way.

"Oh." I back up and run into one of the chairs, circling around until I'm facing Cat and Lily, who are staring at me with concern.

"You okay?" Cat asks, her pencil pausing above the paper she's using to show Lily something.

"Yep. I just forgot I have something to do in the back." My footsteps increase the closer I get to the kitchen as I race to beat the door chime. By the time I reach the kitchen, I hunch over to catch my breath while searching for something, anything to pull out to look busy. Dane knows no boundaries and he'll see no problem with coming back here.

The door chimes and my stomach ruptures into full-on flight mode.

"Dane!" Cat screams.

Smooth, Cat.

“Uncle Dane!” Lily screeches and I hear the metal chair slide across the floor.

“Hey, Lily. You off from pushing baked goods today?”

The sound of his deep voice is resonating between my thighs.

“Homework.” I don’t have to be in the room to know she’s frowning.

“Well, you don’t want to be pushing cupcakes the rest of your life.”

Lily giggles.

“What’s going on with you?” Cat asks.

“Why? You thinking you picked the wrong single dad?”

I can just picture the cocky expression on his face when he said that.

“Um. Is that an actual question?” I see Cat round the counter and pull his boxes from the bottom shelf.

Okay, yes, I’m spying on them.

“Did Charlie tell you they’re ready?” Cat asks.

“What?” he asks, sounding a little confused. If he’s not here for the cupcakes why is he here?

The door chimes again. “Who dressed up the monkey?” Marcus chokes out a laugh.

“Daddy!” Lily screeches again, this time a more loving tone.

“Lily Lu,” he greets her and I watch Cat’s face light up. “You’re not hitting on my girlfriend, are you?” Marcus asks. Dane’s just out of my range of view now, but his voice has moved closer.

“You know my number one rule, I don’t take what belongs to others.” He pauses for a second and I can only see the back of his head so I wonder if he’s wearing that panty-melting smirk. “I might have to fight you for the little one though.”

“You’ll be fighting me for the little one,” Cat comments and I assume Marcus is giving her that look that says *you are the perfect woman*.

“Where’s the Mad Batter?” Dane asks and I rush over to the fridge, peeking my head in, trying to find something to do. Anything. Seriously, how can I not find one thing out of place? I am not this organized of a person.

“She’s working. You know her, the work is never done!” Cat’s chipper voice gives me time. If I didn’t just scrub down the kitchen, I’d smack a pile of flour all over it.

“I’d like to thank her for the cupcakes.”

“Oh yeah, the cupcakes. Is that what they’re calling it these days?” Marcus laughs. “Don’t you and your happy family have somewhere to be?”

“I’ll ring you up and then we’re going to dinner,” Cat says and then I hear the sound of her pressing buttons on the iPad.

“You guys get going. I’ll wait for the Mad Batter to be done. I’m sure she can ring me up.”

Cat looks behind her and sees me shaking my head.

“She won’t be done for awhile. It’s no problem.” She presses more buttons.

“So, what happened today?” Marcus asks Dane, and I tiptoe closer to hear their conversation now that their voices are lower.

“Lily, pack up your bag. We’ll finish at home,” Cat calls out over their conversation and I grit my teeth.

“It just takes time. Though I might as well hand them my checkbook between all the fees,” Dane says to Marcus.

“It’s for the best though, right?” Marcus says back.

“Yeah, but…” Cat decides to open the cash drawer and since I bought it at a restaurant salvage store, it’s clunky and loud and now I can’t hear shit.

“I never knew you could clean up so well.” Marcus laughs, and Cat starts untying her apron.

“I’ll be right back,” she says.

She appears in the kitchen doorway, her eyebrows raised at my ear perched to the wall.

“Hmm.” She takes the apron off her neck and hangs it up by the fridge.

“What?” I whisper, my hands going up in the air.

“Nothing.” The smirk says it’s something. “So, Ava, I’m heading out for the night.” She speaks loud enough so everyone in the place can hear her.

I tilt my head and roll my eyes at her. “Thanks for the help.”

She pats my arm. “Anytime. Go home and get some sleep tonight.”

“I will.”

She leaves the kitchen and I hear Marcus and Dane talking until the door chimes.

Finally, the tension in my body drains and I sit on the stool, contemplating why I care so much and contemplating why Dane in a suit resulted in the same reaction as if Chris Evans had walked into my store.

Shaking my head and forcing myself not to think about it any longer, I stand to leave, but he appears in the doorway—his sunglasses hanging off the pocket of his suit jacket, his shoulder leaning on the doorframe, ankles crossed.

“Dane.”

“I’m getting *déjà vu* when you say my name so breathlessly.” His cocky smirk is in place and though I usually want to smack it off his face, this time I find myself wanting to kiss it off.

Fuck, stop it, Ava.

“Funny. What can I do for you?” I ask. My fingers need something to do so they knot together in my lap.

“I wanted to thank you for the cupcakes.”

I nod. “You’re welcome.”

“A whole dozen for free. I should repay you.”

With his mouth?

Crap. No Ava. Stop it.

“Not necessary. Thanks for your help last night.” I nod, my comebacks not nearly as snappy as they should be.

“Any man would love to be a girl’s knight in shining armor.” He winks and my heart skips a beat or two before I think of something to say back.

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far. I’m not afraid of the dark.” I grab my purse from the counter. If I leave, he leaves and then I can pull myself together and remind myself why Dane Murray is not the man I want to be with.

“You closing up early tonight?” He’s pushed off the wall now, his stance wider, blocking my way out of the kitchen as he plays with his sunglasses in his hands.

“Yeah. If I don’t sleep soon, I’m going to collapse.” I turn off the lights in the back.

He steps to the side, extending his arm out for me to go first in an exaggerated movement. I wait for him to grab the three pink boxes of cupcakes, which he does with ease.

Well, Ava, he lifts kegs of beer on the daily.

“Then I’ll try not to invade too much.” I open the door and he steps out, his sunglasses in his free hand about to cover his eyes.

“What?” I ask, the door still in my hands.

“I’ll try not to invade your dreams too much tonight.” He winks, puts his sunglasses on and turns around. “Sweet dreams, Ava, or rather, dirty dreams.”

I immediately look right and left to see if anyone is close by. Phew, no one.

His laugh rings out as he crosses the street and disappears into his bar. He

must have a game plan and I need to figure it out if I'm going to stay one step ahead of him.

CHAPTER

Seven

DANE

IT'S SATURDAY MORNING, and Toby came to the bar with me because he wants to earn some extra money for the new Xbox football game he's been begging me for. He's washing the tables down while I sit at the table reserved for my dad and his friends, although, they haven't been coming as much lately. Probably because they'd don't agree with the grill.

I shake my head recalling the conversation when I originally wanted to get permits to open a restaurant alongside the bar. He never understood why the bar wasn't good enough, but I knew there was an opportunity for growth with how much the tourist season had increased. I mean we've opened more bed and breakfasts, and I might not agree with it, but large hotel chains have inquired about opening up in town. Town council will never let that happen.

"Can we order it tonight?" Toby asks, spraying down another table and chairs.

He is a hard worker, I'll give him that.

"We have your game first."

The phone rings and I walk over to the counter to grab it.

"Happy Daze," I answer.

"Dane?" Norma, the previous owner of the bakery's shaky voice will always be recognizable to me. Hell, she's been my cookie supplier since I was two.

"Miss Sawyer. How is Arizona?"

I tuck the phone under my chin and sign a few papers from the beer distributors that needed my attention.

"Oh, it's nice but I miss Climax Cove. Hey, dear, I had a question for

you.”

“Sure. I always have time for my pseudo-grandma.”

She giggles and then starts coughing.

“You okay?”

She clears her throat, and I grab hold of the phone to pull it away from my ear. I’d rather not lose my hearing today.

“Yes. Sorry.” Another clearing of her throat. “The girl that took over the bakery...”

“Ava?”

“Yes, Ava. How does it seem business is going?”

That’s sweet she’s worried about her.

“I guess it’s good. She’s changed the whole thing into an Alice in Wonderland theme.”

“Oh, nice. Well, she’s late on her payment. I wanted to make sure she was still in business.”

Damn it. I knew her opening right after summer wasn’t the wisest decision, but Ava isn’t one to take advice from others.

“Could you not call her?” I ask.

See, this is what people find wrong with a small town. I shouldn’t know about Ava’s payment being late, it’s none of my business. The gossip mill has thinned out as the cemeteries have grown, but it will never truly die off.

“I don’t want to stress her out. To be honest I was nervous letting her take over the business on a payment plan rather than buying outright, but what choice did I have? It’s a small town and she was the only person that showed any interest. She’s a good girl and I think she’s good for the money, I just wanted to make sure it was open.”

“And why am I your first call?”

If things have already hit the mill about Ava and me, then we have spies around here.

“You’re across the street.”

I cock my head. “Makes sense.”

“Well, I have to take my sister to the doctor.”

“I hope all is well there?”

She laughs, spurring another coughing fit. “Yes. Things here are nice. Please don’t say anything to Ava, I would hate for her to feel like we’re talking about her.”

I refrain from the smart-ass comment I could say back.

“Sure thing.”

“I’m sure business will pick up for her.” I hear shuffling on the other end. “We need to leave. I’ll talk to you soon. Bye, Dane.”

The line clicks dead before I can respond. I press the off button and my gaze shifts over to the window so I can see across the street.

The sun is shining today and Ava’s moved a few of the tables out onto the sidewalk. Her door is open and I see her preparing to open inside by sliding those delicious crack cakes—that’s what I’m calling her cupcakes now—into the glass case.

“What are you doing?” Toby pulls me out of my daze and I look back to find his eyebrows raised.

“Nothing.” I stand up, grabbing the phone to put on the base.

“You were staring at Miss Ava.”

“No, I wasn’t.” I crinkle my eyes to throw off his scent.

“You were bent over on the bar, staring.”

Of course, he can’t leave well enough alone.

“Are you done?” I ask.

Parenting tip—always distract.

“Yeah. So, did I earn the money for the game yet?”

“Take that spray and rag into the back. Then we need to get you changed for your baseball game.”

He smiles taking my answer as a yes. I can’t complain, he’s a good kid and if he wants a video game, it’s the least I can do.

My gaze veers out the window again, but Toby rushes out a second later, his uniform in his hands, so I shift my gaze his way.

“Ready?” I ask.

“Yeah. Carter totally rocked first base at the last game,” Toby says.

I ruffle his hair and nod to the bathroom to change. “And put your clothes in a neat pile to change into later,” I call out.

His response to my directions is to shut the door.

With Toby in the bathroom and no one else in the bar since we’re not open yet, I stand at the window, like a stalker, watching her smile as she stands with samples on the sidewalk. Her long hair is pulled back into a ponytail and her jeans are form fitting, but today she has red Chucks on, rather than her usual black ones. I notice a bicycle chained to the bike holder in front of Nail Me Hardware store beside her shop and I realize I’ve never contemplated whether she has a car.

“Dad!” Toby’s voice startles me and I turn so fast, I pull a neck muscle.

“What?” I ask, cringing.

“Let’s go. We can’t be late.”

“Go to the car, I’ll be right out.” I scribble down a note for my parents who are opening until I get back from the game, swipe my keys from the counter, and head out.

I lock up the doors to the bar, wave to Ava, without my eyes staying on her too long and slide into my car with Toby who’s voicing his concern that we’re going to be late. The kid does not get his worrying from me. Must be his mom...strike that. I have no clue where he gets it from.

The Climax Cove Raiders win twelve to eight.

Toby orders his video game on my phone on the ride back to the bar. There are times I feel bad for how much time Toby has to spend at the bar and grill. The small arcade I installed doesn’t fill up his time unless one of his friends comes in with their family for dinner. Then usually the parents love it because the boys will go off and play while they have a quiet meal.

But at this point in the bar’s financials, I have no choice. I haven’t found anyone other than Charlie that I trust enough not to screw me over.

“Grandma is going to take you home tonight,” I tell him and I see his frown from my rearview mirror.

“Hey, tomorrow is all us, buddy. Rafting.”

His frown instantly turns into a smile. “Last one for the season, right?” His eyes meet mine in the mirror.

“We’ll see, maybe we can get out again soon.”

“Are Uncle Garrett and Sydney coming this time?”

“No, it’s just us.”

His smile grows wider, and I know it’s not because he doesn’t like Garrett and his daughter Sydney, but since the grill opened, he hasn’t had enough time with just me.

I pull into the back alleyway since the street will be busy today with it being Saturday. Toby climbs out and runs inside the back door. I follow behind, leaving all his stuff in the trunk since we’ll be back on the ballfield in two days.

My mom is hovered over the stove with Toby by her side now, the wooden spoon at his lips.

“What are you doing?” I ask, greeting her myself with a kiss on the cheek.

“I thought you’d like a batch of my sauce. You can freeze some and serve it for a special or something.” She smiles and places the spoon that was just in Toby’s mouth on the resting plate.

As she scoops pasta she’s already made into a bowl for Toby, I take the spoon and toss it in the sink, replacing it with a new one. Sometimes my mom doesn’t understand that she’s not cooking Sunday dinner for our family.

“Thanks, Mom.”

Where my dad hated the idea of adding a grill to the bar, my mom helped me come up with a good menu and is always willing to help me out.

“Dad in the front?” I ask.

She spoons the sauce into Toby’s dish and then pulls up a chair next to her. “Sit and tell me about your game.”

Toby smiles, never one not to want to replay each game with anyone who asks.

Leaving them to their grandma and grandson bonding time, I escape into my office and switch my now dust covered gym shoes to a clean pair.

Walking down the hallway, I pause finding my dad behind the bar, sitting on a stool, talking with his friends.

The bar isn’t horribly busy, but people are starting to find their way into town now.

“Thanks, Dad, I got it from here.” I pat his back, circle around him and ask the first person what they’d like to drink.

“You need help. I always had help.”

“You had me and Sara,” I deadpan, not in the mood for another lecture today. Nothing I do is good enough for him.

“Yeah. Help.”

He walks out from behind the bar, to his table in the back. His friends swivel off their stools to join him. In between serving drinks, I grab the stool, and place it back on the other side of the bar.

I hate asking for help, especially from my father, but Toby was way too excited for me to coach his Little League fall team.

“Hey, Dane. Do we have cupcakes?” Aurora, one of my servers asks me.

“No. Who’s asking?” I look into the seating area.

“They said they were here the other night and you served chocolate ones or something?”

“Oh, that was a trial. So, they want another one?”

“I’m guessing so since they’re asking,” she says, thick with sarcasm. Aurora and her smart mouth. She’s just returned from college after failing out her freshman year. I was hesitant to hire her but other than her mouth, she’s a hard worker.

“Stall them, I’ll be right back.”

I tell Matt, my part-time server slash bartender slash fireman, I’ll be back in a minute.

Jogging across the street, I’m happy to find that Mad Batter has a few people milling around. Although, I’d like to see a million different pink boxes walking out the bakery door.

I step behind the counter and swing the kitchen door open, finding Ava icing another batch of cupcakes.

“What kind are those?” I ask, leaning against the doorframe.

Icing squeezes out all over her table.

“Has anyone ever explained boundaries to you?”

I pause acting as though I’m thinking. “Usually women like it when I bypass their boundaries.”

Her face scrunches up in a *give me a break look* and she rolls her eyes. “How can I help you, Dane?”

“Well, now that you ask.” I step into the kitchen and her gaze stays on me the entire time. I prop myself up on her counter, watching her scoop more frosting into her bag. “I have a business proposition for you.”

That perfect ass of hers falls onto the stool she always keeps nearby and I’m guessing her legs get as tired as mine do from standing all day.

“If you haven’t noticed, I have a business.”

I purposely glance around the store. “I can see that. I want you to make cupcakes for me for the restaurant.”

Her hazel eyes narrow. “Wouldn’t that take business away from me? You are right across the street.”

I grab a cookie from the baking sheet and hold it up to read it. “Try Me?” I raise a brow. “You know all you have to do is say the word.” I wink.

Her scowl diminishes as pink tints her cheeks.

“I see you’re not in a laughing mood today, so I’ll cut to the chase. You supply me with one type of cupcake, ones you don’t sell here. I’ll credit you

on our menus and I'll make sure my staff tells everyone where they're from. Believe me, after one, they'll be coming across the street for more. It's a win-win."

She places the icing on the table. If she's as strapped as Mrs. Sawyer implied, she'll take the bait. Honestly, this will help both of us.

"Okay, we can try it out." She stands to her feet, grabs her icing and starts frosting the cupcakes again.

"So, right now, I need two dozen of something."

She scoffs. "I thought this was a 'we'll talk more in the future' type thing?"

I round my wrist up. "Time's a ticking. I have a table who wants your cupcakes right now."

She looks around the table. There's way more than she'll sell today, but I'm not a moron, I'm not telling her that.

"You can take these." She shuffles over to her shelves, rising on her tiptoes to grab the box.

"Here." I jump off the counter, and reach above her, grabbing the box for her.

She turns and I see this isn't the best position for two people who just went into business together. I'm not sure I'll ever grow tired of watching her chest rise and fall with deep breaths when she's in close proximity to me though.

I back away and her hands hurriedly try to fill the box.

"What kind are these?" I ask, filling the second box for her.

"Salted caramel." She closes the box, fastens it and then slides it my way.

"How much?" I pull out my wallet.

"Just take those and we'll come up with a plan when you have more time."

I stack the two boxes on top of each other and pick them up. "So, you're going to agree to spend more time with me?"

She gives me that exasperated look again. "For business, yes."

"You book the taste test and let me know."

She nods, her hands landing on my sides, swiveling me around toward the door.

"Now, go. I need to wrap my brain around the fact that I'm desperate enough to invite you into my life everyday." Her voice is light, casual, and full of sarcasm.

“Most ladies find me a pleasure to be with.”

Her hands haven't left my back as she follows me to the doorway.

“I never have been a go-with-the-crowd kinda gal.”

I chuckle, turning around and her hands slide around my entire stomach. Damn her touch feels good.

“I think I need to refresh your memory on how pleasurable I can be.”

She rolls her eyes, but she can't bite her lip enough to stop that smile. The smile that jumbles my stomach into a what-the-fuck-is-going-on ruckus.

“Bye, Dane.” She lightly pushes me out the kitchen door.

“Pleasure doing business with you.” I wink again and she shakes her head, turning around to go back to her decorating while I walk through her store, wondering what I just got myself into.

CHAPTER

Eight

I CLOSED the shop early because it's Sunday and no one was really around since the town one over was having their annual fall festival. Next year, I need to grab a booth to sell my stuff and see if I can draw in some locals from neighboring towns.

The warm sun soaks into my skin and I close my eyes as the fresh air breezes by me. I hadn't realized how long it was since I spent time outside and not inside a hot kitchen with sugar and eggs as my only companions.

"I can squeeze you in on the next one if that's okay?" The hot ass tour guide at the rafting company approaches me.

"Oh, great. Definitely okay."

He smiles this double dimple megawatt grin that brings girls to their knees asking him for the pleasure of sucking him off, I'm sure. Under normal circumstances, I'd probably spend the rest of my day flirting with him in the hopes he'd ask me out by sunset. But not today. Today is a solo day, which means it's all about me.

"Go grab a vest." He practically flexes his muscles while he points to the post with all the jackets hanging. "Chill out for a bit, and they'll call you when they're ready." Again, with the smile. Yep, this guy rarely gets turned down from girls.

"Thanks," I look at his nametag, "Bradley."

"Brad." He corrects me, shrugging those big shoulders he must work on daily at the gym. While the girls drool on the ellipticals, I'm sure.

Sorry dreamboat, today isn't the day.

"Thanks." I walk over to pick out my jacket.

Brad moves behind the counter to continue helping the people who already had reservations. Sometimes it's a benefit to be a party of one.

Sitting on a rock by the river, I absorb the serenity the wilderness always gives me, watching the rafting boats come in and out, most filled with families. I could have asked my dad to come with me today, but he'll want to gush on about how proud he is of me, or how happy he is I decided to stay in Climax Cove. Right now, I want to forget all the pressure of the bakery, all the expectations my dad or the town has.

Shaking my head, I try to rid my mind of all the stresses and enjoy a day I rarely get.

I strip off my yoga pants leaving me in my swim shorts hoping to not lose what's left of my tan from the summer.

"Miss Ava!" a kid screams and I turn around, my eyes taking in a boy with a mop of hair running toward me.

His footsteps skid to a stop on the dirt and gravel once he's near.

"Toby! What a surprise."

Please tell me your grandparents brought you, or maybe that babysitter.

"Well, looky looky, it's the Mad Batter."

No such luck.

My gaze skirts to Dane, slowly walking toward us. Good to know he wears his shorts like he does his pants, low. That groin cleavage lays there under his white t-shirt just waiting for an unsuspecting female victim to come along.

"Dad, it's Miss Ava."

"Yeah." He stops next to his son, his hand landing on his shoulder. "I see her." He eyes my bare legs and I curl them into my body as though I can hide them. "Rafting?"

I'm so focused on the goose bumps on my skin from his assessing eyes, it takes a minute for my brain to process the words he just spoke. "I'm sorry?"

He chuckles and then sucks his lips in to stop the laughter while Toby looks back and forth between us.

"Rafting? Are you rafting today, Miss Ava?" Toby's wide eyes and smile full of missing teeth would make me say yes even if I wasn't.

"Yes."

He hops on the rock next to me. "So are my dad and me! I'm so excited." He strips off his t-shirt and then fastens his life jacket over his chest.

Dane picks up the shirt, folding it and placing it in his backpack.

Please don't take off your t-shirt. Please don't take off your t-shirt.

He's taking off his shirt.

Dane's hands reach for the hem of his t-shirt and I'm still repeating the chant in my head, but it does no good. Instead, he removes the piece of clothing revealing what he's most proud of—his perfect V.

"Do you need a water?" he asks.

My eyes flick to his face and that cocky smirk is in place as always.

Not waiting for me to answer, he continues. "You just look so flushed. Maybe too much time in the sun?"

I stare at him unamused until I remember we're not in the back of my shop bantering with no witnesses. Toby is right next to me, so I detour my attention to him.

"What's your favorite part of rafting?" I ask.

He smiles, clearly happy that I'm granting him some of my attention. "Dad won't let me go on any crazy white water yet, but I love paddling."

I glance back at Dane, who shakes his head, obviously a constant point of stress in their household.

"You're eight," he says.

Toby's jaw drops open as he stares at Dane. "Jack was six when his parents took him out."

"Jack's a liar," Dane says straight-faced. "I'm grabbing drinks. Either of you?" He points back and forth.

"No thanks," I say.

"Gatorade for me. Orange!" Toby screams, and Dane doesn't bother turning around.

Brad approaches us on the rock. "Miss Pearson, we're all set for you. You'll be on that one." He points to a group of guys all climbing into a raft.

"I'm sorry. The one with all the men?" I ask to clarify and Toby and I share a look of I'm-not-so-sure-about-this.

"It's a bachelor party, but they haven't been drinking."

So much for a solo day.

"Peachy." I stand up, grab my yoga pants and start putting them on. "I'll be right there."

"You're going to go with all of them?" Toby asks, his bottom lip pushed out a little more than normal.

"Well, I didn't call ahead so it's the only raft they can fit me on." I smile down and Toby shifts his eyes to the boat and then to me. "Why don't you

come on our boat?”

What am I supposed to say? That I want the white water rafting experience and not the sail down a calm river paddling.

“That’s the one they assigned me to.”

Toby still looks confused. I have one leg in my yoga pants when Dane approaches, his gaze not missing the fact that I’m dressing.

“Dad, Miss Ava is going on that boat.” He points, and we all follow the direction of his finger to the group of guys currently seeing who can hit the other one harder.

“Them? They look like a bunch of gym rats.”

“I already told Toby, I don’t have a reservation, so it’s the only boat that has room for me.” Why am I making excuses? This is none of their business.

“Well, Toby, say goodbye to Miss Ava.” Dane steps out of the way for me to get down from the rock.

“But, Dad....” Toby whines, but Dane seems happy I’m leaving.

Why does that irk me?

“Maybe we’ll see her after.” Dane’s gaze shifts to the raft where the guys are now staring over at us. “I’m sure there won’t be any time for them to get too handsy,” he whispers, and I jolt back, staring him straight in the eye.

A smirk edges the corner of his lips and my gaze instinctively moves down his torso.

“You always were a fan of my cleavage.” He raises his eyebrows up in a challenge.

I take a deep breath and purposely keep my gaze directed in front of me as I walk away. I’m almost to the raft, hearing the guys razzing others about me riding along with them. Do I really want to endure this just to prove a point to Dane?

I’m running out of time when the guy in the front, the one with the loud mouth and the biggest muscles bends over and throws up in the raft. My feet stop.

“Fuck man!” one friend says.

“Get off the raft.” The guide points to the dock. “You’re done for the day.” Turning their attention to me the guide continues. “I’m sorry, ma’am, we’ll have to clean it out and disinfect it.”

My head falls back in defeat, and I glance over my shoulder, finding Dane’s know-it-all smirk more prominent than before. Asshole.

The next thing I know, Brad’s standing next to me, his dimples now

hidden under a mask of annoyance.

“Sorry Miss Pearson. I’ll look to see if we have anything else.”

I follow him back to the counter, and he’s checking clipboards, looking between one sheet and another.

“I can get you on the slower tour, but not the white water.” He drops the clipboard, and his shoulders fall.

Either that or nothing.

“I’ll come back another day,” I say.

“Okay, but there’s no refunds.” Smiley Brad points to the sign etched in wood.

“But, this is out of my control.,” I point out.

“Doesn’t matter.” He shrugs. “We’ll offer you a ride on the family raft and give you a coupon for your inconvenience. That’s our policy.” He holds out the coupon.

“Seriously?” I ask, still not believing they won’t give me back my money or at the very least reschedule me.

“Sorry, but yep.”

I changed my mind. I don’t know how Brad gets any of the girls because Brad is a big, dumb jerk.

I grab the coupon out of his hand and spin on my heels, coming face to face with Dane.

Shit.

CHAPTER

Nine

I'M unsure if Ava is part of some dick punishing mission, but after she got stuck on our raft, she stripped down to her tight swim shorts and tank swim top. Thankfully, her tits are covered and her top covers the strip of flat stomach invisible to everyone else. I still get tormented thinking of the small patch of dark hair right above her pussy.

“Miss Ava,” Toby takes the seat next to her, leaving me to sit on the other side of him. “This is going to be so much fun!” Toby’s wide eyes volley between me and her and I hope the kid isn’t thinking something crazy like Marcus and Garrett. I know he’s missed out on having a mom and he doesn’t always understand why his didn’t stick around, but I’m not built for a long-lasting relationship.

She smiles, but I see her hesitancy in sharing this day with us. Hell, I had been looking forward to it being just me and Toby, too.

“Here.” I hold my hand out to take her yoga pants and t-shirt she has shoved on the floor of the raft.

“It’s okay.” She shakes her head like the bullheaded, stubborn woman she is.

“Just give them to me.”

Toby reaches down, grabs them and hands them to me.

“They’ll get wet,” he tells her, and the smile she always has on call for him shines through.

“Thanks,” she says it more to Toby than me, but I unzip my backpack and shove them in with our clothes.

Before we can talk any further, our tour guide hops on board with his

sunglasses and million-dollar smile. I know the owner of the rafting company and he has a very specific hiring pattern. Illegal or not, no one over thirty-five gets a shot. Looking at his time clock hitters today, I'd say it's more likely that thirty is the cut-off. All good-looking guys, sprinkled with a couple girls probably for the bachelor party groups. Hopefully, they don't kill us.

"Hey, I'm Cameron, and I'm your guide for the day. We're going to start off slow, but we'll go through a few rougher patches." He looks down at the family right in front of him, the mom now looking from her husband to their five-year-old. "No worries, ma'am, no one has ever fallen out on my tour."

I roll my eyes, there's a first time for everything buddy, and now you just jinxed us.

"Okay then, everyone received their instructions on shore. Any more questions?" he asks. When no one speaks, up he continues, "Let's get going. Parents you're doing the paddling. I'll just make my way to the back."

He jumps on the deck and then rounds the back of the raft.

"Can't I go on the edge?" Toby whines and before Ava was joining us I had planned to let him this once, but we need the adults with the paddles.

"It's a class three."

"Dad?" he whines and I can't blame the kid. I'm fairly sure it's my family genes that gave him his rebellious live on the edge mentality.

"After first break. Okay? Then I'll let you in front of me and I'll move to the back." I nod my head to where there's an empty spot right in front of the guide.

Toby smiles big and nods. "Awesome."

His own enjoyment fills me with happiness. Nothing like your kid being happy.

Then I glance behind him, finding Ava's lips upturned staring at the two of us. Once she discovers I've caught her, she focuses forward and prepares her paddle.

The first part of the trip isn't that bad and it's more serene and for enjoying the sounds of nature and discovering the world we live in. Nothing is better than being outside and that's why I never had an urge like my sister did to disappear to the big city. I love campouts when summer is right on the cusp of ending. When you're sweating during the day, but chilly at night for a campfire. I love grabbing my bike and heading to the hills to lose myself in my thoughts and enjoy the thrill of following an unpaved track. Yeah, I could live on the beach down in California or on the east coast, but there's nothing

better than sitting on my deck with the trees surrounding me as I stare out over never-ending water.

“We’re about to come to some small dips, so you youngsters don’t go jumping,” Cameron warns.

I look to Toby who’s bored out of his mind. He wants to use the paddle in his hand, and he wants to experience the adventure. After we get through the dips, I look back to Cameron, currently basking in the sun.

“Hey, we’re going to swap.” I point to Toby whose eyes light up with excitement. “Just remember what I taught you. The last thing I want is to have to show off my savior skills in front of Ava.” I wink at her, knowing she’s observing us. Her gaze has been nailed to us almost the entire trip.

She quickly turns around, embarrassed I caught her...again.

“Sure thing. We’re on calm water for a few.” Cameron’s head falls back again.

I slide back onto the other plank and Toby slides into my empty spot, propping his butt on the edge of the raft.

“Now, Toby, when we dip down you lift the paddle,” I start instructing him, but he places his hand in the air. “If you’d rather go back to twiddling your thumbs.” My words are meant to threaten him.

He shakes his head. “No. I got it, Dad.”

To even out the weight of the boat, I’m stuck in the middle of the last row, twiddling my thumbs and giving me nothing else to do but keep an eye on Toby.

“Okay, hope you’re ready young guns, we’re heading toward the class three river.”

Toby looks over his shoulder to me, a fear that wasn’t there moments ago emerging.

“You got this.” I wink and he smiles and then sets his gaze forward.

I try to calm down my pounding heartbeat watching the falls appear in the distance. What is probably seconds long feels like an hour until the top of the raft falls and all of us slide down. Toby does awesome like I thought he would, but another one comes immediately, and we plunge.

“Toby, paddle.” I give him directions and his arms go strong.

Ava’s helping out by paddling double speed, thank goodness.

“Everyone stop,” Cameron calls out when we get to a calmer spot. He directs his bigger paddles into the water to maneuver the boat a certain direction down the river.

We fall into a dip in the surge and a huge wave of water drenches us.

“Go, go,” he says, and Toby paddles his heart out.

I wasn't prepared for one slip after the other, and I bite down screaming directions at Toby. Soon my eyes stop looking at what's coming and I focus completely on him. I still treat him like a child but look at him manning up and handling a class three river.

He breaks when he needs to, propels the raft when it's required, and the best part is his gaze never veers from where we're headed. My heart warms and I probably look like a goon smiling over at him.

Finally, the raft is gliding and all of Toby's teeth—what he hasn't lost and been richly rewarded for by the Tooth Fairy—are smiling back at me.

“Okay group, we're going to tie up over to the left.” Cameron points to a clearing where I'm guessing the rafting company has a snack area.

Toby straightens his back and helps his group out by doing his share of the paddling.

Once we reach the rest area and we're out of the raft, I wrap my arm around his neck, pulling him into my chest.

“You did fantastic!” His face flushes and he tries to toss off my compliment. “I'm serious. Have you been going out without me?”

He laughs, shaking his head. “No,” he mumbles.

“I'm really proud of you.” I rub my knuckles on his head and pull him to my side where he stands limp and he shoves off my praise again.

Toby's a lot like me. We love attention, but never when we do something good or when someone is proud of us. That's when expectations are born.

“So, I can do class four now?”

Ava laughs and I realize I almost forgot she was with us. I search her out, finding her right behind me. She appears mesmerized by the scene in front of her and I'm not sure why.

“We'll talk about it, but let's master class three for awhile.”

Toby squirms out of my arm hold, stalking off to the snack table. He's struggling to fight the smile on his face, which makes me grin.

“Who would have guessed?” Ava says, then sashays by me.

“What?”

“That there's actually one person in this world who has the power to shut you up.”

She smiles over her shoulder and continues on her way to the snack table.

An urge spurs inside me to bend her over my knee and smack that fine

round ass, but instead, I follow behind.

“Well, I don’t know about that. Your cupcakes can shut me up.” I fall into line with her, both of us walking toward Toby and the snack table. “Which brings up the subject of my taste test.”

I feel her eyes on me, but I keep mine straight ahead so I don’t seem too eager.

“How about tomorrow night. Monday’s are usually dead for you, right?”

This earns my attention, and I turn to look down at her. “For someone who acts like she can’t stand the sight of me, you sure seem to keep tabs on me. You got a set of binoculars over there in your shop?”

She stares at me blankly until she has no choice but to face forward or risk tripping on a root.

“It’s not that I can’t stand the sight of you, it’s just that you’re everything that’s bad for me.”

I cup her elbow, quickly guiding her over to a more secluded area. Cameron is busy talking to Toby who’s nodding at him while chewing his granola bar.

“Bad for you?” What the hell is she talking about?

Truth be told, I’ve shared two nights with Ava against my better judgment. Don’t get me wrong, both nights she rocked my world more than anyone I’ve ever been with. But she was still the daughter of an acquaintance of mine. Vic rolls by the bar for the odd Single Dads Club meetings. But when I brought it up that second night in my office she reminded me that she’s an adult and is free to make her own decisions. She’s right, I know she is, but it did take some convincing on her part. Lucky for me, Ava is really good at convincing when she uses her mouth.

Those two encounters have stayed with me. Especially, since one was in my bedroom and I swore even after I washed the sheets, her scent still lingered. Second time, was in my office. Talk about shitting where you eat. This is like fucking where you live. Now visions of her spread eagle on my desk embed my vision every time I’m in my office at the bar and when I lay down at night. I remember the feeling of having her pussy on my mouth as she straddled my face.

“Yes. I thought I could do the whole screw-you-whenever, but I just can’t do that knowing that you’re out messing around with other people.”

“That’s why you dodged me after the time in my office?”

She nods, her eyes studying whatever the fuck is over my shoulder.

“Ava.” My hand reaches out, but I retract it because I don’t want to ruin the friendship we’ve started. Friendship might not be the best word, but at least she no longer hates me. “I never meant to disrespect you.”

She shakes her head, dismissing my words. When she finally looks me in the eye, it’s there, what I somehow always knew was there—she’s not like the other girls I usually get with. The ones who aren’t looking for something beyond a night or two.

“I let you disrespect me. *I* came to the bar that night. We both knew what I wanted and it wasn’t your hand in marriage.”

“But?”

“But it’s not me. The whole friends-with-benefits is one thing. The last thing I want is a boyfriend. I’ve got enough going on right now trying to get this business off the ground.”

“Phew,” I slip out.

Her gaze bounces over to me once again, her soft smile fading.

“I also can’t be one of many and I was upset with you when I had no reason to be. We made no promises, but I changed my mind afterward.”

“So, we can be friends?” I ask, not arguing the point.

Ava’s sexy as hell and my dick is in full chub mode when she’s near, but I don’t do monogamy even when it’s friends with benefits.

“Why do you want to be friends?” She scrunches her eyebrows.

I chuckle. “Listen, if we’re going to be business owners across the street from one another, I think we need to be civil at the very least. You seem like a fun girl and I’m a fun guy. Too bad we can’t enjoy each other’s company now and then, but hey, I promise not to touch if you do,” I waggle my eyebrows.

Finally, that soft smile that’s teetered on the edge of gloom goes full wattage and she nods.

“Friends.” She shrugs like it’s no sweat off her back.

“If I cop a feel once in awhile, that’s okay, right?” I joke, walking past her and toward the snack table.

She turns and walks beside me.

“As long as you don’t mind a knee in the nuts.”

I scoff. “You wouldn’t.”

“Touch and see.” She quirks an eyebrow issuing a challenge.

“You scare me.”

She laughs and if only that sound didn’t spur a spark of something in my

stomach, then I'd be absolutely certain that I could be friends with a girl for once in my life.

CHAPTER

Ten

AVA

TASTE TEST! What was I thinking? I should've sent the samples over with Charlie earlier today. She would have handed them to him, and he could test them out alone in his office.

But no, I had to go ahead and agree to be *friends* with him. Then I agreed to have him at the shop after hours to taste test a few cupcakes he might want to serve at Happy Daze.

Yeah, long story short, I'm a moron.

Admitting my feelings to him at the water rafting excursion wasn't in the plan. My plan when I left his bar that next morning after falling asleep on the couch in his office was to act indifferent. To never let him know how he hurt me after seeing the text from his date the night before.

I'm not sure what woke me up, but I slithered out from under the blanket I was sharing with Dane. The leather couch crinkled and I stopped, waiting until I saw his steady breathing. With him still asleep, I tiptoed around the room, scooping up my clothes that Dane had stripped off me the night before after I'd shown up thirsty for more than just a drink at his bar.

I watched him sleep, a beautiful man that used his good looks to lure women. Who am I judging? It worked on me. Twice now.

After shrugging my shirt over my head, his phone dinged on the desk.

A picture of him and a woman crossed the screen with a caption, 'Be careful I bite'.

I picked up his phone thinking I'd be able to see more and be able to tell who the hell the woman was, but his password screen came up, so, I did what any normal female would, I stalked him on Instagram.

It didn't take long to find the picture linked to his profile. I'm not sure the man holds any secrets.

Pollyanna or whatever her name was, had her cheek pressed against his. He was wearing the same clothes that I just stepped over, so unless I'm an even bigger moron, he went from her to me last night. Hours before he bent me over his desk, he was with her.

That's when I knew, this casual sex thing wasn't for me. I'm not built to share a man. So, I took one last look at Dane knowing that whatever we were doing was over and prayed that neither of my roommates would be up when I tried to slip in our apartment unseen.

What's that saying? Fool me once shame on you. Fool me twice, and I'm an idiot who needs to stay far, far away from Dane Murray.

A light tap sounds on the window of my door and my heart rate picks up speed. I ignore the temptation to glance in a mirror. To straighten my ponytail or make sure the lip gloss I applied minutes ago is still on.

Walking through the front part of the shop, seeing his smiling face behind the glass, warms my stomach.

I unlock the door and push it open. "Hey."

"Glad to see you listened to me last time and kept the door locked." He slides in through the opening, locking it behind him.

"Yeah, you'd never want that robber with the late night sweet tooth to break in."

I walk toward the back. The sooner we get it going, the sooner it's over.

I reach the kitchen and plate the samples while Dane slides onto the stool next to me.

He's wearing cologne tonight. God, it makes him smell so good.

It's probably for a date. Probably for one of his bang buddies.

Block it out. Block it out.

Be professional.

I push the plate toward him. I do my best not to divert my gaze between his wide-open legs. My mind tries not to remember the length and girth of what lies under those jeans. My pussy tries not to throb with the memory of how he filled me up.

She's doing a really shitty job in that department.

"So, what do we have here?" he asks.

I back up to sit on my own stool, attempting to create some distance between us.

“I stuck with a drink theme so they’re all based on alcoholic drink flavors. Like margarita and strawberry daiquiri.”

His fingers wrap around the Kailua and crème cupcake and he holds it up to his nose and smells it.

“A dessert cupcake.” He smiles and a pair of hands have never looked more appetizing to me as he peels back the paper. If the hands weren’t enough to turn my thermostat on high, watching his mouth open and his perfectly white teeth bite into my creation, has me practically waving myself to cool down.

Why is that such a turn on?

An enjoyable mumble rumbles out of him and he closes his eyes briefly as he chews and swallows.

I cross my legs to tame the fire his noises ignited.

“Put a ring on it.” He shakes his head in disbelief.

“What?” I giggle like a schoolgirl.

Stop it.

“The cupcake, all your cupcakes. So. Fucking. Good.”

He peruses the other ones, his eyes widening as he takes them all in.

“Which one should I choose?” His hand floats over the tray until he picks up the sangria one.

“That’s a sangria berry flavored.”

His smile grows. “Perfect. You really picked some great samples here.”

Again, my breathing hitches, my heart thumps in my chest watching him eat another cupcake.

He reacts the same, eyes closed, inaudible murmur and I force myself to stay seated instead of straddling him and inviting him to eat the cupcakes off my naked body.

Real professional, Ava.

We continue this torture for another four cupcakes until Dane pushes the tray to the side.

“I think I’ve indulged enough and I can confidently say, you can make whatever the hell you want for my grill.” He pats his stomach. “Damn, girl, where did you learn to bake?”

Needing to escape the closeness of us, I grab two waters from the fridge and hand him one.

His forearms flex as he twists it open and his Adam’s apple bobs when he guzzles down half the bottle. “Thanks.”

I nod.

“So, where did you learn?” He turns his body on the stool to face me.

“My mom.”

“She’s a baker?”

“Well, after her and my dad split, she had to find a job. A bakery hired her for behind the counter help, but as the time went on, they needed more help in the kitchen and the woman trained her. You know what it’s like in one parent households—the kids end up at their parent’s work a lot.” I smile and he nods, a quick look of guilt shadowing his features. “I picked up on things. There were times I’d help her out. I loved it but never thought of actually doing it for a living. And here I am.”

“I can’t thank you enough for stepping into the family business. My stomach thanks you, too.” His grin spreads across his face and the space between my legs heats.

“So...” In an attempt to distract myself from my thoughts I grab a notepad and pen from the table behind me. “How many would you like me to make you each night? Or would you rather just do weekends? Or we could try it out and if it doesn’t work...”

His hand warms my forearm.

“Relax.” He dips his head to look me in the eyes.

They’re searching mine and although I try to push back all of my desire for him, his chest rises and falls with a heavy breath showing me that I failed.

“Sorry. I’m just nervous for some reason.” I drop the pen and clench my fists.

“Hey, it’s me, Dane Murray, your friend.”

I shake my head and stand up, getting as far away as I can, which lands me on the other side of the counter, my hands planted in front of me on the stainless steel.

“Don’t,” I warn and he holds his hands up in the air.

“Don’t what?”

“Make a joke of the friend agreement.”

He chuckles. “It’s funny, you know.” He looks up at the ceiling, his biceps on prominent display with his arms crossed over his chest. “Your cupcake tray kind of explains why people struggle with monogamy.”

I scrunch my eyebrows, waiting for him to explain himself.

“Would you want only one flavor of cupcake for your entire life?”

“Yes, I would. I would be happy to eat a chocolate cupcake with coconut

shavings everyday of my life.” My tone is indignant. I’m not going to fall for his lure to get me to sleep with him again.

“Hey.” He raises his hands in the air in defense. “I’m not saying anything, I’m just saying what if you marry some dude who can’t give you chocolate one night, red velvet the next, and still be able to make your toes curl with vanilla?”

He stares at me, as though his point is proven.

“Why would I marry that person?” I round the prep station, needing something to do other than stare into those moss green eyes.

“You tell me.” He gulps down more of his water and his Adam’s apple bounces up and down. I can’t help the desire that wells up inside. I want to run my tongue over the top of it and drag it all the way up to his ear.

Ugh. Back to the point at hand.

“Is this all because I said I couldn’t have casual sex with you?”

“I don’t think our sex would be casual. Applaudable, earth-shattering... those are better words for our sex.”

I bite down on my lip, attempting to shelter the smile, but my cheeks are rising.

“Don’t we think highly of ourselves? Earth-shattering?”

“Hey.” His shoulders rise and fall. “I’m not giving all the credit to myself. You’re a yoga master in some of the positions you contort yourself into.”

Now I’m not only smiling like a goon, I’m blushing.

“Good to know I won’t be some plain vanilla cupcake for the man I marry.”

“Definitely not.”

I nod thinking it’s time put this topic to bed now.

“Where are you going with this conversation?” I ask.

“Just food for thought. I’m not built for one flavor the rest of my life. I like variety, but lately, I’ve been thinking, maybe variety doesn’t have to mean numerous girls.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “Did you have this epiphany before or after I shot you down?”

He puckers his lips. “Did you really shoot me down? I don’t remember asking.”

I almost reach for a cupcake to throw in his cocky, arrogant face, but the last thing I need is to smear frosting on an already edible body. I fear I’ll end

up licking it off.

“Answer the question,” I grit out.

“Yeah.” The stool slides across the floor when he stands. “See, after you this summer, I beat off to the image of you. My cock likes the memory of you bent over my desk, not to mention the memory of you straddling my face.”

I blush and back away as he rounds the prep table.

“No one has really piqued my interest. I haven’t really dated, and definitely haven’t slept with anyone else. Then it dawned on me.”

“It dawned on you. When you were fisting your cock to the image of fucking me?” That front I’m so used to putting on is crumbling as he approaches. I back up another step, trying to act indifferent to his stalking toward me.

He chuckles. “We’ve only been friends a few days and you already know me so well.” He winks and my stomach disobeys my brain by flipping and flopping over and over again.

“I can be exclusive with you.”

“I feel honored. Is this your way of asking me out?” I swallow the extra saliva building in my mouth. Damn, his shirt is so tight around those strong shoulders.

“I have a deal that I think we’ll both be happy about.”

“Which is?”

He stops a foot away from me, his thumb rubbing up and down the prep table. His gaze detours from mine as though he has to gather up the strength to say what he wants to. When he looks up, his eyes are swimming in determination.

“We can be exclusive friends with benefits.” He holds up his two fingers in the air. “I promise I won’t date or fuck anyone else while we’re messing around.”

“Scouts honor?” I give his two raised fingers a questioning gaze, knowing if Dane was ever a boy scout, it was solely to build fires and use a knife. “Why not a pinky promise?”

He tucks the two fingers into his fist and then he’s holding his hand out to me with his pinky finger extended. His very large hand with those slim fingers that know exactly how to curl inside me and make me crazy.

I push my thighs together, clenching to push that memory away.

“I’m cool with a pinky promise.”

I shake my head, spinning on the balls of my feet and walking to the

fridge. Grabbing the bottle of vodka from the freezer, I twist it open and swallow down a shot.

Dane meets me there, grabbing the bottle from my hands and pouring it down his own throat and then sets it on the counter.

“What do you say?” he asks, his gaze intent.

His deal is tempting. I can’t deny the fact he rocked my world those two nights. The man is insatiable and I loved every second his hands, mouth and dick were all over and in me.

“No rules. No obligations. If anyone decides they meet someone they want to date then it’s over?” I ask.

He nods, closing in on my space now. The promise that he’ll rock my world is all over his face.

“No one can know about it. This is between us, after hours or secret places.”

He nods, his finger skimming down my arm.

“No guy talk at the gym or in those single dad meetings.”

He nods, stepping so close our bodies are flush together. God, he smells edible.

“Why?” I ask, wondering why he’s willing to veer from his usual M.O.

His hand moves up until he’s cupping my face, his thumb rubbing along my cheek. “I need to work you out of my system.”

There it is. No romantic line about how much he needs me in his life. He wants to use me and move on. I’d harness the energy to be offended, but I think I need the same—get my fill of him—literally—and then move on to a normal, healthy relationship with someone who isn’t such a commitment-phobe.

“Okay.” I press my cheek into his palm and he bends his head down. “Pinky promise?” I ask again.

“Pinky promise,” he whispers before sealing our deal with a kiss that weakens my knees, but I don’t have to worry about falling because Dane’s arm swings around my waist and hoists me up and swings me back around onto the prep table.

Is Dane the devil or a saint?

Neither. He’s a fucking genius, especially with how he’s mastered the way he uses his tongue.

CHAPTER

Eleven

THE COOL METAL permeates through the thin fabric of my shirt while the heat of his body on top of me warms my front. I forgot how much I love the weight of him on me. How secure I feel with him.

The first two times we were together, our movements were frantic and uncontrolled, but tonight his hands move under the hem of my shirt, slower and more deliberate. Maybe he's been imagining doing this in his beat off sessions.

His large palm cups my breast and I wiggle under him, the ache in my pussy building.

"You have no idea how long I've wanted to feel your skin again." His mouth casts open kisses up my neck while his other hand reaches down and fiddles with the button of my jeans. "I can't wait to see what you're hiding under here."

The lightbulb goes off. Fuck.

I sit up and he slides off me. "What?" His eyes peer through the opening to the front door. "Did you hear something?"

"No. Um, I'm all for this." I motion with my finger between us. "Just not tonight."

I slide my breast into my white cotton bra and straighten my t-shirt.

Placing his hand on my hip, he maneuvers me to the edge of the table, pinning both arms on either side of me.

"Talk," he says, bending his head down once again, kissing my collarbone and my neck.

"Maybe we should think it over some more," I rush out.

“Do you not want me? Whenever and wherever you want?” His voice has that low timber that makes my core clench.

“Yes. I want you, but...” My thoughts trail off when he moves to the hollow of my neck, his tongue swirling until he reaches the other side.

“What is it Ava?” he murmurs against my heated skin.

My head lulls back and he takes the opportunity as an invitation.

“My tongue is magic, remember how good it felt working your pussy?”

His hand skims along the side of my stomach and his finger grazes along my stomach until his thumb and forefinger are flicking the button of my jeans again.

“Nope.” I take two hands and push him off.

His eyes are wide with surprise but he’s still staring at me like I’m his own batch of chocolate peanut butter cupcakes and he doesn’t plan on leaving any crumbs behind.

“Okay.” He holds his hands up. “I’m not gonna beg.” He rounds the counter, swiping his phone and keys off the counter. “Let me know when you want to initiate our agreement.”

Watching his back as he leaves feels like a jagged knife twisting in my stomach.

“Dane!” I call out.

He turns on his heels, leaning in the doorway in his usual suave, confident way. Somehow his position always seems to have the same affect on me as watching Magic Mike.

“What if we turn off the lights?” I ask.

Surely, that will be okay. There’s no way I’m going to let him see me in my white cotton bra I’m wearing because it’s my most comfortable and a pair of cotton panties that are jacked up to my naval because I haven’t had time to laundry in three weeks. Said panties may or may not also have a tear around the elastic waistband.

“Nah, I’ll wait. I need to see your body.” He pushes off the doorframe and stands straight. “Why so shy?” His stance widens and he fiddles with the keys in his hands.

“Um...”

“I don’t want to push you into anything, Ava. You have all the control.”

I look down at the table. “It’s just, I wasn’t really prepared for this to happen tonight.”

A deep chuckle floats out of him and he grabs his phone out of his back

pocket and places it and his keys on the counter, stalking toward me.

“You need to shave?” he asks and my face heats to the level I imagine it would standing in front of an explosion. “Because that’s okay.”

“No, I shaved.” Which must have been some sort of sixth sense because I hadn’t since the rafting. “Um,” I swallow. “Remember that pink see through matching bra and panty set you saw me in the first time?” He nods a deep breath causing his chest to rise and fall. “The second time, I had that sexy zip down athletic bra and nothing under my yoga pants.”

“Best surprise.” The corner of his lips upturns into a smile as he bites his bottom lip.

“Neither would be the case right now.”

“So.” He shrugs, and his hands grab the hem of my t-shirt, fiddling with it in his hands. “You were going to pass up on an earth-shattering sex marathon because you aren’t wearing sexy lingerie?”

That sounds a tiny bit lame now that he says it out loud.

“Well...”

He pulls the t-shirt over my head, and my hands quickly wrap around my breasts to cover the bra.

Grabbing my forearms, he pries them apart and licks his lips. He reaches back, unhooking the clasp and it drops to the floor.

“One problem solved.” He bends down, and his mouth takes my nipple into his mouth. His eyes glance up to mine, and my nipple pops out of his wet and inviting mouth. “I did like the bow though.”

I roll my eyes and my breathing hiccups when his hands again move to the button of my pants. He slides them down my legs, his mouth sucking and licking my breasts the entire time. I wait for him to glance down. To look at what I’m wearing, but his fingers blindly pull both sides down my legs and he waits for me to step out of them before he flings them somewhere behind him.

Now that I’m standing in front of him naked, he kisses his way back up to my mouth.

“Better?” he softly asks against my lips.

“Better.”

“Can I fuck you now?”

“You better.” My hand reaches behind his head and pulls it toward me. His tongue dives into my waiting mouth with determination.

Locking his head to mine, our lips and tongue search for a pace but

nothing seems to quench the need in either of us. His hands search my body like it's the last time he can touch a woman and quickly, his fingers dig into my hips and he hoists me up onto the table.

Because he's so tall, we're even in height now and I strip him of his t-shirt, tossing it on the floor. My hands explore all the grooves and indents of his muscled chest.

"You're so fucking hot," I say and his lips close to smile against my lips. "I want to taste you," I whisper as his lips hover over mine.

"I could say the same." A smirk crosses his lips.

My hand explores, coming upon his pants and I flick the button open and slide the zipper down, his already hard cock pops out of the hole in the front of his boxer briefs, begging to be played with.

I squirm to get off the table, ready to take him in my mouth, but he stops me, his hand pressing on my chest until I'm lying flat.

"You'll have plenty of chances, but you've made me wait too long to taste you again."

He widens my legs, his head dipping between my thighs.

My body almost convulses when his tongue touches my clit. I arch my back, but he places his hand on the small of my stomach, keeping me down.

His tongue continues to manipulate my center, twirling and swirling, eating me like I'm his own personal cupcake made just for him, but when his teeth scrape along my clit, my entire body quivers for the orgasm he's spurring.

His finger pushes into me and then another one, filling me up.

"Dane!" I scream, my fist pounding the metal, needing something to grab onto.

Once he arches those strong fingers right to my G-spot I come like a freight train unable to stop. There's no yellow warning, my orgasm barrels through me straight from red to green.

His tongue slows, placing sweet kisses to my now trembling pussy until he's staring up at me. Propping up on my elbows, our eyes lock, and his hands reach for my hands, urging me up.

"Taste yourself," he says, his mouth covering mine. He pulls away. "See how addicting you are?"

I don't answer, not that I think he's expecting one. Using my heels, I push his jeans down to the floor and he toes out of his shoes and pushes everything off to the side, leaving him in a red pair of boxer briefs.

“I like it.” I examine his rock-hard dick tenting the front of his boxer briefs.

“You’re going to like it even more when it’s deep inside you.”

“I was talking about the boxers, but that too,” I laugh, and he slides me to the edge of the table again.

Reaching down he fishes a condom out of the pocket of his jeans, tearing open the packet.

“Would you like me to do the honors?” I ask, sliding down from the table.

My feet land on the floor, but I fall to my knees, hooking both my fingers into his boxers and freeing the cock my mouth waters for.

He has such a beautiful cock. I swear before Dane, I never even knew you could attribute that word to a penis.

He hands me the condom. A small gasp escapes him when I roll it down and I know I don’t have long before he hauls me onto the table to screw me. My body aches to feel him inside me.

His hand grabs my hips, and I’m sitting on the edge before I can blink. The one thing I realized when I’ve been with Dane in the past is that he has no qualms of placing me exactly where he wants me. There’s something animalistic about it though, and that only excites me more.

I look into his eyes as he’s guiding himself into me, there’s so much lust and arousal in the room that it feels almost stifling. Inch by inch he pushes into me until he’s as deep as he’ll get. He moves one of my stray hairs from my ponytail behind my ear and leans in for a kiss.

Our kiss reaches the frantic stage fast, and he starts drilling into me repeatedly, his hands holding my legs up under my thighs as I’m hanging over the metal table. A table I’ll be disinfecting tomorrow numerous times.

“Jesus, you always feel so fucking good,” he says in my ear as he drags his cock in and out of me, his hips roll over and over again.

My ass rocks into him, our two bodies grinding together as moans and sighs bounce off every wall in the room. I place my palms flat against the metal, needing leverage to get him even deeper. My tits bounce up and down with each thrust, something he doesn’t miss. His callused hands skim up my thighs to my hips and ass, continuing to dictate the rate we’re going.

“I’ll never get tired of you. I need this pussy every time I wake up. Be prepared for morning calls.”

I have no doubt he’s telling the truth.

“Harder, Dane. Harder,” I pant, sweat starting to drip between my breasts. His fingers grip my ass harder and he plunges into me with such ferocity, I gasp for a breath.

“Hard enough baby?” He continues to fuck me to the hilt and my arms are starting to lose strength, my legs already straining to hold up my weight.

“Yes.”

He moves one leg to rest against his shoulder, hitting me in a completely different place inside. I gasp at the sheer amount of pleasure that rips through me every time he thrusts.

His thumb massages my clit and I feel my orgasm building. He continues working my body, his own sweat dripping onto my stomach.

“Damn, baby, your pussy is so fucking wet.”

My hands find the edge of the table and I grip it hard to keep my body stable so he can hit that spot every time.

He skips a few gears and suddenly we’re speeding up a hill and just like minutes earlier, there’s no breaking, no warning, we fly right over the edge and I cry out.

My back arches off the now slippery surface and Dane’s arm wraps around my leg in the air to make sure he continues to control my climax.

“That’s it, baby, scream my name.”

“Oh fuck, Dane!” I scream.

“Again.” His face contorts into a half painful, half lust filled expression and he pumps into me one more time and stills.

“Ava,” his voice is low and he twitches as he comes.

Done and spent, my arms extend out on the table and I catch the breath Dane stole from me.

This friends-with-benefits thing might just be the best decision I’ve ever made.

“Next time, we’re using frosting.” He winks, draws out of me and walks back to the bathroom.

I sit up, feeling slightly self-conscious now that it’s all over. He returns a second later as I’m throwing my t-shirt over my head.

“Name your flavor,” I say, and he approaches me, swinging both arms around me.

“You know my favorite.”

“Peanut butter and chocolate.” I smile.

“Well, you actually, but I’ll take what I can get.” He winks and then takes

the hem of my shirt and strips it from my body. “I’m not a one and done kind of guy. Let’s eat some cupcakes and then fuck again.”

“I’m not sure what you want more of...me or my cupcakes.”

He swipes one from the tray and bites into it. “That’s the beauty, I don’t have to choose.” He smirks, and I take my finger and dip it into the frosting of his cupcake. “There. Now, wipe that on your tit and I have my perfect dessert.”

His words shouldn’t ignite firecrackers inside my stomach, but damn if my body ever listens when it comes to Dane Murray.

CHAPTER

Twelve

DANE

I OPEN the door to the Mad Batter and Toby and all his teammates file in along with their parents.

Ava's eyes widen as she places another tray of cookies in the glass case.

"What's going on?" she asks.

Toby runs up to the counter, his friends following closely behind. They huddle around Ava like she's Bryce Harper or some other Gatorade promoting player in the majors.

"Miss Ava, we won!" Toby screams and all the players start screaming.

They're all amped up after winning their first game of fall ball. Let's just say it's been a rough one.

"You did? Well, then, you need a cookie!" She pulls out a tray of her famous Eat Me cookies iced in pink and purple and turquoise.

The boys' hands freeze, none of them grabbing one.

"Those are for girls," one of them says.

Ava looks down and then places the tray back, pulling out another one with dinosaurs and teddy bears.

"Those are for babies," the same boy says, which stops every other boy from taking their fill.

"I swear, when I was young a cookie was a cookie." She looks over the heads of the boys to me, a smile in place. A smile I didn't used to get until our deal to be friends-with-benefits.

If I were arrogant I'd say she's smiling because she's still in the euphoria my dick created for her last night. But then I'd have to admit, I brought the boys here as an excuse to see her because I'm still in a state of bliss after last

night, too.

“Sorry boys, that’s all the kinds I have. I’ll put it on my list to make some baseball ones, okay?”

All the boys shrug, and their hands dig in to grab one, appeased by her answer.

“Take a seat at the tables.” I point to the section of tables one of the moms is pushing together.

They scramble and I wait for the parents to each place their order and find a seat in the small bakery. When it’s finally my turn, I pull out my wallet to pay for the cookies.

“What would the coach like?” Ava bites down on her lower lip.

I lean over the counter. “Ten minutes with the baker in the storage room.”

Ava pretends to look at the chalkboard sign above her head.

“Hmm, I don’t see that.” The spark in her hazel eyes is apparent and the caveman inside of me hopes her playfulness is due to last night.

“I think it’s a special. Maybe exclusive for one person.”

She giggles, grabbing a plate and placing a cookie on it, sliding it across the counter.

I glance down to the Eat Me cookie. “Are you giving me instructions now?” I look over my shoulder, finding the parents and kids busy and not paying us any attention. I pick it up and spread my tongue over the top in an exaggerated lick, flattening and widening it.

“You are truly something.” She waves my antic off.

“You’re the one who asked. I’m just displaying my skills.” I bite the cookie, sliding the cash across the counter.

“Oh, I’m acquainted with your skills, Dane.” Her own gaze takes in the room and then she slides the money back over to me.

“Cookies are on me.”

“No, you don’t.” I slide it back her way. “Take it, really.”

She hems and haws before, opening the cash register and grabbing my change.

“Thank you.” She hands me the change, which I drop in the tip jar.

I look through the open window into the kitchen spotting a six-tier wedding cake on the table.

“Do you have a wedding or is that another one for the portfolio?”

She looks over her shoulder, dismissing it right away. “Portfolio.”

“It’s beautiful.”

Just then one of the moms approaches the counter to grab some napkins and she checks out where we're looking.

"Did you make that?" she asks Ava.

Ava's face blushes and she nods, nibbling on the inside of her cheek.

"Yeah, she's a fantastic baker."

Ava shoots me a glare that says *shut-up*.

"Those flowers look so real. Are they?" the woman asks, craning her neck to see it.

"They're sugar." Ava steps to the side. "Would you like to see it?"

The mom, Krystal, eyes me, clearly surprised we have this kind of talent in Climax Cove, and then circles around the counter right through to the back. Ava and I follow.

"You should enter one of those cake competitions on the Food Network," Krystal says, walking around the cake like she's a judge. "Why the hell are you in Climax Cove?"

"Excuse me?" Ava asks.

"I mean, you're way too talented to be here. You should be in the city where people will spend five grand on a wedding cake." She focuses on the tray of sugar flowers that Ava must have been working on before the team barged in.

"Heidi, Kate, get in here and see this!" she calls out to the seating area.

Krystal, Heidi and Kate are like the mom brigade of Climax Cove. They have their hands in everything from fundraisers to extracurricular activities. They're the team moms, the PTA leaders, the volunteers at school. The overzealous, and overbearing kind of parents.

The tall blonde and the shorter brunette walk in, coffees in hand.

"Who did this?" Heidi swings her long blonde hair off her shoulders, stepping closer.

"She did." Krystal points to Ava who's about as red as a tomato and ready to hide under the table.

Heidi and Kate's eyes shift to Ava, both of their mouths ajar.

"It's gorgeous and makes me want to get married all over again," Kate says, setting her coffee down on the table.

"Thank you," Ava says with the smallest voice I've ever heard come out of her mouth.

"Whose is it?" Heidi asks.

"No one's. I just shoot it for my portfolio," Ava admits, and they all

scoff.

“What do you do with the cake?” Kate asks.

“The last one I made, I took down to Veteran’s Hall.”

They all nod, their eyes focused on the extravagant cake.

“Oh my God! I have the best idea,” Kate says, pulling her phone out of her jacket.

Ava’s eyes shift to mine in a *what’s going on* question.

Kate walks away toward the storage room, whispering into the phone and by the time she returns she’s smiling so wide you’d think someone just told her she doesn’t have to do any more school fundraisers for the rest of her life.

“So, I’m hoping it’s okay, but I have my in-laws walking down here.”

I smile knowing exactly what Kate just did.

Based on Ava’s fidgeting with her hands she’s skeptical. “Okay. Why?”

The boys are getting louder and I know most of the dads are probably just talking sports and not paying attention and the last thing I want is for the boys to break something in her shop. So, I walk over to the window and take a peek, finding them all flipping a water bottle in the air to see how it lands.

“Boys, simmer down.”

One of the dads catches me and waves me off to say he’ll handle it.

“I’m married to Donnie Vitner, his parents own Double D’s,” Kate says.

“Okay. And?” Ava asks, her gaze shifting to me.

“They could take the cake off your hands once you’re finished with it and serve it at the restaurant. At least you’d get something for it.”

“Not the five grand like she should.” Krystal is still in awe. “If I ever get a ring on this finger again,” she holds up her hands, wiggling her ring finger, “you’re doing my cake.”

I could make a few jokes right now, but I’m not about to ruin this for Ava.

“Katie?” Debbie’s voice hollers into the bakery.

“Back here, Ma,” Kate says and a second later Debbie walks in and her jaw hits the floor.

“You weren’t lying.” Debbie takes her time to examine the cake as though it won’t be sliced into pieces and served.

“Hi, Ava, sorry I haven’t been by yet,” Debbie says.

“So, Ava,” Kate interrupts. “The diner used to get pies from the Baking Basket before Norma closed. Lately, my father-in-law has been trying to bake the desserts himself.” She shares a look with Debbie. “It’s not working out

very well,” Kate adds.

“He’s more of a BLT and burger type cook.” Debbie pats Ava’s arm.

“I don’t know why we didn’t think about this sooner,” Kate says, shaking her head.

“Then it’s set.” Ava’s gaze shifts to me when I finally speak after hanging out in the background.

“How much?” Debbie asks. “I’ll definitely take the cakes after you’re finished with them. How many are you planning on doing?”

“Um.” Ava hiccups for a response, probably not used to how fast things can get done in a small town. No emails, texts or voice messages. All business is done face-to-face.

“She’ll make one a week. You can freeze the layers and take them out as needed. You’ll pay half of what she’d normally charge?” I quirk my eyebrow to Ava to make sure it sounds fair.

She nods. “Or I could make you other cakes?” she offers.

I shake my head. She’s too much of a people pleaser. Not that I’m upset when she’s pleasuring me.

Luckily Debbie beats me to it.

“No, this is perfect and we don’t have any waste. Plus, Don will look at it like he’s getting a deal.” Her and Kate laugh.

Don Senior is known for stretching his pennies.

“Okay, thank you. I’m almost finished and then I can snap a few pictures and get it down to you.”

Debbie smiles. “Perfect. By dinner tonight?”

“Yes. That sounds good.” Ava’s smile gleams.

“Looking forward to our business partnership. Oh, and I was at Dane’s grill the other day and had one of your strawberry margarita cupcakes. Oh my, that was delicious. Worth every gripe from Don about spending so much on flour and sugar.” She smiles and Kate laughs.

“Thank you.” Ava holds out her hand to Debbie who stares down at it and then to me.

I shrug in a what-can-I-say-she’s-not-a-native-in-Climax-Cove.

“I seal my deals with a hug.” Debbie steps closer, wrapping her arms around Ava, who at first seems hesitant but eventually reciprocates.

A crash comes from the front room and I don’t hear any of the boy’s voices anymore. All of us run to the doorway to find the boys circled around a teapot pointing fingers to one another in a *he did it* echo.

“Boys,” I say and all their scared faces look at me. “Who did it?” I walk into the room and they continue to point and blame one another.

My eyes focus on Toby, but Ava comes to my side with a broom and dustpan.

“It’s okay,” she says, starting to use the broom to sweep it up.

“Toby?” I question and when his matching green eyes meet mine I shift my eyes to Ava.

“I’ll do that Miss Ava.” He holds his hands out to Ava.

Then another boy grabs the dustpan.

“Thank you boys, that’s very polite of you.” Ava steps back, running right into my back.

I place my hands on her shoulders and lean down to whisper. “I’ll pay to replace it.”

She circles around and my eyes can’t stop staring at her lips, remembering them on my skin last night.

“Not necessary.” She slides away and goes behind the counter.

As my eyes track her, I catch Krystal, Heidi and Kate all staring over at me with smirks that suggest they’re running scenarios in their heads. I’m sure it’ll be all over the circuit soon that the town bar owner and bakery owner are hitting homeruns in the back room.

Once the mess is cleaned up, we say our goodbyes and I get the boys out of the bakery before something else breaks. Heidi has taken Toby with her since he has plans to sleepover at her place for her son’s birthday so I have the rest of the day to myself.

No sooner have I sat down in the chair in my office, when my phone chimes.

Ava: Do you think that deal is fair?

Me: Definitely.

Ava: Thanks for negotiating. I was just surprised.

Me: I look forward to collecting my commission.

Ava: Commission?

Me: My cut for closing the deal.

Ava: Do I even want to know what you want?

Me: Oh, believe me you do. ;)

Ava: Does it involve me on my knees?

Me: I would never ask you to do something you don't want to do.

Ava: Don't make assumptions.

Me: How about a striptease?

Ava: Oh, you can do better than that ...

Me: Tonight. My place. Toby's at a sleepover for a birthday party.

Ava: Time?

Me: Seven.

Ava: I'll bring the kneepads.

I chuckle, my thumbs already moving.

Me: I could get used to this friends-with-benefits thing.

She never answers and my gaze finds the clock, seeing I still have six hours before my mouth is on hers. I lean back in my chair contemplating the fact that it's the first time I can remember ever counting down the hours until I got to see a woman.

CHAPTER

Thirteen

DANE

I GLANCE at the clock when I finally walk into my house.

Six fifty.

I search the room, deciphering where to start.

Toby and I built a fort Thursday and watched Goonies. The blankets are still strewn everywhere and covering the couch I plan to use to watch a movie with Ava later.

Moving my gaze to the kitchen, I see breakfast from this morning in the sink.

So, I'm not much of a cleaner. Ava has to already assume that about me.

Scrambling I figure the kitchen being clean is more important than a few blankets that need folding.

I turn on the water, getting the sink cleaned out and loading the dishwasher. Glancing at the kitchen table, I sigh and my head falls back.

Toby's iPad, baseball cards, and a bunch of other crap is everywhere along with dried cereal from this morning. Instead of picking each item up, I grab the laundry basket that was for the clothes in the dryer and swipe my arm along the entire surface, effectively cleaning off the table.

Now we have somewhere to eat.

On the way to Toby's room, I pick up all his stuff that you'd think must just fall out of his pockets as he walks around and drop the basket into his room, closing the door behind me.

The place is halfway decent now and my feet are moving to the family room to tear down the fort when the doorbell rings.

Should I have expected anything less than for Ava to be on time?

She's smiling and eyeing me when I open the door.

Is she remembering the first time she was here because I wouldn't mind her stripping in my foyer again.

"Hey," she says, both her hands clutching her purse in front of her.

"Come in." I step aside and open the door wider.

She peruses the area, her first time here with the lights on.

"Thank you." Her heels click on my wooden floors and it's the first time I've ever seen her in anything but Chucks.

"So, I'm going to be honest with you. I'm not an Alice." I grab Toby's cup off the counter and stuff it in a drawer.

"Alice?" she asks, still looking around.

"You know from the Brady Bunch. Alice the housekeeper."

She nods. "Oh. It's okay, I didn't think you would be."

"Stereotyping me?" I ask her, grabbing her purse and placing it on the table. "Relax."

She nods a few times, her eyes on the purse I just laid down. "Is it stereotyping when you find out it's the truth?"

I chuckle, grabbing her hand and leading her through the house to the back door.

"I suppose not." I open the screen door and wait for her to walk out first.

The minute the light salty air hits us, she smiles and inhales a deep breath.

"Talk about beautiful." She takes no time to slip off her heels and wiggle her toes in the sand that bumps up to the edge of the deck.

I wait a second, admiring her ass in a pair of jeans rolled at the ankles and a blouse that falls over her left shoulder, exposing the sun-kissed skin I love to kiss. Usually she's a jeans and t-shirt kind of girl.

She's still wearing jeans and you always see her at the bakery. What do you expect her to wear, a ball gown and diamonds?

Her head swivels both ways, finding us secluded except for my parent's house farther back off the beach, but close enough to see that their lights are on.

"It's peaceful." She looks over her shoulder, smiling.

"That's what I love the most about it." I meet her at the end of the deck, not stepping in the sand since I'm wearing my boots.

"You?" she asks with a laugh about to rise up her throat.

"Yes, me. Why do you say that?"

"You like to be the center of attention, life of the party, take nothing

seriously.” She sits down on the edge of my deck.

“Do you want a drink?” I ask.

“Sure.”

I run inside, grab two beers and return to the deck after disposing of my boots and socks.

“Here.” I twist the cap off and hand her over a bottle.

“What were we talking about?” I sit down next to her.

She’s wearing perfume tonight. Perfume that makes me want to push her onto her back and have my way with her.

“How you take nothing seriously.” She raises her eyebrows.

“I just like to have fun in life. That’s all.”

She nods. “I think you want people to believe that.”

We lock eyes for a moment, but she turns away. “Sorry, I shouldn’t do that. I’m always telling people what I see and that’s not what this is about.” Her eyes roam over my body.

“What this is about?”

She stands. “Friends with benefits. Nothing serious, right?” She startles me and I set my beer down on the deck to have two free hands.

“Well, friends find things out about each other.” My hands squeeze her ass.

“I’d rather get to the benefits.” Her fingers unbutton her top button on her blouse and she starts working her way down. “There’s no white cotton bra tonight.”

“No?” My eyes fixate on her fingers, her painted fingernails.

“I opted for something a tad sexier.” She opens her blouse and she’s wearing a black see-through bra with a red satin fabric spread across her bare breasts and tied into a bow.

“A present for me? It’s not even my birthday.” I flex my hands, exaggerating the movement in preparation to get my hands on her.

Her head falls back in laughter, and she steps a little closer to me.

“Go ahead.” She leans forward, her breath tickling my ear. “Open me.”

I look around like someone would have appeared in the two seconds she straddled my lap and stripped open her blouse.

My fingers grab each end of the bow and I pull. The fabric falls to her sides and there are those pink nipples peaked and ready to be played with.

“Damn, you’re sexy as hell.”

My one arm swings around her and I pull her closer to me so I can place

my mouth over her breast.

Her fingers run along my neck, and one arm raises up until she's pulling on my strands, keeping me right where she wants me.

"I think it's safe to say you like your present?" She giggles.

"Uh huh," I mumble into her breast, my tongue licking and swirling around her pebbled nipple.

She slides back, and her breast pops out of my mouth. "What are you doing?" I reach out to grab her again, but she shakes her head.

She stands up and unbuttons her jeans before kneeling on the bottom of the deck stoop.

"I think it's time for gift number two."

Pulling the hem of my shirt up she unfastens my jeans and pushes me to lean back so she can unzip my pants.

"Hey, I was good with where we were going."

"Why are you always so quick not to let me suck you off?" She falls back on her heels. Her tits are right there and waiting for my hands.

"I never want you to think you have to do anything like that," I say honestly.

"Dane." She rises, leaning over to me so our lips are almost touching. "I want to taste you. I want to feel you crumble in ecstasy while you shoot your load into my mouth. And I really want to swallow you down my throat."

"Fuck. Your dirty words almost finished the job before your mouth did."

I've never been with a girl who talked as dirty as I did and now I see that I've been missing out. This woman is phenomenal.

She giggles and grabs the waist of my jeans and boxers, shimmying them down my legs with help from me.

Her hand fists me first, running up and down along my cock in a swirling motion. I wish we were on my couch so I could lean back and relax, but then I'd probably close my eyes and miss the first time those pretty plump lips cover my dick. Her pale pink glossed lips open and she takes me into her mouth.

It isn't the tip of my dick hitting the back of her throat or her hand pumping the bottom of my shaft that makes me grow harder. It's the inaudible moan that rises and floats out of her mouth and into the dusky night air above us.

"Holy shit." My hand moves to her hair, fisting her dark strands around my hand, keeping her right there. Doing exactly what she's doing.

Her free hand skates along my inner thigh until she cups my balls, playing with them in her hand.

A groan escapes as she sucks her cheeks in while she draws her mouth up my straining length and swirls her tongue around the head. Without pausing, she pushes back down on my cock until I reach the back of her throat. She does this over and over again until I can barely keep my head up and my eyes open to watch what is absolutely going to be the number one feature on my rub reel from now on.

My orgasm is right there, begging for the torture to end, but I'm promising myself it will be so much more intense if I can hold off a little longer.

"I don't wanna know where you learned to suck cock like this or focus on the fact that you own that bra."

Her soft giggle is still audible over her slurping as her saliva covers my cock and drips down over my balls.

She continues to moan and groan while the ocean waves make land, and I'm trying to not come, but then she does some sort of twisting action with her hands and mouth at the same time and all my stomach muscles contract as I jolt up, gripping her hair tighter.

"Oh, shit."

I come down her throat and she stays there until my cock stops twitching, swallowing every drop of me.

By the time she rises, I see that at some point she's stuck her hand down her own pants and that's all my dick needs to go full salute again.

She licks her lips and then slides closer to me, bringing her lips to mine. "Want to taste yourself?" she asks, just like I did to her.

Then she giggles, standing up and grabbing my hand.

"Mind if we go inside now? I saw a fort I wouldn't mind being lost in for a few hours." She walks to the back door as I try to pull my pants and boxers up and keep pace.

She keeps the doorknob in her hand and her back pressed against the door.

I barricade her in, my lips millimeters from hers.

"Is it time for my benefits now?" she asks in a sultry voice that makes my balls tighten.

"Tell me what you want...rope, dildo, handcuffs?" I turn the knob and we fall into the house.

“How about all three?” she says and runs into the fort.
“A girl after my own heart.”

CHAPTER

Fourteen

DANE PULLS UP HIS PANTS, and I throw my t-shirt back on.

“Hurry. She’s going to be here in like ten minutes,” I say to Dane who I’m about to shove out the window like he’s my high school boyfriend and my dad’s knocking on the door.

“I am, but I’m not about to zip up my dick so Charlie doesn’t find out about us.” He slowly tucks himself in and then pulls the zipper up at a tortoise pace.

“Okay,” I take my two hands and direct him to the door. “Now you go.”

“I kind of like these afternoon quickies.” He turns, and I circle him back around, my two hands on his back, forcing him down the hallway.

“Yeah, why is that?”

“Your mouth is dirtier during the daylight hours.” He chuckles and walks down the stairs just as the doorbell rings.

“I could say the same about you.”

We reach the bottom and he circles around again, picking me up. “I really do love your pussy just so you know. And your taste. I’m not lying when I say those things. It’s not a heat of the moment kinda thing.”

I laugh because when it comes to Dane I can’t not. “Well, thank you. I’m glad you find my pussy flavorful.”

He kisses me short and sweet and then my feet land on the floor. I swing open the door, finding a package on the stoop. I pick it up and feel my face heat when I see where the box is from. Dane pounces like the good observer he is.

“What’s in the package?” he asks.

“Nothing.” I toss it on the table and walk past him to grab his jacket off the couch. “Something for Charlie.”

It’s wrapped in brown paper, so he’ll have no idea. I turn at the same moment his eyes scan the package.

“Did Charlie change her name to Ava Pearson?” he asks, raising both eyebrows.

“It’s nothing. Let it go.”

He picks it up. “Are you keeping secrets from me? What is Your Hart’s Desire Products?” He acts like a seven-year-old trying to figure out his Christmas present by shaking the package. “It’s rectangular.”

I snatch it out of his hands. “It’s private.” I hold it to my chest.

“Do I really not satisfy you?”

I crinkle my brow.

“I know what Your Hart’s Desire Products are Ava. I don’t live under a rock.”

Of course he knows the sex toy company that Cat’s sister’s friend owns. Why wouldn’t he?

“The owner comes up and stays at Garrett’s cabin every year.”

Well, I didn’t know that, not that I care. I’m not going to stalk her and ask for samples. But still, I should find out what the hype of this unicorn cock thing is anyway.

“Am I not pleasing you enough?” He seems really bothered by that notion.

I smack him with the package and he rubs his hand over it. “Let’s not bruise the goods, okay?”

I laugh and he smirks.

The room grows quiet. “I’m serious though.”

Walking to him, I jump in his arms. “You pleasure me just fine.” *More than fine if I’m being honest.* “This is for our off nights. I bought one because Cat and Charlie were bragging about it and I wanted to know what it’s all about.”

He stares for an uncomfortable few seconds. “You’re telling me that you’ve never used a dildo?”

I shake my head.

“Butt plug? Nipple clamps?”

I shake my head again.

“Anal beads? Ben Wa balls?”

“Okay, now I’m wondering what you haven’t tried. No wonder you knew what Hart products were.”

He smiles. “Variety is the spice of life, right?” He winks and continues. “The thought of using a dildo on you intrigues me. Can you show me?”

I wiggle out of his hold and stare down at the package. Glancing at the clock, I see we only have five minutes before Charlie should be home.

“Quick, okay?”

“Hey, we’re dressed. I can say I stopped by to see her.”

I rip open the package and pull out the Unicorn Cock I bought.

“Unicorn Cock?” he asks, grabbing it from my hands and turning it around and around in his hands. “This is bullshit.”

“What?”

“It says that every girl should find their unicorn cock but in the meantime, enjoy this.” He looks at me without an ounce of humor in his eyes. “I’m your Unicorn Cock.”

I take it out of his hands. “Why would you say that?”

He approaches me. “Bring this to my office tonight and I’ll show you who your unicorn cock is.”

“Maybe.” I bite my bottom lip. Is he...jealous? Of an inanimate object?

A key inserts in the door and my eyes widen, and my gaze scrambles around the tiny area, to do what, I have no idea.

“I told you!” I point my finger at him, but he turns around, his shoulders relaxed.

Opening the door for Charlie she stumbles in, her hand still on the key in the door. She looks up to see Dane and then looks behind him to me and then back to Dane.

“Hey, boss.” She takes the key out of the lock and walks the rest of the way into the house.

“Hey, Charlie. Just finalizing my cupcake order for this week.” He waves his hand up in the air. “Thanks, Ava, see you later.” He shuts the door behind him leaving me alone with a very curious and skeptical Charlie.

“You’re screwing Dane Murray?” Charlie asks, flipping through the envelopes of mail on the table.

“No!” My voice not even close to normal.

“Okay.” Her tone suggesting I’m lying.

“I’m serious, Charlie.”

She doesn't say a word and walks into the kitchen.

I follow.

"Charlie," I call out after her but she never turns around. "I'm not."

She pulls down a bowl from the cabinet and pours cereal into it. "It's none of my business if you are, but I'll tell you this." She points her spoon my way. "If you somehow get together with Dane and Cat's with Marcus, I'm not going to be with Garrett."

I slide into a chair at the table. "I'd think you'd like that scenario."

She pours the milk and then digs her spoon into her Lucky Charms.

"Why would you say that?" she asks, not bothering to look my way.

"Charlie, most of the town knows you lust after Garrett Shaw."

She shakes her head. "He's one of those childhood crushes that's all. My big brother's best friend. He's too heartbroken to ever be serious with another woman. I doubt he's even the guy I crushed on anymore anyway."

"I bet he's in there somewhere. Maybe he needs you to dig him out."

Just then the back door swings open and Cat bursts through, panting for breath.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

She's never at the apartment anymore since she's usually at Marcus' place.

"I ran down here from Marcus'." She bends at the waist, heaving and trying to suck air into her lungs.

"Why?" Charlie asks in her usual laissez-faire manner.

"I'm having a hard time in the creativity department. I used to run in college when the same thing would happen in college, so I figured I'd try it out. Turns out I'm out of shape and I think I've gained twenty pounds since meeting Marcus."

She grabs a water from the fridge and sits down, loudly gulping down half the bottle.

"What's up with you guys?" she asks, still short of breath.

"Ava's screwing Dane."

"Charlie!" I screech but she only winks over the spoon of Lucky Charms going into her mouth.

"Really?" Cat looks at me, not nearly as surprised as she should be.

"You already knew?" I deadpan.

She shrugs.

"So, I was the only one left out in the cold?" Charlie questions, chomping

down on her cereal.

“I assumed. Ava never confirmed,” Cat clarifies and I want to slink down.

“Well, he was just over here and they were bumping uglies or whatever.”

“Who’s watching the bakery?” Cat asks.

“I closed it for an hour. I need to find some help though.”

“You closed it so you could fuck Dane? Why not just use the storage room?” Charlie asks.

I shrug.

“We’ve done it there. We’ve done it in his office, on my prep table, his house. Hell, we even went on a hike and banged. Thank God, I didn’t get poison ivy. In the last three weeks, I’ve screwed Dane everywhere imaginative and unique. I’m having a hard time keeping up with this foreign version of myself as a sex kitten.”

Charlie rounds the counter and sits at the table.

“Are you guys dating?” Cat asks, finally able to talk normally now.

“No.” I pick at the skin around my fingernails. “We’re just friends with benefits.”

Charlie lets loose a mocking laugh. “Yeah, okay.”

“What?” I ask, confused by her reaction.

“Ava, how old are you? You know one of you will be hurt in the end and my money is on you,” Charlie says.

I study the table, knowing she might be right. “It was going great until I felt like I always had to keep being exciting,” I say.

“Why do you think that?” Cat leans forward.

I rub my hand on my face. “Because I told Dane I wouldn’t do the friends-with-benefits if he was screwing around with other women.”

“So, you guys agreed to a monogamous friends-with-benefits situation?” Charlie stifles a laugh that looks like it’s begging to escape.

“Yeah,” I shrug.

“You’re both morons.” The chair Charlie is sitting in slides along the floor as she gets up.

“Why do you say that?” I ask, a little hurt by her reaction.

Even Cat is biting the inside of her cheek. Was it really that stupid of a notion?

“Ava, think about it. You guys are dating. You only see each other,” Charlie says.

“No, we only fuck each other,” I clarify.

“Same difference if you ask me. Just because he doesn’t pick you up, take you to a nice restaurant or buy you flowers, you think it’s any different?” Charlie tosses her bowl in the sink and leans against the counter, staring me down. “I’m guessing you probably don’t strip off your clothes, fuck, and then leave, right?” She quirks her eyebrow.

“Well.” I try to fight it, but the truth is, we usually share a meal and oh God, some conversation about our day. The memory of laying in a fort as he told me how his whiskey distributor screwed him over and how he has some new guy coming up next week replays in my mind. Or when I told him how I burnt three batches of cupcakes and had to air out the shop for an hour.

“Sometimes yes, we focus on the friends part, but that doesn’t mean anything.”

Charlie pulls her unruly curly hair into a ponytail, her eyes digging into me like she’s some detective waiting for me to crack under the pressure of her scrutiny.

My gaze shifts to Cat. Surely, she understands.

“I’m not looking for a relationship,” I argue my position some more, my eyes meeting Charlie’s head-on like a game of chicken.

“Isn’t that when you fall into one?” Charlie’s cocky smirk let’s me know why she gets along with Dane so well. They’re two peas in a pod.

I stand up, knocking over Cat’s bottle and it spills all over the table.

“I don’t need to justify my actions. We’re having fun, with no strings, and yes it’s monogamous but that means nothing.” I stomp out of the room and then pause. “Sorry for spilling the water.” Then I spin on my heel, grab my keys, and leave out the front door.

Charlie. Ha. Like I need to take advice from a girl who’s pining away for a man who’ll never allow himself to be available again. She has no idea what she’s talking about. Our arrangement is working out wonderfully and I see no reason to let what she said get into my head.

This argument is working. I don’t care about anything but Dane’s dick.

And maybe his hands.

His mouth, too.

I don’t care about anything but Dane’s body.

There.

I turn the corner to get back to the bakery, but I step back to hide behind the brick wall of the building on the corner as my heart drops to the pit of my stomach. Scratch that. It splatters to the concrete ground, cracking open and

dying a slow death on the corner of Main and Maple while I watch Dane open the door of his Mustang for a brunette in a pair of Daisy Duke shorts and a tank top.

The smile on his face is as bright as the sun shining in the sky.

That asshole played me. He played me well.

CHAPTER

Fifteen

DANE

“THANKS FOR COMING.” I pull my car away from the curb.

“I can’t believe you still drive around in this car.” Sara touches the hood and glances back to the backseat. “He rides in the back?”

I look at the empty cup from Double D’s and his paper hat from the other night. “Yeah.”

“Thanks for the pictures.” She crosses her legs and while she’s fidgeting, I try to give her the once over, not really sure what she’s up to these days.

“Well, I figure a mother would want to know.” There’s a little more bite in my voice than I intended.

“Who’d figure a screw up like me could make such an attractive kid?”

She asks the question, but I know she’s not looking for answers. Sara’s never been a real mom, and she seemed to have sensed that after a short time. A year to be exact. Toby woke up on his first birthday without a mom to care for him.

We drive down the road and I could ask what’s been going on in her life. Where she’s been, who she’s been with, does she have any money, how she got here. But the truth is, I had to leave Sara to her own demise years ago. I couldn’t save her and that was just the hard truth.

“Happy Daze looks good. You’ve made a success out of it after all these years.”

“Thank you. Yeah, had to fight tooth and nail for every change, but it was worth it.”

“Do you ever wonder what it’d be like if I’d stayed? What your life would be like?” she asks the same question I thought of a lot early on in

Toby's life. But only because of the insecurity that plagued me when I worried I couldn't be the father he deserved. Now, years later, I can't imagine my life any other way. Without Toby, it's nothing.

I shrug. "Doesn't everyone wonder about decisions in their life?"

"I look at other moms and I think to myself, why can't I be like them? What's wrong with me that I just can't stay in Climax Cove and take care of my kid? Or maybe I could've been one of those moms who drift around with their kid. I could have taken Toby with me."

"To sleazy motels and drug houses? Have him help you panhandle for food?" The bitterness in my tone can't be disguised as anything different.

The one unselfish thing Sara ever did was leave Toby behind. Let him have a normal childhood back in the same town she grew up in. Yeah, she was always the small-town girl who couldn't break out fast enough. I'm not sure when she transformed into that person. High school, junior high, or whether she was born like that, but I always remember her wanting out.

"When you put it that way..." she doesn't finish because we both know Sara can't care for herself let alone a child. "I'm afraid he'll hate me."

"I'll make sure he doesn't hate you, but I can't say he won't come looking when he gets older."

"You never came looking." There's a hint of sadness in her voice, but we both know the truth.

"You didn't want to be found."

She nods.

"You'll make sure he knows I love him?" Her voice cracks and I look down at her chipped nail polish and broken nails. A million cheap silver rings on her fingers and bracelets on her arm. What happened to the girl next door who won Miss Climax Cove?

"Of course."

I reach over and cover her hand with mine. "I promise, but Sara, you're making a good decision."

She nods and I slide one hand from under mine, swiping a tear from her eye.

I'm unsure whether to trust the tears. They've come in the form of manipulation so many times before.

I pull into my driveway, park, and run inside.

Grabbing the papers from my underwear drawer in my dresser so they've stayed hidden from Toby, I lock up and jog back out to my car.

I hand them to her and then pull out of the driveway and head back to downtown.

“It seems silly that this is all it takes to not have your kid be yours anymore.” She flips through the pages with Post-It notes that indicate where to sign and date.

I ignore her comment because I’m not sure what she wants me to say.

By the time we’re parked outside Happy Daze, it’s growing close to when Toby gets out of school and the last thing I need is for them to see one another.

“Hold up, Sara.” I hold my finger up and jog across the street to see if Ava would mind grabbing Toby after school.

The minute I open the door to Mad Batter, something is different. The energy is different, not the usual light and welcoming mood.

A pounding in the back tells me where to find her.

She’s kneading and hammering a rolling pin on a ball of blue something.

“Hey.”

She looks up, surprised to see me.

“Why do you think you can just come back here?” Her eyes are laser pointed at me and I feel like I should be covering my nuts before she takes a shot at them.

I take my life in my hands and erase the distance between us, coming up behind her. “You usually like it when I’m back here. Usually it’s me pounding something on the table.” I drop my tone an octave lower.

She swivels around, the rolling pin high in her hands. “Do you think I’m stupid? That you can just go off and I wouldn’t find out? And let’s not even talk about the part where your dick moved from me to her in a half hour time frame. You know what...” she raises the rolling pin higher and starts wiggling it, so I grab her wrist, pulling it back down until the rolling pin falls to the table.

“Enlighten me on what the hell you’re talking about.”

“Daisy Duke girl ring a bell?” She slides by me, mostly because I can’t believe she saw Sara.

“It’s nothing, okay?”

She opens the fridge, grabbing another pile of the same shit she was working on except this time it’s pink, then picks up a rolling pin again.

“It’s nothing,” she mimics me. “You’re so full of shit, Dane Murray. And I’m the naive girl who believed your lies. Well,” there goes the rolling pin

back up in the air, “not this time around. This time it’s over. O.V.E.R. Over.”

She takes out all her aggression on whatever that stuff is on the table.

“Listen, give me an hour and I’ll explain everything. I promise. But I can tell you for certain, I’m not screwing Sara.”

“Sara. Oh, the whore has a name? Dane and Sara Murray what a ring that has to it.”

I can’t stop my laugh from escaping when she uses our names like that.

Her eyes narrow and if this were a cartoon like Toby watches, there’d be steam pouring out of her ears. “Get out, if you know what’s good for you!” She stalks toward me, dropping the rolling pin on the table.

I grab both her hands and smash my lips to hers. She tries to fight me, her small little bunched up hands hitting my chest, but when I slide my tongue into her mouth, she loses the fight, kissing me back. That doesn’t last long and she takes her two hands and pushes me off her.

“Don’t distract me.”

“Listen.” I cage her between my arms, giving her no space to leave, praying she doesn’t knee me in the groin. “I’ll be back in one hour with an explanation. A very good explanation and you’ll look back at this moment and laugh. But I need a favor.”

She crosses her arms over her chest and raises a brow. “Go figure.”

I smile, hoping to turn this around. “Can you grab Toby for me and bring him here?”

“You better not be asking me to watch your son while you go screw someone else or so help me God, Dane—”

“The only person I’m screwing right now is you.” I kiss her forehead and feel her body soften against me.

“Are you making a fool of me?” she asks in a small voice.

“Never. I promise.” I hold up my one hand with my pinky sticking out. “I pinky promise.”

This earns me a smile.

“Okay, fine. One hour and I want an explanation the minute you walk through that door.”

“You got it.” I bend down and kiss her lips, wishing I could stay and fuck all that aggression out of her.

Nothing’s better than angry sex.

“I’ll be back,” I say.

I run out of the shop and find Sara on the phone. She’s crying to someone

with the papers crumbled in her hands. Damn, I knew I was taking a chance leaving her alone without making sure this was headed in the right direction.

“Sara?”

“I gotta go.” She hangs up the phone and shoots those brown puppy dog eyes she’s used so expertly to get her way over the years in my direction.

“I’m not sure, Dane.” She rummages through the papers, flipping one after the other. “It says I no longer have any rights.”

Okay, stay calm and collected. Do not go off on her.

“Sara.” I put my arm around her shoulders, looking up to the sky and praying Ava isn’t watching out her window. Leading us toward Mike Polar’s law office. “This is what’s best for him. I’m assuming you’ve battled with this decision since I tracked you down?”

She nods.

I figured since it took her over a year to get back to me and agree to sign the adoption papers.

I open the door to the lawyer’s office and then close it, detouring us to the side of the building.

“I’m not going to force you, Sara. This is your decision and if you’re not ready then okay.”

“What if I told you I want to take him with me?”

I thread my fingers through my hair. “Then I’d have to say I’ll see you in court. I won’t let Toby live that life, Sara and I think you know I have a better case than you.”

She blows out a breath, staring at the papers in her hand.

“Will you continue to send me pictures?”

“Yes.”

She nods a few times. “That was my boyfriend. He’s waiting for me at the bus station in Wet Rock.”

I raise my eyebrows, stuffing my hands in my pockets. I don’t want to sway her either way. This has to be her decision.

“Okay, this is best for him. I know that.” A tear runs down her cheek.

She opens the door herself and sits down in a chair while I walk up to Linda, the receptionist.

“Mike will be right with you,” she says.

I sit down next to Sara and wrap my arm around her shoulders to pull her into me.

“I’m a horrible person,” she mumbles into my chest.

I had suspicions that her double guessing was guilt and not necessarily want.

“You’re not horrible.” The words are hard to say because I never understood why Toby wasn’t enough for Sara to stop what she thinks is a fun lifestyle.

Mike’s office door opens and he eyes the scene in front of him, questioning me with his raised brows.

I nod, standing up but keeping Sara near me.

We file into the office and sit down across from Mike.

Mike hands a pen to me and to Sara. “Linda, I need you to witness.”

She comes in the office. Linda used to be my Catholic religion education teacher. Sara’s too actually. I wonder what she thinks about this situation.

She notarizes the papers and shuffles out of the office without a word, shutting the door behind her.

“So, I’ll file these with the courts, but as the papers say, Dane is now the acting legal guardian.” Mike looks at Sara.

“He’s always been the responsible one,” Sara mumbles.

Mike laughs but catches himself. “In this case, he is.” He winks at me before standing up.

“That’s it?” I ask.

“That’s it. I’ll be in touch with you as soon as everything comes back,” he says to me then switches his attention back to Sara. “Good luck, Sara.”

She wipes a few more tears and I eye the clock in his office. Fifteen minutes before Toby gets out of school.

“Let’s go,” I say.

I shuffle her out of the office and down the street while she tucks her head down, probably trying to not be recognized. Hell, I didn’t tell anyone she was going to be in town. That was a stipulation I had to promise to before she agreed to come.

We get into my Mustang and I’m driving out of town to Wet Rock well before Toby would ever walk down Main Street.

“Thanks, Dane,” she says when I park in a spot outside the bus station.

“The least I can do is give you a ride.”

I spot a guy on a bench. He’s got baggy jeans and a tight t-shirt on. His hair stuck up in every direction. Looks like her usual type of loser.

“It’s not that. Thanks for taking care of Toby.” She reaches over pulling me in tight. “You sacrificed for me.”

“I don’t see it as a sacrifice, Sara. I’m sorry that you always did.”

She pulls back, tears welling in her coffee-colored eyes.

“Why?” she asks, her voice shallow I almost missed the question. “Why did you take him in?”

I shrug. “It’s simple. I love him.”

“As your own?”

“I’ve never not thought of him as anything but my own.”

She glances to the window, the loser now standing up, noticing it’s us.

“Tell Mom and Dad I love them and I’m sorry I couldn’t face them.”

I nod.

“Take care of yourself, little brother.” She opens the door with one foot out the door. “Take care of each other.” She exits and shuts the door behind her.

I sit in the parking lot, watching her cross the lot and straight into the arms of the guy. He rushes her over to the bench and my heart breaks for my sister, who just couldn’t or didn’t love her son enough. I know she loves him in her own way, but not enough to put him first.

Backing up, I take one last look at the girl I looked up to most of my life, hoping it’s not the last time I’ll see her. Then I speed off down the street to pick up what will soon be my son on paper. He’s always been my son in my heart.

CHAPTER

Sixteen

TOBY'S quiet at the table, doing his homework. The shop hasn't been extremely busy so far today, so I bring him over another cookie and a juice I had in the back.

"Thanks, Miss Ava." He peeks up at me and I sit down next to him.

"Do you need any help?" I look at the homework wondering when third-grade math included division.

"No." He pencils in the right answer and I keep focused over his shoulder seeing how intelligent he is.

I swear I was learning how to tie my shoe at his age.

"So, Toby, has it always just been you and your dad?"

Stop it, Ava. Don't pry.

"We lived with my grandparents for awhile. Until Dad could build the house." He pushes over his sheet of math toward me. "Can you check it for me?"

"Um, sure."

As I channel my grade school math and look over his sheet, he eats his cookie and drinks his juice.

"When is my dad coming to get me?"

My eyes shift off the sheet to the door. "I'm sure he'll be here soon." I look over his last few answers and slide the sheet back over. "This looks good."

He tucks it into his folder and places it in his backpack.

Our conversation stalls and I resist the urge to pry about his and his dad's backstory. That's for Dane to share with me whenever he wants. Truth is, I'm

not supposed to care. Regardless of what Charlie thinks, monogamous friends-with-benefits has been done before. I'm sure it has. Right?

"Want to help me in the back?" I nod to the kitchen.

His eyes light up. "Yeah."

He stands up, pushes in his chair, and follows me into the kitchen.

"I was thinking about doing some cupcakes with different color batter swirled together like a zebra, or rainbow? What colors do you think I should use?"

He peruses the colors as I pull the dyes out of my container. "Could we do my team colors?"

I rack my memory for what colors his uniforms were.

"Black and orange. We're the Giants."

"Like Halloween?" I ask.

He frowns. "Like the Giants."

"Okay, the Giants." My voice raises an octave to show how excited I am. "First we need to make the batter."

"Can I crack the eggs? My dad never really lets me. Says it's messy."

I look over to him from pulling the eggs out of the fridge. "I'm surprised your dad cares about you making a mess."

After being at their house the other night, it took everything in me not to grab Lysol and a sponge.

Toby doesn't respond to my question, and I find it funny he's so shy and quiet right now. In camp, he was the center of attention, telling jokes and he never stopped moving.

"You can do the eggs and all the measurements here." I pat the surface of my work table. "Any mess is easy to clean up on this table."

I take a last look at the spotless stainless-steel table I just cleaned for the night before grabbing Toby. I've realized people in Climax Cove don't leave their houses after six at night and if they do, they're going over to Happy Daze, not to grab a cupcake, so I've been closing the shop earlier these days.

Twenty minutes later, I've fished egg shells out of the batter, cleaned up spilled flour, spilled oil, but regardless, the batter is ready.

"Now comes the fun part," I say, grabbing the plastic gloves before we touch the dye. "Here, put these on."

His small hands swim in the gloves, and he stares at them, bending his fingers and straightening them.

"Take this." I hand him the orange dye. "Squeeze in a few drops."

He squeezes the container so hard, a puddle of orange accumulates on top of the batter. “Too much?” he asks, contorting his lips into an *uh oh* expression.

“It will just make it that much more orange.”

He smiles. We do the same with black and I let him judge the amount. This time he drips in much less, grabs the spatula, and stirs until the batter resembles midnight.

“Now. Layers or camouflage?”

“Camouflage.” His lips spread into a smile.

“Then you scoop and I scoop. We’ll fill up the cake pans and get them in the oven.”

We do just that, five minutes go by and the cake pans are in the oven. While I clean up the mess, Toby helps by wiping down the table and handing me the items to wash.

“Miss Ava?” he asks, sitting down on a stool behind me.

I glance over my shoulder to let him know I’m listening.

“Do you not like my dad?”

The dish slips from my fingers and plops down into the sudsy water.

“I like him just fine.”

“This summer, you yelled at him.”

“Well, I was mad because I thought your dad acted more like your big brother than a parent.” I continue scrubbing the dishes, rinsing them and putting them on the dry rack.

“He’s more fun than my friend’s dads, that’s for sure.”

Done with the dishes, I dry my hands on a towel and turn to face him, leaning against the counter.

“I’m sure he is.”

He smiles that magical little boy one that shows how much he loves the person.

“He builds forts, takes me on hikes, bike rides, we camped out on the beach and had a bonfire. My other friend’s dads just sit in front of the television.”

Dane really is more of a hands-on dad than I had originally thought. Maybe because I concentrated on his dates and late-night activities, but the truth is, Dane’s only fault is wanting to have a personal life while he’s raising his son. Is that really all that bad? Don’t parents deserve a life of their own, outside of their children as long as there’s a balance?

“That all sounds like fun,” I say.

“He’s just always loved me.” Toby looks up from entwined hands, and a light bulb turns on in my head. He’s trying to persuade me into thinking his dad isn’t a bad guy.

“How could he not?” I sit down next to Toby, really wanting to give him a big hug, but he jumps off the stool instead.

“What do we do now?” he quickly changes the topic and I want to reassure him that he’s an amazing boy who deserves to be loved and cared for. He’s not mine though and I can’t overstep.

“We could get started on the frosting?” I offer and his eyes widen, his head nodding. “Okay then.”



A half hour later, the cakes are cooling and the frosting is ready to cover when the door chime rings.

In walks Dane, his shoulders not nearly as strong looking as they usually are.

He beelines to Toby, wrapping his arms around him.

Toby squirms and gets free of his dad’s hold. “What are you doing?” he asks, and Dane grabs him again.

“I just missed you.”

“You saw me this morning.” He stares blankly at his dad. His gaze shifts to me and then back to his dad. “We’re making a cake.”

Dane looks at the table. “Giants. Nice!”

“Yeah, and we’re waiting for it to cool to frost it.”

“Enough time for us to have a chat. Go grab your bag, I need to talk to Miss Ava.” He pats him on the back.

“Chat? I swear I didn’t do anything today.” Toby starts pleading his case and I cover my mouth to keep from laughing.

“Guilty conscience?” Dane asks, eyeing me over his son’s head with a smirk.

“What else would we talk about?”

“Just go grab your bag.” Dane lightly pushes him to get moving and Toby’s head falls forward as he walks by me.

“Can I still frost the cake?” he asks me.

My gaze veers to Dane who nods. “Yep. As soon as you and your dad have a talk.”

The corners of his lips turn up, and his steps move a little faster.

Once he’s out of the kitchen area, Dane approaches me, caging me against the counter.

“He could come back in,” I whisper.

“Stay out there, Toby, I’ll be right out.”

“Okay, Dad.”

“Better?” he whispers back.

My face goes slack. Even if my body is bursting like balloons the night of the county fair, I will not give him the satisfaction of knowing how much my body craves his touch.

“We still have the issue of the other woman who got into your car to discuss.” My voice drips with false sweetness.

“I promise, you’re going to get your questions answered, but I have to talk to Toby first. We’ll be fifteen minutes probably. You’ll be here?” He steps closer and my nipples peak to attention at his nearness. They’re practically calling out for him to touch them.

“I will and don’t make me regret it.” I narrow my eyes, shooting him a warning glare.

He chuckles, his lips hovering over mine. “You kind of scare me.”

“Good.” I attempt to make my voice not sound weak and wanting.

“It makes me hot though. Has me thinking of you punishing me.” A smirk crosses his lips as he breaks the small distance to press his lips to mine.

His mouth meets mine, but he uses no tongue, and he’s separated from me before I can savor his taste.

“To be continued.” The heat from his body leaves and a chill envelopes my body. “We’ll be right back.”

Then he’s gone and I’m watching him place his hand on Toby’s shoulder, walking him out of the shop.

Toby’s question rings in my head. The hatred I had for him morphed into like at some point and it continues to move further up the scale. I need to figure out how to keep it from rising any further before I regret it.

CHAPTER

Seventeen

DANE

“DID THE PRINCIPAL CALL?” Toby asks again as I walk us over to the path that runs along the ocean.

“No. Why are you so worried about that?” I look down at him, figuring he’s probably hiding something that happened at school today, but I’m not going to harp on it because what we’re about to talk about is much more important.

He shrugs. “Because usually you only make us walk this route when you want to lecture me about something that happened at school or when you said we were moving into our own house when grandpa was sick.” His head swivels my way, his eyes wide with fear.

“No, buddy, grandpa is fine. If anything, he’s a bigger pain in my ass than ever,” I mumble.

“Then what’s going on?”

I find a more secluded area right before we get into town because if we venture too far in, we’ll be bombarded with people stopping to talk to us.

“Here, sit down.” We walk out on the plank and our legs dangle over the edge. The quiet inlet of the ocean seems like a good enough place to tell him his mother doesn’t want him.

“So, I talked to a lawyer today and I wanted to ask you something.”

I’ve delayed this talk until Sara signed the papers because I didn’t want to rehash the fact that I’m not his biological dad unless I knew what I hope will happen was a possibility.

“What?” he looks over at me, his eyes unsure what this could be about.

“I want to adopt you.”

“Why?” His little brows draw together.

“Well, I want it legal that you’re my son.”

He gazes out to the ocean for a while and I let the words absorb. It can’t be an easy thing to deal with.

“She doesn’t want me, right?” His voice cracks.

“No buddy, if she could take you, she would. I fought for you.”

He looks up at me, his eyes almost amazed.

“Why?” he says in such a small voice I swear I hear the shell around my guarded heart fracture.

I wrap my arm around his shoulders, pulling him into my side. “I think we’ve got a pretty good thing going, don’t you?” My voice is lighter now in the hopes that he’ll see the good parts about this, not the negative.

He nods. “What changes if you adopt me?”

“Nothing. Not a thing.”

“So, I can still call you dad?”

“That’s who I am to you.”

When Toby was two, I took him to the park and another kid was there with his dad. He’s called me Dad ever since that day. Well, other than the month after we explained to him about me being his uncle and my sister, Sara, being his mom after a surprise visit. My parents and I wanted to make sure there were no secrets. He referred to me solely as Uncle for awhile until one night he had a nightmare and I slept in his bed with him. The next morning, I got my reward of being dad again. Best word in the English dictionary.

“Hey, Toby.” I grip him firmer to pull him from his haunting thoughts. “You’re an amazing boy and I knew it the minute you were born. I mean, your crying at two in the morning was a little nerve-wracking, but I love you. I’ve always loved you as my own and I want that documented.”

“What if she wants me back?”

Out of all the questions, he has to ask the one that’s like a knife slicing my heart open. He’ll never be number one in her life, but damn if I’m going to tell him that.

“If I adopt you and we go to a judge and have paperwork filed, she can’t take you away from me.”

“Was I a bad kid?”

“No. The fact you had more energy than that damn rabbit with the batteries was tiring, but you were an awesome kid. Listen.” I turn him by his

shoulders so he can look in my eyes and see how serious I am. “Your mom not sticking around Climax Cove has nothing to do with you. She’s just free spirited, like a bird that’s hard to cage. But, she’s the one missing out. I get to spend everyday with you, and it’s a gift I don’t take for granted.”

He nods, still quiet.

“Hello? I’m Mr. Irresponsible, but I haven’t been able to leave your side for eight years.”

A small smile starts at the corner of his lips.

“So, are you going to let me adopt you?”

“Well, how about that Xbox game?” His lips widen and his gapped-tooth smile emerges, causing a warm feeling to bloom in my chest.

“You’re going to try and cut a deal with me?” I chuckle and pull him into my chest, pretending to give him a noogie.

He laughs and I hold him tight in my arms. He may no longer smell like watermelon from his toddler shampoo, and he hardly wants to sit in my lap much anymore, but he’s mine. Always has been and now always will be.

“Do you think the cake is cooled now?”

He dislodges himself from me and stands up on the plank.

“That’s it. Our conversation is over?” I jump to my feet and he’s already starting to walk back to the bakery.

“What do you want? Crying and hugs?” He chuckles and runs because he knows I’m about to chase him.

I catch him before he rounds the corner of Marcus’ boat restoration shop.

“I love you, Toby.”

He nods. “I love you, too, Dad.”

And it’s over. The conversation I was worried about is all over. I’m not naïve enough to think those are the last of his questions, but he’s accepting me, which speaks more than rehashing the fact that he has a mother who doesn’t want him and a biological father not even my sister could identify, which speaks to how hard my sister was partying back then. Hell, probably still is.

“You sure are eager to get back to the bakery,” I say. He’s walking so fast I can barely keep up.

“Miss Ava promised me I could frost the cake.”

“I’m sure she’s going to wait for you. She frosts enough cakes everyday, she probably welcomes the break.” I finally catch up and fall into step with him as we pass the library.

“You like her, don’t you?” Toby asks.

“She’s okay. A little ornery,” I respond, hoping this isn’t going to become our topic of conversation.

“If you ever get married some day, what if the girl you’re with doesn’t want me?”

I stop us and place my hands on both of his shoulders and squeeze. “You’re kidding me, right? Me and you are a package deal. If she doesn’t want you, then I don’t want her.”

He nods, turns on his heels and starts up with the fast walking again, saying nothing in response.

“Are you sure you don’t want to talk about this more?” I call after him.

He turns his head to look at me behind him. “No, that’s it. I’m good, Dad. Promise.”

He finally stops outside the doors and I see Ava’s closed the shop since we’ve been gone.

“I’m going to invite Miss Ava over for dinner, and we’ll have the cake for dessert.” He opens the door and steps in.

“Why don’t we just eat at the grill?” I say, following him to the back of the store.

“Because she made a cake. You should make her dinner.” He says it matter of factly and keeps walking.

“Don’t go playing matchmaker, Toby.”

He turns around, a smirk way too similar to the one I’ve been accused of sporting more than once. I might as well be looking into a mirror.

Like father, like son I suppose. I can’t help but grin back.

Later that evening, Toby is passed out in his bed and Ava is grabbing her coat and purse to leave. I walk up behind her, wrapping my arms around her middle.

“Trying to sneak away? Planning to steal my car again?” I chuckle in her ear and she shakes her head.

“You stranded me here.”

“Maybe because I wanted to make sure you couldn’t sneak off.” The scent of her vanilla shampoo puts my body at peace. “I never figured a one-

night stand would steal my car.”

She giggles and her purse falls back onto the chair it was resting on. “You ready to talk now?” she asks, the playful tone in her voice vanishing.

“Come.” I grab our drinks off the table and escort her by her hand outside.

Placing them on the table, I hold out the chair for her and then sit in my own. Her eyes are on the ocean and the light breeze moves strands of her hair around her face.

“The woman,” I pause and her chest heaves with a heavy breath, “is my sister.”

Her shoulders relax a bit but she continues to stare out to the dark ocean and I can’t tell if she’s relieved by this news or not.

“I asked her to come back here,” I continue because truth is the faster I come out with the fact I’m not the biological father of Toby, the better.

“Where does she live?” I glance through the glass of my patio table to see her purple nail polished toes wiggling along the rails.

“Where ever she lands, usually.”

She nods, catching my drift.

“How long is she staying?” she asks, as though I have a normal relationship with my sibling.

“She already left. She did what she came to do and I didn’t want Toby seeing her.”

She places her beer down on the table and grants me her full attention. “Why?”

“She’s Toby’s mother.” I let the words fall from my lips and relief washes over me to have this information out there until her eyes widen in what I think is fear.

She slides the chair out and springs up from the seat, ready to bolt. “Oh my God, Toby’s a product of incest?” Each word is short and abrupt as it leaves her mouth.

My entire body shakes uncontrollably. “Holy shit. No!” I push away from the table, matching her stance.

“You just said your sister is your son’s mother.” She shakes her head, looking right and left as though she’s being cornered and looking for a way to escape.

“You have it all wrong.”

“Dane. This is not funny. Is this some kind of joke?”

She stays in one spot long enough for me to get my arms around her, securing her to my chest.

“No, not a joke. Toby is not biologically mine.”

Her eyebrows crinkle and I realize that there’s probably a better way to explain all of this.

“I’m so confused.” Her rigid body relaxes in my arms.

“I’m his uncle. My sister had a list of about ten guys who could have been the father, not that she could even identify half of them by name.”

“Really?” That sparkle in her hazel eyes that I’ve loved the past few weeks dims. “That’s horrible.”

I nod and she wiggles out of my hold.

My arms feel empty the moment she’s absent in them. She slips off her shoes and steps down onto the wooden plank that leads to the beach, so I follow her lead.

“So, what is she doing back? She here for Toby?” She wraps her arms around herself as the cooler breeze floats off the ocean.

I grab the supplies from the campfire Toby and I had a few nights ago and bring them over to my fire pit. Lighting the match, the paper is quick to catch and since the wood is dry as a bone the fire roars to life.

Ava sits down on the step, closer to the warmth of the flames and I join her once the fire has a life of its own.

“I asked her to sign over her parental rights.” I stare out at the ocean. There were many nights after Toby would go to bed and I’d sit out here drinking a beer and wondering what my life would be without him.

“Why?” she asks.

“Am I that much of a dick that you can’t guess?”

An embarrassed sigh floats out of her. “Sorry. It’s just I’m a little floored right now.”

“That I’d take care of a kid who isn’t mine biologically? Or the fact that I want to adopt him to make it official?”

She shrugs. “Both I guess. I mean come on. You don’t exactly scream man of responsibility.”

“There have been times I’ve struggled giving up my life for him. Not that he doesn’t come first, he does, but I haven’t forgotten that I’m a man who wants a life too.”

“Some would call it selfish.” Her tone doesn’t suggest she’s judging, simply stating a fact.

“I raised my nephew as my own since I was twenty-six. I’ve housed him, fed him, and clothed him. If I’m selfish for going on a few dates and getting a babysitter or his grandparents to watch him then I guess I’m selfish.” The guilt I bear is revealed in my rambling.

“Hey.” She removes her hands from around her middle and raises them up in the air. “I’m not some.”

I knock her shoulder with mine. “You were. You said it yourself. I was more a big brother than a dad. To your point I am. I’ve had to walk that line between fun uncle and authoritative dad figure.”

“I’m sorry. If I’d known—”

I shrug. “That’s why people don’t. I shouldn’t be put on some pedestal for taking him. It was never a choice.”

“Look who doesn’t want to be the center of attention now?” Her teasing tone and body sliding toward me gives me the sign that her anger from earlier at the bakery has faded.

“Can we talk now about the fact that you thought I’d break a pinky promise?” I nudge her down so her back hits the deck and I’m pressed against her.

“Are you really going to make me apologize again?” Her legs widen and I nuzzle into her, grinding the length of my hard-on against her center.

“Would you like to negotiate?” I ask, my lips casting small kisses to the hollow of her neck.

Her hands fall to the back of my head. “What do you have in mind?”

Her hand grazes down my side and I part from her long enough so she can feel me through my pants.

“Mmm...I like the way you think.”

“What if Toby wakes up?” she murmurs and my dick deflates slightly.

I pull back to look into her eyes. “I’m in uncharted territory here. I’ve never had a woman here with him.”

“Really?”

I fall off her, laying down next down to her, deflate from her assumptions of me.

“Man, what the hell do you think I am?”

She rolls on top of me, sprinkling me with kisses. “Sorry. So, sorry. Judgment is over. You’re nothing like my first impression.” Her body slithers down mine until she’s on her knees and her fingers are unbuttoning my pants. “Let me make it up to you.”

I sit up on my elbows, watching her pull my cock out. “Well, I’m really hurt. It could take awhile.”

That sparkle is back in her eyes as she fists me and licks her way up to my tip. She doesn’t hold back—the tip of my dick is pushing at the back of her throat in no time.

“Oh, fuck,” I say with a groan.

Thank God, the only light out here is from the fire because although Ava’s busy polishing my knob, I’m struggling to relax completely with Toby in the house.

Ava works herself into a frenzy and pulls and sucks my cock in the most animalistic way, I’m halfway to come zone, and my sleeping child is the farthest thing from my mind now.

The soft moans falling from her lips as she sucks and rubs me is my undoing—as if she’s enjoying this as much as me.

Such a fucking turn-on.

Ladies—a word to the wise. Whether you like giving head or not, if you act like it’s your favorite thing in the world to do, you’ll have that man more addicted to you than if you were heroin itself. Or Ava’s cupcakes.

You can all thank me later.

My head falls back and my arms feel weak from the euphoria running through my veins. I’m trying to count back from one hundred when she cups my balls and gives them a slight squeeze. They tighten, signaling to her she’s got me there. And boy does she.

She pops up off my cock with a smirk. “Come for me,” she says and squeezes my length in her hand. She throat-dives onto my dick again and a laugh might emerge from my mouth, but cum shoots down her throat at the same time.

She licks me clean, swallowing with a satisfied moan.

“Did you seriously just command me to come?” I ask as she crawls back up to me.

“I did and I’m glad you can listen to instructions.” She giggles, her hair falling forward and teasing my face.

“It’s time for me to give the orders.” My hands grip her hips and I slide up, positioning her on my lap. “Can you be quiet?”

“As a mouse,” she whispers.

“You’d better be or I’ll have to ball gag you,” I joke and pull her up with me when I stand.

“Well then maybe I should scream a little.” Her voice is teasing, but I can’t deny that I like the way she thinks.

I hang her over my shoulder, grab one of the water bottles and douse the fire, taking my girl into my bedroom caveman style. Just how she likes it.

CHAPTER

Eighteen

DANE

“FUCK,” I mumble to myself, staring out my window.

“Bad word.” Toby walks into the kitchen dressed and ready for school.

“Looks like I’m riding the bus with you today, buddy.”

“Yeah, no.” Toby sits down at the table and pours himself a bowl of Frosted Flakes.

“Well, I have no choice unless I want to ask your grandma, and I don’t need twenty questions from her.” I pour my coffee, looking again at the note Ava left on her empty pillow.

To My Fav Single Dad With The Groin Cleavage,

Didn’t want to be here when Toby woke up. I took your car (yes, I’m laughing as I’m writing this). Like the last time I took it, keys are under the mat in front of the bar.

*Yours quietly whimpering,
Rode Hard & Still Wet*

I grin at the way she signed off her letter, but seriously, the girl has a serious

problem understanding that you shouldn't take what belongs to others.

I fold the note in my hand, pocket it, then proceed to cut up a banana for Toby. I finish packing his lunch and stuff everything into his backpack.

While he eats, I pull out my phone.

Me: You should be picking me up.

Ava: Sorry. Big day at the bakery.

Me: You better be making my cupcake order.

Ava: Cool your jets. I'm doing muffins this morning. 😊

Me: Hmm ... I could use some MUFF-ins.

Ava: Your mind spends a lot of time in the gutter.

Me: You're opposed to me eating your MUFF-in?

I imagine her cheeks flushing with the slightest shade of pink.

Ava: You better hurry. I've already had a few men in here who seemed to enjoy my MUFF-ins very much.

I laugh and Toby glances over to me, rolls his eyes, and then shovels another heaping spoonful of cereal into his mouth.

Me: Who isn't the monogamous one now?

Ava: A girl has to make a living.

Me: I'll be there in twenty minutes and I want your extra sweet, extra juicy MUFF-in waiting.

Ava: First come first serve. 😊

I glance at the clock on my phone and stand so fast, the chair slides to the

other end of the kitchen. “We gotta go.”

Toby takes a few bites of his banana and swings his arms through his backpack.

The bus is coming down our street as we run out of the house, so I quickly lock the door behind me.

Toby runs on the bus, finding a seat in the back with his friends and completely ignoring me.

Luckily, the bus driver is my friend from high school, Cee Cee. She’s a mom herself and took the job of driving the bus in order to be home as much as she could.

“I need a ride,” I say from the bottom of the steps.

Cee Cee laughs, her hand resting on the handle to close the doors. “You upset some chick and she steal your car?” she asks, laughing more to herself now as I trudge up the steps of the loser cruiser I thought I was done with.

I slide into the front seat because no one ever sits in the front unless you need a place to put your giant ass cello.

“Something like that. You’re still routed to go through downtown, right?”

“Yeah. Want me to drop you at the bar?” She eyes me sitting behind her in the extra-wide rearview mirror.

“Perfect.” I sit back and drink my coffee like I’m starring in *Driving Miss Daisy* or something.

“So, I heard a rumor about you.” Cee Cee glances at me through the mirror.

I slide up to the edge to hear her better since the kids seem to be competing on who can be the loudest. Toby’s obviously the winner since it’s his voice I hear plain as day.

“No, I didn’t double park outside *Steaming Hotties* and get towed,” I laugh, joking because I already know where she’s going with this.

She eyes me again through that big mirror. “Maybe not, but I hear you’ve been doing a lot of dropping in at the new bakery in town.” She smiles a cocky grin as if she knows each and every position Ava and I have tried out. Impossible—there’s too many.

“Have you tried their cupcakes? They’re addicting.” I pat my belly to show how many I’ve consumed as of late.

I may be trying to get this conversation to make a detour, but Cee Cee seems hell bent on sticking to her route.

“And her cookies, you like them too?” She smirks through the mirror.

She always was a smart ass with a dirty mind. That's probably why we got along in high school. Birds of a feather and all that.

"Actually, I was just talking about eating her muffins this morning."

Her foot slips on the brake, and we all fly forward, my dark coffee spilling out of the lid.

"I swear Dane, you always did love to try and shock me." She's laughing while her eyes inspect the kids as they grumble.

"You brought up her cookies, I thought we were trying to out do one another."

"So, are the rumors true?" She tries a different approach because I'm sure she wants to be the queen bee who holds all the information. If Ava wouldn't have stolen my car this morning, I might actually have been able to fly under the Climax Cove rumor mill radar.

"Rumors?"

We're stopped at a light, so she leans back turning her head to whisper. "That you're screwing the baker."

"Now, Cee Cee. You shouldn't believe everything you hear."

We're one light away from downtown and the corner she'll let me off at.

"I haven't even asked you if what people are saying is true."

"Meaning?" I scrunch my forehead, not sure what she's getting at.

"That the gorgeous baker hypnotized Climax Cove's perpetual manwhore into a doting boyfriend."

I scoff. "Me, a boyfriend? Come on Cee Cee, use that brilliant brain of yours." I lean back, shaking my head.

Her gaze finds me in the mirror, assessing me as I think over what she's saying. I did confess my biggest secret to her, but is it that big of a secret? The whole town knows about Toby's parentage, it's just not something anyone ever discusses. As it should be.

But you've never once talked about it with a woman you're banging before.

Lucky for me the bus stops, and Cee Cee is kind enough to stop right outside the bar. Unfortunately, I have to get out on the bakery side of the street and Ava is bent over wiping down the tables outside.

"See you, Toby!" I wave and he rolls his eyes, sliding down the seat, his hand barely lifting in my direction.

"I don't know, Dane looks like she has nice buns too." Cee Cee laughs, cranking the door open for me. "What will I tell the gossip mill?" She pats

her finger to her lips.

“Cee Cee, she has nice buns, a fantastic muffin, and her oven rack is to die for, but I’m not boyfriend material, we both know that.” I wink and jog down the steps.

Ava turns around, her eyes flashing with amusement as I step off the yellow monstrosity.

“One day, Dane. A woman is going to knock you on that fine ass of yours,” Cee Cee calls out after me.

I bend over and wiggle said ass in her face.

The doors shut and her laughter eventually fades begins to move away from the curb.

“Hi, Miss Ava,” Toby waves ecstatically out the window.

He can’t even wave goodbye to me, but he can lean half his body out the window for Ava? Jeez.

“Get back in the window, Toby. See you later,” Ava says, waving to him.

He smiles and crawls back into the bus.

“Well, little boy, would you like a cookie?” Ava asks, in a sweet voice like I’m a toddler.

“I’m more interested in your special *muffin*.”

I place my hands on her hips and backtrack her into the bakery. Springing the door open, I shut it behind us and flick the lock behind me.

“Get those buns in the storage room.” I smack her ass, and she jumps but obeys.

I change her sign to say she’ll be back in fifteen minutes. Would I like longer? Of course, but we’ll make this short and sweet. There’s something satisfying about knowing she’ll be wanting me for the rest of the day.

“I have customers,” she says and I glance around the empty room.

“Yeah, me and shouldn’t you be aiming to please me?” I cross the room, twisting her around and picking her up.

She yelps and her legs wrap around my waist. A perfect fucking fit.

“I think I pleased you just fine last night.” Her fingers twirl the small hairs on the back of my head. I could let her do that for hours.

“That you did, but I’m fairly sure I repaid that favor at about two a.m.?” I squint my eye like I can’t remember every time we brushed against each other, waking me up, and one touch led to more.

Which reminds me, condoms. I need condoms.

“I don’t remember.” A playful smile flirts on her lips and I step us into

the storage room and slam the door shut, dropping her on a sack of flour.

“We can’t do it on the floor?” she says, and I’m happy that she didn’t even fight me on closing her store to have a quickie.

“Lay back and relax. You have one job. I’m going to eat your pussy and all you have to do is come all over my face.”

Her face blushes and she licks her lips then bites her bottom one.

“You’re even dressed for the occasion.” I wink and my hands move up her cute summer skirt, hooking my fingers on either side of her underwear.

I drag them down her legs and fall to my knees. They hit the linoleum floor and I pull her to the edge of the flour sacks.

“Mmm...you smell fucking fantastic as usual,” I say while inhaling her delicious scent.

With the front of her skirt covering my face, I get down to business.

“Dane,” she pleads after a minute of me lapping at her. But instead of bringing her the relief she’s craving, I torture her and blow lightly on her clit.

Her hips wiggle and I dart my tongue to her clit, play with her swollen bud, and retract my tongue to tease her.

“Dane.” There’s a warning in her tone, as though she has any control over this situation.

I push my flat tongue along her center and her legs fall to the sides while a low moan escapes her mouth.

Hearing her response, I imagine her eyes fluttering back, her hands gripping the sides of the sack of flour and I stop, blowing again. Her body tenses immediately.

“Dane!” she half yells now.

“You are a demanding little thing, aren’t you?” I say against her perfect pussy.

“Will you please finish me off? I’m going crazy,” she pleads.

I chuckle into her wetness and do as she commands. I lick, I suck, I twirl my tongue, making it my own little plaything. Just when I think she’s there, I insert two fingers into her and arch up to hit her G-spot.

I’d like nothing more than to prolong this, make her squirm and beg for mercy, but we both have things to do.

“More,” she pleads and I pump my fingers in and out. Damn, she’s wet. My cock grows even more rigid in my pants, pushing against my zipper.

She starts grinding against my face while I flick my tongue then suck her clit into my mouth, signaling she’s almost there, like a rollercoaster teetering

at the top of the hill.

“Oh my God,” she moans and her thighs shudder, locking my head between them and then releasing, locking again and then finally falling open once more. She comes all over my tongue and clenches around my fingers. I swear this woman and her pussy are addicting.

I slowly remove my fingers, come up for air from under her skirt, and admire her lying there like the satisfied woman I want her to be.

“So, not fair,” she mumbles, raising to sit on the sack of flour.

I bend down, taking her lips with mine. Our tongues glide, our lips moving in a rhythm we seemed to perfect last night. When I break apart the kiss, I love the fact her lips are swollen and red.

“I told you, I wanted my *muffin*.” I weave my fingers with hers and pulling her into a standing position.

“Did I object?” She raises on her tiptoes and plants another short kiss on my lips. “You want a real muffin now since you just worked up an appetite?”

She opens the storage room and then shuts it immediately, flicking the lock. She turns around and her eyes are as wide as saucers.

“What?” I slide by her and try to grab the doorknob, but she throws her hand over my mouth.

Backing us up from the door, she pushes me into the corner.

“My dad is outside that door,” she whispers.

Well, that got my heart racing like I was the one who just got off.

“I’m sure you don’t want to have the whole I’m-screwing-your-daughter-for-fun talk, so, stay here until I can get rid of him.”

Then she turns around, opens the door as I hide in a corner of the storage room, praying he didn’t hear her moans.

“Hey, sweetheart. Are you alone?” he asks, his voice echoing into the storage room from the kitchen beyond.

I’m starting to regret the fact that I gave my dad a spare key to my shop. “Yep. I was just stocking the room. Checking inventory.”

Their voices are close enough that I assume they must be hovering around the door.

“Ava, should you really be closing the store so you can watch porn?”

I choke on my own laugh, covering my lips and clamping my mouth shut so I don’t give myself away.

“Dad!” she screeches. “I was not watching porn!”

“Well, I heard voices and if you’re alone,” his voice echoes in the small

room and I'm thinking he's giving the door one more look over, "that's about all it could be."

"Maybe you're hearing things. I was just doing inventory."

The door shuts and I'm thankful not to hear them talking about whether Ava was masturbating to porn in her storage room because that image just makes me want to be the one masturbating in her storage room and if her dad yanked open the door and discovered me, how in the hell would I ever explain *that*?

I sit in the dark room that smells of sweetness from all the baking ingredients waiting until I'm given the all-clear. Ten minutes later, I'm playing some game Toby got me addicted to on my phone when a stream of light from the kitchen breaks through the darkness.

Ava stands in the doorway, the light silhouetting her perfect figure.

"You can come out, my own little porn video."

I emerge from the corner, tucking my phone in my back pocket and laughing.

"Don't laugh. My dad probably thinks I'm a nymph now."

I wrap my arms around her waist, but she slides away from me, moving to the front door.

"You're mad?" I ask.

"I'm not mad, we just can't in front of the customers."

Again, I look around at the empty room and quirk my eyebrow.

"When they come in." Her voice is slightly bitter and I wonder if her dad just gave her bad news or something.

"FYI," I lean closer, "you were the soundtrack of that porno." I kiss her cheek and she pushes me in the chest.

"Go! Don't you have a job to get to?" she asks, but now she has a smile on her lips.

"Call me." I open the door, turning around and running right into Miss Betty, the town librarian. "Sorry."

"Dane Murray!" she scolds and hits me with her newspaper.

I exchange looks with Ava.

Her dad might think she was watching porn and I might get my ass kicked by the librarian, but that was one hell of a way to start the morning and we both know it.

CHAPTER

Nineteen

I STAND THERE LOOKING out the window of my bakery, like a stalkerish teenage girl, watching my crush until he disappears out of sight.

My head knocks on the glass, and I close my eyes as a defeated feeling overtakes me.

What am I doing?

The door chimes and I straighten up, plastering a smile on my face that doesn't reach my eyes.

Cat floats in with paint smeared along her arms and her hair strung up into a hastily made ponytail.

"Guess what?" Her expression is excited so I push the situation with Dane to the back of my mind.

"What?" I choke out.

"I got my mojo back and we're having a party." She walks around behind the counter, opens my case, and grabs a carrot raisin muffin.

"Help yourself," I deadpan.

Needing to do something with my hands, I head toward the kitchen.

Cat follows, propping herself up on a stool, chomping on her free muffin. "You'll come, right?"

"If you have your mojo, shouldn't you be locked in that gorgeous hillside studio your boyfriend made for you?"

I pull out the eggs, sugar, and the rest of the ingredients to prepare my cupcakes.

"I have been. You mean you didn't even miss me these past few days?"

She pretends to pout and then places a chunk of muffin in her mouth.

“It’s been busy.”

“You mean, you’ve been getting busy.” She laughs.

I crack an egg and it drops from my hands, landing in the bowl, shell and all.

“Damn it.”

“Well?” she asks.

I look up at her once I fish the shell out. “I don’t even want to hear it.”

She shrugs, her eyes zeroed in on me. “I’m not saying anything.”

The door chime rings and I wipe my hands on my apron to head out front.

“What’s up girlies?” Charlie screams into the store, walking straight back to the kitchen. “Except for Dane’s dick of course.”

I blow out a breath and walk back to the table, concentrating on my cupcake batter.

“Oh, that looks good.” She points to Cat’s muffin and scurries out to the kitchen. I can hear her open the glass case and she returns with a muffin in her hand.

“One day I hope to have paying customers,” I mumble to myself.

“Hey, I’m here to put an order in for a cake,” Cat whines as though I shouldn’t give her shit for stealing muffins and cookies all the time.

“And I’m like a walking advertisement for you. I was raving about you last night at Happy Daze. Those Sex on the Beach cupcakes are orgasm quality desserts.” Charlie gives Cat a look that says you gotta have one.

“I want one,” Cat whines again like she’s learned from Lily.

“I’m on a rotation of what to make for Happy Daze, but as soon as I make them, I’ll let you know so you can go to Happy Daze and buy one.” I give her a syrupy sweet smile then turn on my mixer, shuffling to the cabinet to grab more ingredients for the icing.

“Funny, I’ll gladly pay my way.” She fishes out a twenty from her back pocket and places it on the counter.

“Put your money away, I’m sorry. I’m just in a bad mood.” I grab my scoop and the cupcake trays to get the batter in the oven. I’m behind after the impromptu visit from Dane.

“Did Dane do something?” Charlie props herself up on my counter, biting into the top of the muffin.

“What? No. Oh My God, can everyone just stop with the gossip? Not everything is about Dane freaking Murray.”

“Technically, it’s not gossip if it’s true.” Cat raises those perfectly arched eyebrows.

I turn on the mixer again, just to drown out their voices.

Which was useless since when I turn it off, they’re both exchanging looks. So, I scoop the batter into the cupcake pan, trying to ignore them.

“What kind of cake do you want?” I ask Cat after a minute of silence thinking maybe I can change the subject to something other than Dane.

“Um.” She carefully folds the paper liner from the muffin. “I want something fun and colorful to celebrate fall.”

“What’s this about?” Charlie asks, her jean-clad legs swinging back and forth.

“We’re having a party. Marcus and I.” She smiles and I can’t deny that I’ve been envious of what Marcus and Cat share since they got together. Although I’m not ready for the time a relationship takes right now, I’m a little lonely when Cat is at Marcus’ and Charlie is at work.

Dinner last night with Toby and Dane was nice if I let myself admit it. The fire, talking on the patio after Toby went to bed.

“Hey,” I look at the two of them, each granting me their full attention. I stuff the cupcakes in the oven and turn on the timer. “Did you guys know about Toby and Dane?”

Cat glances to Charlie. Charlie nibbles on the inside of her cheek, something I’ve learned means she’s uncomfortable.

“Yeah,” Charlie answers first. I’d already figured she knew since she grew up in Climax Cove.

“And you?” I ask Cat.

She nods. “Marcus told me.”

“And neither of you thought to tell me?” I sit on the stool, smashing chocolate pieces off the huge chunk of Belgium chocolate in my hand.

“He told you,” Charlie says as a statement mixed with a little disbelief. A smile forms on her lips that suggests what everyone in this town wants to believe. That the baker and the bartender are hooking up.

“Only because I saw his sister in town yesterday.”

Charlie’s eyes widen. “Sara was here? I swear it’s been years since she’s been back. Is she sticking around?”

“Did you know her?” I ask, ignoring her question.

Charlie’s already shaking her head. “No. She’s older than Dane, so I was too young. But I’ve heard stories about her. If you think Dane is a wild child,

Sara was...well, she was the typical small-town girl who wanted to escape. Looking for guys that would get her out.”

Cat stares on, listening intently, clearly hearing about Sara for the first time.

“So, Dane just took Toby for her?” I ask.

Charlie nods. “At first, she’d disappear for weekends, then long weekends, then a week. As the years went by it became months and Dane decided he wanted more for his nephew.”

“Do you find it odd that Toby calls Dane dad?” Cat asks, her chin resting on the palm of her hand now, looking like the high of finding her mojo is fading as sleep deprivation creeps in.

“Toby started calling Dane, Dad, one day and except for a brief period when he first found out that Dane was his uncle he’s never deviated from that as far as I know.”

“Dane told you that?” I ask, my voice shaking that they share such intimate things.

She hops down off the counter. “He did, but only because I pry. I asked him one night when I was working.” She approaches me, placing her hand on my upper arm. “I’m his employee, nothing more.”

I scoff. “Oh, I don’t care. Why would I?” I shake my head. “Please.”

Charlie stares at me for an uncomfortable amount of time. “Just thought you should know. Hey, aren’t peanut butter and chocolate Dane’s favorites?” She glances down to the frosting I’m currently making and the peanut butter jar on the table then turns on her heels. “See you later, I gotta go to work.”

“Bye, Charlie!” Cat hollers and the door chime rings a second later.

“You, go home to bed.” I point at her with my spatula.

“I thought you said not everything was about Dane Murray?” Cat asks, standing up from the stool and throwing away her muffin wrapper.

“Shut up.”

She giggles. “So, you can do whatever you want with the cake. The party is this Saturday, kids are invited. Just a barbecue before the weather turns.”

“Got it, I’ll bring the cake with me.”

“I’m emailing out the invitations tonight.” She stops right before she’s about to leave the kitchen. “You know, it’s okay if you like him, right? I know we all assumed he was this immature single dad who had no business taking care of a kid, but I think we were wrong.”

“He might not be who I thought he was, but he’s still not boyfriend

material. We both know that.”

She gives me a tight smile and then turns around toward the door.

“See you later, Cat.”

“See you.”

Once the door chime rings, my ass falls to the stool, my body completely conflicted with how this friends-with-benefits has morphed into me wanting more.

No, I don't want more. Dane can't offer me more and my mind has to come to grips with that. Maybe we should stop. I know my pussy would not be onboard for that if she had a say. Truthfully, I'm not either. Never have I experienced sex like I have with Dane. Despite knowing how he learned all his moves he always leaves me begging for more. Only now it's more than just his body I'm left wanting.

CHAPTER

Twenty

DANE

CHARLIE WALKS IN, a huge smile plastered on her face.

“What’s so great this morning?” I ask her, placing the baskets of condiments on each table.

“I just started my morning with a muffin from Ava.” She practically bounces to the backroom.

“Funny, I did too,” I smile.

“Ew, spare me.” She exaggerates an intense full-body shiver.

A couple minutes later she emerges from the backroom wrapping her waist apron around herself.

“Tell me, what is the gossip around town?”

She looks up from behind the bar as she starts taking stock from last night.

“Well, let’s see. Miss Betty is on the warpath for a missing book, little Peter Caldwell peed in the fountain so now there’s a debate about whether it needs to be drained or not, and,” she taps her finger to her lips, “people are saying that Dane, the owner of Happy Daze should pay his best employee, Charlie, double what he pays her now.”

“Charlie?” I sit on the stool on the other side of the bar top from her.

“People want to know if someone finally got you to settle down.” She leans against the other side of the bar, sipping a cup of coffee I just prepared.

“How do people even know about us? We’ve been keeping a low profile.”

She lets loose a full belly laugh, bent over exaggerating her amusement.

“This is Climax Cove. Sometimes I’m convinced we live in a make-

believe town like that Truman movie with Jim Carey. Where they made up his entire life?”

I shake my head. “Stay on course, Charlie.”

“You’re over there all the time, you’ve convinced Steaming Hotties to feature her baked goods in a basket on the counter by the till, Double D’s is taking her wedding cakes now, and you tell everyone to go there all the time.”

“Because she’s a great baker. Her goods taste awesome.”

“Well, I wouldn’t know about her goods, but her cupcakes *are* delicious.” That familiar smart-ass smirk is splashed on her face.

“Do you think Vic knows?” I’m a little afraid to ask. I know it’s Ava’s call whether or not her dad should know about us but I can’t help but feel like a douche for keeping it from him. No, we’re not besties and I’m not sure you could even call us buddies, but I do see him a couple times a month.

The smirk wipes off her face. I’m not sure how happy he’d be that a fellow Single Dads Club member would be dating his daughter. Fuck, I’m not even dating her, I’m fucking her. Plain and simple.

“Who knows. He doesn’t come down to town very often. Plus, he’s never been one to be in on the gossip.”

I nod because she’s right. Vic isn’t usually looking to gossip when he’s at the Single Dads Club get-togethers.

“But, Dane, you know this isn’t going to end well, right?” Charlie leans forward, her steaming mug of coffee cupped between her hands.

“We’ve agreed to the terms together, and I’ve been monogamous for the first time in my life.”

“That’s why I don’t understand why the two of you continue to play this game. You might as well just date. The fact she got you to be monogamous says a lot, don’t you think?”

“Exactly what does it say?” I notice the SUV parked outside, so I stand from the stool.

“That maybe she’s the one for you.”

I laugh and shake my head. “Charlie, drink some more coffee. You’re not thinking clearly yet.”

Walking over to the door, I see the man opening his passenger door, where a woman with dark hair steps out. She’s in a pair of shorts and a blouse, and I’d put her around the same age as me.

I step outside onto the sidewalk and approach the vehicle. “Cole

Webber?" I ask with my hand extended.

The woman opens the back door and the familiar sound of kids flows out of the high-priced SUV.

"Dane Murray. Pleasure to meet you." He shakes my hand and glances to who I assume is his wife. "Please excuse us, we made it an impromptu family trip."

"Climax Cove is a great place for families," I say.

"Yeah, my wife already has her eye on the bakery over there."

I laugh, watching his wife unbuckle one kid out of the car seat and then the other one jumps out right after.

"The Mad Batter makes some delicious treats."

"Not that these kids need more sugar, but it will keep them busy for awhile while we talk business."

"You said no work," the oldest girl, whines.

Cole ruffles her dark hair. "Relax, pumpkin."

Cole and his wife share a look of complete exhaustion. I've been there plenty.

"Dane, this is my wife, Whitney, and my girls, Veronica and Zoe."

I hold my hand out to his wife. "Nice to meet you."

"You as well. We have friends that come here often. They always speak so highly of the place. Actually, do you know who Marcus Kent is?" she asks.

"What on Earth do you want with Marcus Kent?"

She laughs and the smallest daughter jumps up in front of Cole until he takes her in his arms. Almost immediately she starts playing with the light scruff on his face.

"He's dating my good friend's sister and I kind of want to meet him."

"Whit, we've been over this. I'm sure he's a fine guy. Cat wouldn't be with a douchebag." Cole's gaze veers to me. "He's not a douche, right?"

"I'm bias, he's one of my best friends. We love Cat by the way. The Mad Batter over there is her roommate." I nod across the street to the bakery and Whitney turns her head.

"Perfect, that's all I really need then. But I want to meet him before we leave."

"Well, we're leaving in three days, so you have plenty of time to stalk the poor guy." Cole hands over the little one to his wife. "Just let me get work out of the way first."

She smiles, taking the little girl from him. She settles her on her hip and grabs the older one's hand.

"I'm exploring, call me when you're done. It was great to meet you, Dane, and I can say in all honesty that if you don't take on Rock Hard Whiskey you're a fool of a business man."

"Whit!" Cole says in a way that tells me this isn't the first time she's said something like that.

I chuckle.

"Relax, babe. He seems like a guy who knows a joke when he hears one."

I nod, smiling at their banter. Judging by the older daughter, they've been together for awhile and it's clear they're very happy together.

He wraps his arm around her waist and pulls his wife close, kissing her cheek. "Love you."

Her face blushes and she doesn't push him away nor does she try to escape his hold. She nuzzles closer if anything and the little girl presses her hand to her daddy's cheek.

"Love you." Then her eyes find mine. "Nice to meet you."

A feeling, something like a hollow abyss develops in my chest watching the two together.

"You, too," I say after her.

After Whitney walks her two girls across the street and I'm thankful that Ava will have a new customer today, Cole opens the back of his SUV.

"I swear when I bring them with me, it's a hassle, but it's nice not to sleep without them at night, you know?"

I dodge his question and grab a box of bottles from him. "Need a hand?"

We walk into the bar, sit down at a table, and move on from a topic that I seem to have a harder time brushing off these days.

An hour later, I have a new whiskey distributor, and I'm stocking a few bottles with Charlie behind the bar.

"Would you and your family like to have lunch out on the terrace?" I ask Cole, who's busy texting.

He looks up. "Come to think of it, we should probably feed the kids before we bypass their happy hour and all hell breaks loose." His fingers

move on the screen again, a smile present the entire time he's texting.

"Yeah, my son has about fifteen minutes past normal feeding times before the crankiness erupts and we're both screaming." I grab a few menus and nod out to the patio that overlooks the marina.

We both head out there, and I lead him to a table that looks out over the water.

"It's beautiful here," Cole says as he takes a seat.

"Yeah and if your wife really does want to hassle Marcus Kent, he's over there." I point to my friend's workshop a little farther down the shoreline where he restores boats.

"Whit's just acting like an overprotective sister. She's been friends with Cat's older sister since they were young, and I think she looks at Cat like she's her own sister in a way." It's funny to me that he's making excuses for his wife. "Add on the fact she's an investigative reporter and you can be rest assured your buddy isn't hiding anything because she would have already found it."

I chuckle for a second thinking of all the grief Whitney's gonna give Marcus. "So, you know Cat's entire family?" I sit down to keep him company until his family arrives.

"Tahlia, Cat's sister and her husband, Lucas we're close with. I don't have a ton of contact with their parents unless there's a party or wedding. But I will say one thing, Marcus held his own when it came to Bill, Cat's dad." He shakes his head. "Hard sell."

We share an understanding nod. Bill Santora was Marcus' client for years and played a huge part in the success of his business. Luckily, when Marcus went down to San Francisco without Cat to talk to him about it, he trusted Marcus enough to let their relationship run its course without interfering.

"He's got balls not many have," I say. "It's probably because he's such a control freak—better to go in prepared than be taken by surprise."

Cole laughs and nods. "Glad to see it worked out for everyone."

I catch sight of Whitney and the two girls being escorted out to the patio by Charlie, so I stand, holding the chair out for the first lady who wants to take the spot.

Charlie positions a highchair next to the table and Whitney places the little one in, then the older girl hops up on the chair I've pulled out.

Noticing a Mad Batter bag in Whitney's hand, I smile. "Did you enjoy what our Mad Batter has to offer?"

I sure as hell have been.

She giggles, as Cole's eyes widen at the size of the bag. "The Alice in Wonderland theme is so cute. We'll have to pop in again so I can show you." She directs her gaze to Cole.

"I'm afraid we'll go bankrupt if I take you in there again," Cole jokes, shaking his head.

"Please." She rolls her eyes. "Ava, the owner, is so sweet. We talked about Cat and what she's been doing here. Then Ava called her so we're going to have dinner with her and Marcus one night before we leave."

Cole's eyes narrow slightly as he studies his wife. "Please tell me you won't be drilling him with questions the entire time?" He shoots his thumb my way. "Dane is Marcus' best friend."

Whitney sits up straighter, her eyes lighting up like she just spotted the Hope Diamond at Tiffany's.

"Really? Tell me everything." She shifts her weight to the edge of her chair.

I place my hands up in the air. "Nope, not getting involved. I'll leave you all to lunch." I hold my hand out to Cole. "It was a pleasure meeting with you."

He accepts my hand and stands. "Thank you and I promise Rock Hard Whiskey will take care of all your needs."

"Well not all of them," Whitney says and Cole shakes his head with a chuckle.

"Love bringing the family with me to business meetings," the sarcasm in his tone isn't missed.

I turn my attention to Whitney who's now shooting her husband a look. "Pleasure meeting you as well. Come down to Climax Cove during Christmas. It's beautiful."

"I'm thinking about planning a friends trip to come up here for the holidays. Seems like a great town," she says.

"I can't say enough good things about it. Lunch is on the house so enjoy yourselves." I nod and wave goodbye before walking back inside where I find Charlie pouring herself a shot of whiskey. "What are you doing?"

"Trying the new stuff." She downs a shot. "Smooth. I like it." Circling the bottle, she inspects the label. "That guy makes this whiskey?" she asks.

I nod. "Yeah, he started about eight or so years ago I guess. It's a pretty well-known brand. I mean, I've heard of it before, but I guess he's kind of

selective about where it's served."

"He picked Climax Cove?" She crunches her eyebrows.

My guess is Rock Hard Whiskey is primarily in the urban high-end restaurants.

"I'm not arguing, he's a helluva lot easier to deal with than my last guy. Plus, they kind of know Cat, and it's nice to keep it all friendly."

"Hopefully not as friendly as you are with your dessert supplier." She laughs, already running down the hall to get away from me.

My gaze veers over to the bakery, wondering what she's doing right now.

CHAPTER

Twenty-One

THE THREE BUTTER pecan cakes are arranged on the counter in the kitchen, looking too good to eat, each placed on pedestals of different heights.

“I cannot wait until they cut that,” Charlie says next to me.

She’s wearing a cute dress matched with leggings and ankle boots. Fancier than the usual t-shirt and jeans or shorts I see her in at Happy Daze.

“You don’t have to work tonight?” I ask.

“Oh, don’t worry. Your man will be there, too. He actually trusted Chad to close up tonight.” She hip checks me.

“I wasn’t asking because of that,” I mumble.

She shoots me a look that says, ‘we both know you were.’

I stop admiring my cakes so I can spread the hors d’oeuvres Cat and Marcus have out on the table.

“What’s the party for again?” Charlie asks me, grabbing a pastry puff.

“Cat’s found her mojo.” I peruse everything on the table, but for some reason, I haven’t been able to eat much of anything today.

“So, every night I double my tips, I should throw a party?” she laughs. “Ow!” she screeches.

I turn to find Cat behind her, pinching her arm. “Don’t make fun of me. I was in a slump for weeks.”

“I was joking,” Charlie huffs out.

All three of us know she wasn’t.

“Thanks again, Ava. The cakes look delicious.” Cat peers past Charlie to me, and then takes a sip of her wine.

“You’re welcome.”

“We really want to pay you,” Cat says and no sooner does Marcus approach, pulling his wallet out of his back pocket.

“No,” I hold my hand up. “Friends don’t pay.”

“Yes, they do.” Dane’s voice brings tingles throughout my body.

Had I been waiting for him to show up? Probably.

He situates himself between Marcus and me, his forearm brushing against mine, scorching my skin.

“Is Dane your manager now?” Marcus jokes.

I look up and Dane winks. “I will be if she doesn’t start charging people. Babe,” he says and I swear every conversation in a two foot perimeter stops. “You have to take money to stay in business.”

He doesn’t even notice that he referred to me with an endearment in front of everyone.

“I’m with Dane,” Marcus grabs sixty dollars and throws it on the counter in front of me.

“It’s flour and sugar, Marcus.” I push the money back to him.

“And your time.” Dane’s hand covers mine, stopping me. My stomach roars with a million butterflies escaping their cocoons.

“He’s right, Ava, your time has to be factored in,” Cat says.

I stare down at the money and I think about rent and utilities. I’ve wondered lately if I’ll still be able to import that chocolate everyone loves if business doesn’t pick up.

“How about I give you a discount?” I slide a twenty out, leaving the other forty on the table.

Marcus doesn’t go for it and we all stand there for a moment in silence until Dane grabs it and shoves it down my shirt into my bra.

“You did not just do that,” I say, my face heating.

Charlie starts laughing next to me, Marcus is shaking his head, and Cat’s pressing her lips together trying not to laugh.

“This way you have to keep it.” Dane shrugs, taking a puff pastry and popping it into his mouth. “These are so good,” he mumbles over his mouthful of food. “Who made them?”

If my body wasn’t trying to cool down from the feel of his hand so close to my nipple, I’d grab him by his ear and escort him outside. Lucky for me, it was only the five of us here and since it seems everyone knows that we’re screwing each other, it’s not as major of a deal that he felt me up in front of

them. I can only hope that everyone around us had already lost interest in us and gone back to their own conversations.

“Miss Ava!” Toby screams next to me, his feet sliding to a stop. Lily almost runs into his back.

“Hey, Toby.” I squat down, forgetting about Dane and how I need to lecture him about how social etiquette dictates that he doesn’t feel me up in front of other people. Especially when we’re trying to keep this on the DL.

“We made the championship!” he screams.

I hold my arms out and he comes into them, letting me hug him. “Congratulations! I’m so proud of you.”

I catch Dane staring at our exchange.

“Yeah, buddy, way to go,” Charlie chimes in, stepping up beside me, ruffling his hair.

When we separate, he looks over to his dad and then back to me. “Will you come to the game?”

“Of course. When is it?” I ask, setting my wine down on the counter.

“It’s next Saturday.”

I hold my hand up for a high-five. “I’m there.”

He smacks it. “Yay!” He runs off screaming with Lily two steps behind.

“That’s great, man, you didn’t say anything.” Marcus’ hand cups his friend’s shoulder.

Dane shrugs. “We just found out this afternoon. It’s fall ball, but this is a great confidence builder for us next spring.”

Dane’s eyes volley between me and Marcus.

“You should be proud, too, coach.” I knock him with my shoulder and his arm swings around, holding me to him as his heated stare makes me melt like ice cream doused in hot fudge.

The doorbell rings and I step back from him. What are we doing showing affection in public?

Marcus disappears only to return a minute later with Garrett and his daughter Sydney right behind him.

“Hey, big daddy.” Dane holds out his hand.

Garrett shakes it, his eyes rolling to the back of his head.

“Hey, Sydney.” Dane puts his arms around her in a big bear hug, lifting her feet off the ground.

“Hey, Uncle Dane.” No emotion in her tone. Nothing that makes her seem excited to be here much less see Dane.

“Don’t be a dud, Syd. I get it. You have better things to do than hang around us old people, but cut us some slack, okay?” Dane’s overly dramatic with his hands and eye rolls.

“Where’s Toby and Lily?” she asks.

“There you go. They could probably use some supervision.” Dane pats her on the back.

“I think they’re in the basement,” Marcus tells her while wrapping his arm around her shoulders. “Thanks for coming.”

“Hey, Uncle Marcus,” her tone exactly the same as with Dane. “You’re welcome.”

Her phone is out of her back pocket in her hands as she walks out of the room.

“Old people?” Cat asks and cocks a hip to the side.

“*You* are the old people.” I point to the three men. “We’re young and vivacious and energetic and—”

“Living in Climax Cove. Population nine hundred and forty-three, six hundred and fifty of those being older than sixty-five,” Dane interrupts, hijacking the conversation.

“Then I think I’ll take my cupcake business somewhere else.” I stare directly at Dane. A threat he’ll not like because the man goes crazy for my cupcakes. And I do mean my cupcakes, not my *cupcakes*.

“Let’s not get carried away, okay? I get that you’re young-*er*. I’m sure Marcus enjoys how limber Cat is.”

Marcus hand slaps Dane’s chest and he weaves through us to reach Cat’s side, promptly putting his arm around her waist and pulling her into him.

“Don’t talk about how limber my girlfriend is, dick.”

“Definitely crossing the line, man,” Garrett mumbles over his carrot stick with dip.

I glance to Charlie who’s been quiet ever since Garrett walked in and I find her face a flushed pink, eyes glued to Garrett.

“Hey,” I elbow her in the ribs, which snaps her out of the daze she’s in. “Let’s go outside for some air.”

“Why am I not invited?” Dane whines like a four-year-old. He looks at Garrett. “We’re not cool I guess.”

Garrett chomps down on another carrot ignoring Dane.

“You’re too old for us.” I joke and swing my arm through Charlie’s, escorting her to the deck.

“What’s with all the carrots, man? You half rabbit or something?” I overhear Dane making fun of Garrett as we walk through the patio doors to the deck.

For the first time since Dane entered the room, I feel like I can breathe again.

An hour goes by and Dane has been keeping his distance. Charlie and I sit next to the fire pit talking with some of the other guests, mostly all town people. Three guys who work for Marcus, and the new barista down at Steaming Hotties. I wish I could say I knew what the conversation was about, but I don’t because my eyes are constantly drifting to the windows, searching for Dane.

A newfound worry begins to bloom as I wonder if he’s flirting with someone else in the house because why after an hour has he not sought me out?

“I’ll be right back.” I place my wine glass on the wooden planked table next to Charlie and decide to use the bathroom. At least that’s the story I’m telling myself.

I slide through the glass door, dodging some kids that are chasing one another as Marcus yells at them to stop and head downstairs. Toby leads the pack and disappears through a door, which I assume must be the basement.

Marcus shuts the door, smiling at me. “I bet you’re longing for the quiet of the bakery right about now.” His beer is tucked between two of his fingers in a casual manner that, if he was anyone other than my roommate’s boyfriend, I’d find sexy.

No one can deny that Marcus is attractive. Dark wavy hair that has that tousled and just fucked kind of look. He’s got a long and lean body and a swimmer or runner’s type build.

“The quiet is nice, but a little more noise might make my bottom line better.” I laugh and Marcus doesn’t.

Instead the corners of his lips turn down slightly. “I was meaning to talk to you about something. Every time I finish a boat, I usually include a gift basket with an assortment of things from Climax Cove. I’d love to include a variety pack of a dozen cupcakes. Is that something I should order ahead of

time or can I just drop in?”

“That’s very thoughtful of you. You can just drop in. I can either whip something up or we can take from the display case. I don’t think you’re rolling those boats off on an assembly line.”

He chuckles. “Well, no, that’s true. I was also thinking...every year I go to a boat conference, and I’d like to hand out cookies with my logo on them. Could we do something like that?”

I pat Marcus’ arm and he stares down at it for a moment before meeting my eyes. “Please don’t feel like you have to give me business.”

“No.” His voice raises a few octaves. “That’s not why—”

I shake my head. “You’re a sweet guy. I see why Cat loves you so much.”

“Really, Ava, you’d be helping me out.”

I meant what I told him, he’s sweet and I have an inkling Dane has put him up to helping me. Either Dane or Cat, but too many townies have approached me lately with business without someone handing them a flint to ignite the idea.

“There you are.” Dane walks into the hallway. “People are falling to their knees over your cake. Go sell yourself.” He nods in the direction of where the table is setup.

“I’m sure you’ve probably already done a good of job of it.” Marcus’ smirk tells me I’m right about my assumptions.

Dane’s been the one walking over all town, pushing people to give me business.

“What can I say? I love her cupcakes.” He winks and if my stomach wasn’t feeling like a firecracker just went off, I’d worry that Marcus saw him. Then again, the man felt me up an hour ago right in front of him.

“That’s not all you love,” Marcus mumbles. “Gotta go find Cat, see you two later.”

Marcus walks down the hallway, swigging his beer. He turns the corner and then Dane’s plants his hands on my hips, forcing me to take a few steps backward.

Before I realize what’s happened, I’m propped up on a washing machine with Dane’s lips attached to mine while he feels around to lock the door behind us.

His hands are fiddling with my dress, my fingers fisted in his hair. God, he always tastes so good. Our tongues glide together only to make us both more ravenous.

“I need you,” he murmurs against my lips on the short break we take from mauling one another.

My legs widen and I use one hand and untie my wrap dress so it swings open, revealing my bra and panties for him.

His chest rises and falls as his gaze sweeps over my body, burning my skin with an invisible flame only he can ignite.

While he’s busy drooling, my fingers unbutton his jeans. “Tell me you have a condom,” I say, my hand palming his dick.

“Never leave home without them.” He digs one out of his pocket right before his jeans drop to the laundry room floor. “Boy scout, remember?”

The fact he carries a condom around raises a red flag for me. I hope it’s not for anyone other than me.

“Especially when I know you’re going to be within an arm’s distance.” One side of his lips turn up and you’d think he had a magic button to control me the way his one sentence has me grabbing the back of his head and smashing his lips to mine.

Lost in the lust of Dane Murray, our hands grasp, our mouths devour and I barely take a breath before my ass is perched off the washing machine, his fingers are sliding my panties to the side and his dick fills me up. Keeping us connected, he circles us around so I’m on the counter.

A moan escapes me and Dane swallows down my noises with a red-hot kiss, continuing to thrust in and out of me.

In the laundry room of Marcus’ house, I lose all control, screwing Dane while people mill around eating my cake and small puff pastry outside the door. I wish I could say I regret it, but I don’t until a knock sounds on the door.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Two

DANE

I SHOULD'VE WAITED until I could have her at home because as I button up my jeans and shove the tied condom in my pocket, I watch her cover her skin up with that thin fabric and I'm wishing we had a little longer to go at it again.

Knock, knock.

Ava's panicked eyes reach mine, her fingers tying her dress together and then threading through her long, dark hair.

We both still and stand there in silence as the doorknob jiggles.

We each point at the other one to go out first, but in the end, I figure I have to man up.

Instead of walking to the door, I swing my arm around her waist, pulling her to me. Damn, I love the way she fits just right in my arms.

My lips descend on hers, my tongue seeking hers immediately. She never denies me, and I can't get enough of the fact she seems like she's in a constant state of want for me.

I catch my breath as my mouth parts from hers. Bending down to her ear, I whisper, "I'll be driving you home tonight."

She shakes her head. "I have my car," she whispers back.

"We'll say it won't start." My lips brush her forehead and I pull away before the person outside gets too antsy.

A small smile covers her mouth and my eyes take their last chance to scan over her body.

"Tonight." I mouth and then unlock the door, and slide out.

"Victor!" I say loud enough for Ava to hear.

“Hey, Dane.” He moves to slide by me to walk in the door, so I quickly step in front of him.

“What did you need?” I ask.

He tilts his head skeptically looking at me. “The bathroom.”

My heart immediately relaxes. This I can deal with.

“That’s the laundry room. The bathroom is down this way.” I swing my arm over his shoulders, walking him down the hall.

“Do I need to ask why you were in the laundry room?” Victor jokes, too familiar with my usual antics.

“Just spilled something and was looking for some stain remover.” I stop him at the bathroom, thankful it’s empty so I can get Ava out of the laundry room while he’s doing his business.

“Yeah, yeah. One day you’re going to meet a woman who’ll knock you on your ass.” He laughs while shutting the bathroom door.

I pull out my phone, and text Ava that it’s free to leave. She slides out a second later and heads to the kitchen.

Fuck, why do I feel like I’ve betrayed Victor? Ava’s a grown adult and as much as I wish I could stay away, there’s no way I can keep my hands off her.

“Dad!” Toby yells and runs up to me. A few other kids circling around.

I beeline away from the bathroom because that just seems creepy if I wait for Vic to get out.

“What’s up, buddy?”

“Can I spend the night?” He’s bouncing in one spot, obviously excited.

Do we have some telepathic bond or what because in order for me to manipulate Ava every which way tonight, I need Toby somewhere else. Score.

Then the usual guilt seeps in because I wonder if I’m a horrible dad needing some adult time and leaving my kid with someone else?

“If it’s okay with Uncle Marcus, but I’m picking you up early and we’re going rafting.”

He smiles from ear to ear, heading in the direction of Marcus.

“My dad said I can raft category three by myself.” He brags to his friends and although I had my reservations about letting him try a harder category, he did excellent last time.

“Really?” The kid next to him sounds shocked.

I enter the kitchen and there stands Ava. Her face flushed and her hair not

quite as perfect as it was in the beginning of the night. I'm about to set my course in her direction when Victor comes in through the other opening and greets her.

"I had no idea you were here." He kisses each one of her cheeks.

"Hi, Dad," she says, her eyes finding me over his shoulder.

"Did you make this cake?" he asks, grabbing a pre-cut slice. Ava waits for him to fork off a bite and place it in his mouth. "One of your best," he brags, and her face flushes more.

"You have to say that. You're my dad."

The two continue a conversation about the shop and how business is. I wait a few feet away, pretending like I'm struggling to decide which piece of cake I want to take, eavesdropping on their conversation.

"I thought we could do something tomorrow." Victor leans against the corner and Ava's gaze shoots to mine.

"What did you have in mind?" she asks.

"Dane." Victor spots me and I grab the first piece of cake on the table in front of me, seeing that it's only a sliver of a piece. Who eats a sliver of cake? That'd be like me licking Ava's pussy once. Never going to happen.

"Hello again." I raise the cake plate in the air. "Just grabbing a piece of your daughter's scrumptious cake."

He nods, a tight smile on his lips.

Shit, he must know something.

It's probably because I used the word scrumptious. When the hell have I ever used that word in my life?

"Her skills are impressive." He takes another bite of his and then sets the plate down.

"I can't disagree with you on that one." Ava's face grows even redder though I wouldn't have thought it possible.

Vic turns his attention back to Ava and I figure this is my opportunity to escape.

I back out of the room, tapping my watch behind Vic's back, mouthing to Ava that she has twenty minutes.

Do I feel a little deceitful where Vic is concerned? Absolutely, but it's Ava's father and it should be her decision whether to tell him or not. Besides, that feeling will pass once I have her strapped to my bedpost.

Two hours later, Ava is strapped to my bed.

Not really, but her hands *are* gripping the bars of my headboard, as my mouth teases her sweetness from her body.

“Dane,” she pleads.

My tongue plays with her clit as my hand leaves her smooth thigh to get her off exactly how I know she likes it.

I plunge two fingers into her fast and her back arches, her breasts push up and they’re so damn mouth-watering I’m about to leave her pussy for them.

I stay on track and arch my fingers to her D-spot—that’s right I renamed it after myself since Ava admitted I’m the only one who has ever successfully found it—and suck her clit into my mouth, burying my face in her center.

Her fingers thread through my hair, locking my head to her as she grinds against my face.

“Oh. My. God.” I wait for her muscles to tense and then she collapses on the bed, her arms falling to the side.

I slowly remove my fingers and inch up her sweat slicked body.

“You’re...” her words trail off and her eyes fall closed for a moment.

I miss the hazel eyes until she pops them open and licks her lips.

Circling my hips, the tip of my dick teases at her opening.

“Ready for number two.” I hover over her and her two hands reach behind me, grabbing my ass and I drive into her without thinking.

Her warmth envelopes my dick and it’s never felt *this* good before.

Shit. The condom.

I’ve never been without a condom in my entire life. This is what I’ve been missing? Hell, I see why they have to preach so much about safe sex. The sensation of her coating me is out of this fucking world.

“Shit, you feel amazing.” My body collapses on top of her, my hands reaching up her arms until our fingers entwine and I hold her to the mattress.

“Dane.” She sighs and I remove my mouth from her neck to look into her eyes.

No, no, no. Don’t lose yourself in her. You need to be the responsible one.

“Condom,” I say and move my hips to slide out. I do not need a Toby two point O right now.

Her legs wrap around my waist and she locks me in place. “I’m on the pill, and I’m clean. If you’re clean...”

“I’m clean.” I quickly reply. “I’m on the testing route and I’ve never not used a condom, which you’re about to figure out if we keep this up because

I'm about to come in three seconds."

She grinds her hips and I slow my movements, relishing the slickness of my dick in her soft flesh.

I'd like to say it takes more than that to convince me, but it doesn't.

Leaning up, my hands explore her tits, tweaking and twisting her nipples. Her head falls back, and I circle in and out of her at an excruciatingly slow pace, but this moment is way too awesome to rush.

Her hands run down the length of my chest, her short nails feeling every ridge. Needing to kiss her, I bend over, leading her by the neck up to meet my lips. Our bodies are aligned, and we're slow and gentle.

Never in all my life have I felt like I wanted to freeze time like I do right now.

She clenches around me and I practically lose my load from how intense that feeling is without a barrier.

"Ava." Her name leaves my lips and it's the first time I realize how weak I am for her. Now more than ever.

"More, Dane. I never want this to end," she whispers, closing her eyes as my right hand reaches around and grabs her ass, arching her hips, helping me get as deep as I can get.

"Me either. You're like heaven." I slip in and out of her.

"You too," she says, inching up on her elbows and I grant her wish for a kiss, which leaves us chest to chest, my hand in her hair as my lips cascade over hers until I work my way up her jaw to her earlobe.

No dirty words leave my mouth, no hard and fast movements between us, no nail scratching or ass smacking. Missionary sex turns out to be the best sex of my life so far.

"God, Ava, I'm about to come."

She tightens around me again and I push back the orgasm begging for release.

"Me too," she pants. "Kiss me, Dane. I want to come with you kissing me."

I capture her mouth, our tongues gliding in a slow dance matching the waltz of our two bodies.

The walls of her pussy clamp down on my dick so hard I end up losing my load in her.

Both our tense bodies still until our orgasms fade and then her back hits the mattress, and I stay on top of her, not wanting to leave her body just yet.

I cast kisses to her jaw and neck, and her fingers run down the back of my head.

Once I soften I draw out and head into the bathroom to grab her a washcloth. When I return, she's still in my bed, her breathing finally slowing.

"Thank you." She holds out her hand, but I wipe her up, trying my best to be gentle in case she's too sensitive.

After we're finished, I hop into bed with her, bringing the sheet up over us.

"Are you tired?" I ask.

She nuzzles into my arms, her head in the crook of my neck and her smooth leg swung over mine. "Not really."

"You want to watch a movie?"

"Sure."

I grab the remote off my side table and kiss the top of her head.

Something feels different. Something feels like we're moving out of the friends-with-benefits zone, but it feels so fucking good, I refuse to think too hard about it right now.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Three

I PRY one eye open because of the stream of light peeking through his curtains. My entire body is at peace with where I'm waking up as I inhale the scent of Dane on my pillow.

One side of me knows I'm being stupid—I know exactly where this relationship is going. Right in the dumpster along with my heart because I want more from Dane than these trysts. I'm beginning to form feelings for him. All right, I *have* formed feelings for him. The one thing I swore I wouldn't do.

He's not the man I agreed to have a friends-with-benefits relationship with. That man was egotistical, self-serving, and a grade A asshole who thought with his dick and not his heart.

I yearn for the side of Dane most don't see. The one who wants to adopt his sister's son, who tries to make sure I stay in business, who coaches his son's little league games...the one who made love to me last night.

A deep voice on the other side of the door startles me and I sit up straight in bed. Grabbing his t-shirt strung over the chair in the corner I slip it on and crack the bedroom door open.

"Vic, listen to me," Dane says somewhere down the hall.

My heart hammers in my chest. My dad is here?

"No, Dane. I heard you with that girl in the laundry room at Marcus' last night. Ava's car was sitting outside his house when I left. I was told that she had car trouble and you agreed to take her home. Imagine my surprise when I go to her house this morning to offer a hand and find out she's not there. Please tell me she's not in your bedroom."

“Vic.” Dane’s stalling.

“I’m about to barge in there if you don’t start explaining.” The anger is apparent in my dad’s voice, and the last thing I want is the temper from his Brazilian side to make an appearance. Afraid he’ll make good on his threat, I shut the door quietly, putting on my dress and shoving my bra and underwear in my purse.

“It’s not what this looks like.”

Can’t Dane just lie? Tell him it isn’t me in here?

“I think you’re fucking around with my daughter. She’s not like your other girls.”

Dane’s quiet for a moment and I strain to listen at the door again.

“I know.”

“You know? So, she *is* in that bedroom?”

I glance at the clock. Eight o’clock and my dad’s already up and looking for me.

“Listen, I’m not gonna lie to you. I respect you way too much to do that. If I were in your shoes I’d want you to know. Yes, Ava is here.”

Damn it.

“Fuck you, Dane.” There’s that tone I remember from my youth when I’d do something stupid.

“Vic. It’s not like that.”

“Like what?”

Hope blooms in my chest as I wait to hear Dane’s next words.

“We’re friends.”

Friends. It feels like a knife just gutted me open.

“Friends? You think this makes it better because you like her as a person? My daughter deserves a helluva lot better than some guy who can’t keep his dick in his pants. She deserves to be treated with respect, to be worshiped for the amazing young lady she is.”

Dane’s quiet for another moment. “You’re right.”

It’s quiet for a moment and I can picture my dad running his hands over the top of his white and grey beard, trying to rein in his temper.

“I think you’re a good guy, don’t get me wrong. You do so much for this town and no one can refute that. But boyfriend material? You’ve never even had a relationship that I know of. Have you?”

“No.” Dane’s tone is downright melancholy now.

“I don’t want my daughter to be the guinea pig.” I hear his footsteps and

the front door creak open. “If you don’t think you’re ready for this then don’t fool yourself into thinking because you’re friends, no one will get hurt in the end. I’d put money on the fact that the two of you aren’t on the same playing field. Eventually, someone will want more, and my money is on my daughter if she’s not already there. Don’t be selfish, Dane. Man up or get out.”

The door shuts, and the ensuing silence weighs heavy on my shoulders.

I give it a few minutes, but since Dane hasn’t come into the room, I head down the hallway, finding him on the back deck sitting in a chair with his head in his hands.

I open the sliding glass door, and he bolts up to a standing position.

“Hey,” I say.

“Hey.” He walks over to me. “You’re dressed already. I was thinking I could give you another earth-shattering orgasm before you leave.” He smiles but it’s weak and doesn’t reach his eyes.

Classic Dane trying to defuse the tension with humor.

“Can we sit?” I ask.

He nods, stepping back and I sit down in the chair across from him, hoping for as much distance as possible.

The ocean is beautiful as the sun shines down on it and water lazily laps at the shore.

“Can I get you a coffee?” He moves to stand, but I signal for him to sit back down.

“I heard.”

“Your dad can be scary.”

I nod. “He can also be right.”

His face loses the usual smile he’s known for and he stares me directly in the eyes. That’s when I know things are about to change between us.

“Ava.”

I shake my head, praying the tears keep at bay until I can hightail it out of here.

“You can’t commit, can you?”

His gaze focuses on the table and then out at the ocean.

Guess that’s my answer.

“I like you, Dane, a lot and I didn’t want to feel this way for you. I wanted to enjoy what you had to offer, but...I lost that battle last night.”

He draws in a deep breath and shoves his hand through his hair. “Ava, I just can’t. I have Toby and the bar. I’m not the type of guy who can settle

down. My schedule is crazy, we'd have no nights together. Soon you'd want something more. Something I can't offer you." He sits back in the chair, shoulders slumped.

"You won't offer me. Not can't. There's a difference."

"I wouldn't make a good boyfriend."

"How do you know? You've never been one," I bite out.

He stares at me long and hard. "Are you trying to convince me? Do you think that I'll cave and be like 'oh, you're right, Ava, I can be a boyfriend?' I've been this way my entire adult life. I know what I want."

"And it isn't me." I rise from the chair unable to continue this conversation.

I refuse to grovel for him only to be heartbroken when I'm still not enough.

"You couldn't be further from the truth. I've never wanted anyone like I want you. Just not as something serious. I'm not built for it. I'd disappoint you eventually."

I roll my eyes. "You sound like a jackass. If you only cared about my pussy, you wouldn't be going around town getting every business to buy from me for one reason or another. You wouldn't have made love to me last night and held me in your arms the entire night. Guys who only want friends-with-benefits don't do those things."

"I agree maybe a line blurred last night, but it was one night. Doesn't mean anything."

The contents of my gutted chest spill out down to the ground. At least that's what it feels like.

"Bye, Dane." I march through the back door and straight for the front of the house, making a pit stop for my purse first.

"What are you going to take my car again?" He follows behind me.

"No. I'll call a taxi." I hit the button for Al on my speed dial and give him Dane's address. Luckily, he's not far.

Without a word, I step out the door and slam it behind me, only to hear Dane follow me out.

We stand there in silence for a few minutes, me refusing to speak to the bastard for fear I'll burst out crying and him...well, him doing I don't know what because he's standing behind me.

"Ava, I don't want us to end like this."

"End?" I turn to face him. "According to you, we never even started."

Have a nice life, Dane, stay on your side of Main Street from now on.”

Like a gift from the heavens, Al pulls up into the driveway at that exact moment. I rush over to the car, hop in, and slam the door shut.

As Al pulls away, I’m not going to lie, I kind of wish for a movie moment. The one where the man chases down the taxi, admits he was wrong and didn’t mean anything he said. Then he takes her in his arms and kisses her until applause rings out.

But that didn’t happen. Dane never chased after me. In fact, when I look out the window I realized he didn’t even bother to stand in the driveway and watch me drive out of his life, confirming I made the right decision.

Why does the right decision have to be so damn hard and hurt so damn much?

CHAPTER

Twenty-Four

DANE

MONDAY'S SUCK.

The shipment of Rock Hard Whiskey must have arrived on Saturday and of course, Chad didn't inventory it yet. Hence the reason I love Charlie so much more than Chad.

I busy myself for the first hour, logging the bottles in and then spend five minutes checking out Mad Batter through the window of the bar.

She's open. Her door is closed, but the fall weather has finally kicked in full force this morning, and she's probably trying to keep her place warm. Not at all is the closed door a metaphor to keep me out.

I wish I believed that even a little.

The bar door opens, and I'm about to announce we're closed when in walks Marcus and Garrett. I already know why they're here and their scowls don't scare me.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Marcus is the first to talk, sitting down at the bar across from me.

"Party was great, man. Thanks again for the invite," I dodge his question.

"Did you think she'd never want you to be serious?" Garrett finally opens his mouth and I wish he hadn't.

I toss the dishrag on the bar top. "I don't need to be lectured by the two of you." I disappear into the kitchen, prepping the meat for today's special.

When I decided to add on the grill, I did a ton of research on recipes I could make fresh for large groups. Every day there's one special and usually it's a sandwich with a marinated or slow grilled meat.

The two know-it-alls follow behind me.

“I don’t even know what you’re talking about,” I say in an attempt to put them off. One I know is useless but you can’t blame a guy for trying.

“Cut the shit. Everyone in this town knows you and Ava have been fucking around. Now everyone knows that you broke her heart.” Marcus is the one with all the accusations.

“I didn’t break her heart.”

“Did you really think the whole monogamous friends-with-benefits was an actual thing?” Marcus asks.

“What?” I flick my gaze to him. “How do you know?”

“Do you live under some rock? Girls talk,” Garrett chimes in.

“Cat is my girlfriend and guess what happens when things go south with you and your girl? She talks to my girl who in turn gives me the back turn last night because my friend is a dick.” Marcus’ tone grows more agitated. Not that I give a shit, he signed up for the problems when he agreed to date Cat.

I never agreed to date anyone.

“Back turn?” I ask.

“Where you’re denied sex at bed time.” Garrett crosses his arms and I’m beginning to feel as though they’re ganging up on me. His beastly frame has him looking more like a bodyguard at a strip club than a supportive buddy.

“I wouldn’t know that move because I don’t do bed times with my women.” I pull on the plastic gloves and grab my spices for the rub.

“One day, Dane, you’re going to realize you made a mistake.” Marcus shakes his head in that fatherly way he seems to love so much.

“I’m telling the Club,” Garrett says, voicing his own disapproval.

“It’s not Fight Club, big guy, they aren’t going to beat me up in the corner until I agree to date Ava. Let’s not forget her dad is a member.”

Marcus puts his hands in the air. “I’m out. I can’t take this anymore.” He’s a man of his word as he walks out of the kitchen and I hear the front door open and close.

Garrett however stays. He not only stays, he takes the stool that’s in the corner by the point-of-sale machine that the wait staff use.

“What?” I whine feeling like a teenager who was just caught with his pants down on top of his girlfriend and is about to get the sex talk.

“Marcus is right, you’ll regret this one day. I know you think a monogamous relationship is worse than a death sentence, but what do you think is so different than what you and Ava have been doing?”

I throw the meat in the smoker and take off my gloves and wash my hands.

“If we were in a relationship, the stakes would be higher. She’d nag. I’d get bored. Eventually I’d disappoint her like I do with everyone. Sounds like I’m really missing out.”

“You are my friend. You just haven’t realized it yet.” He rubs at his beard for a minute before he continues. “You’re missing out on all the best stuff.” He runs a hand through the long hair on the top of his head with frustration.

“See.” I point to him. “That’s where you’re wrong. I get the sex.”

Garrett lets out an exhausted sigh and though I can tell he’s trying not to let the undertow of his memories drag him down, it’s clear they are.

“It’s not the sex. It’s the sharing your life with someone. Movies with popcorn and having her snuggled into your side. Watching the sunset on the deck in each other’s arms. Seeing her smile when you surprise her with flowers. Having someone in this world who really, truly gets you. Someone you can look at and have a whole conversation with, without saying a word. Someone you know will be there no matter what life throws at you.” He swallows and his eyes go distant for a moment. “I miss it every damn day,” he whispers.

“I’m sorry.”

The mood in the room shifts and with good reason. Garrett was dealt a shit hand when his wife died.

“Don’t be sorry. It happened twelve years ago,” he pauses and I see him swallow before he continues. “All I’m saying is don’t let a little fear ruin what you guys have. I’ve never seen you as happy as I have since you’ve been spending time with Ava.”

He stands up to leave and I walk over putting my arms around him.

“I’m sorry about Melissa.”

“Get off me.” He pushes me off him and steps back with a small smile playing on his lips. “Listen, I may have taken days with her for granted, but I know now, no one will ever compare, and that’s why I don’t date. Once you have the real thing, everything else is second best.” He clasps his hand on my shoulder. “Don’t let her slip out of your grasp because you’re scared.”

“I’m not scared.”

He quirks an eyebrow. “We both know you are. Just think long and hard about it.”

He walks out the door and then steps back for a second.

“Hey, Charlie,” he murmurs, putting his head down.

Charlie walks in right after Garrett’s departure.

“Good morning,” I say, but all she does is give me the finger in the air and walk into the bathroom.

Great, now I have two ornery females pissed at me. Things can only get better from here, right?

CHAPTER

Twenty-Five

I DROP a tray of burnt cupcakes in the sink and slouch down on my stool. Maybe I made the wrong decision. Maybe I could be with Dane and not want something more.

The door chimes and I stand up.

Stop feeling sorry for yourself.

“Ava?” Cat walks to the back, waving her hand through the smoke. “Is something on fire?” she asks.

“No. Apparently I’ve lost all baking ability.” I pop the burnt cupcakes out of the pan, throwing them in the garbage and then turning on the water to soak the pans.

“I’m yours all day today.” She smiles, moving over to grab her apron.

“No, you’re not.” I point to the door. “You have your mojo back and you need to work on the pieces for that gallery spot next month.”

“Nope. You’re stuck with me.” She leaves the room and I hear her in the display case fiddling with things. “We need some more goodies.”

I sit on the stool again, the side of my face laying in the palm of my hand. “What’s the use? I can’t sell anything. Dane’s probably been bribing people to buy my stuff. Add on the fact that I have to see him every day through the window? It’s an impossible feat.”

I stand up and look through the cut-out, my gaze focused on his Mustang parked out front of his bar.

“Nonsense. Everyone loves your baking. I hear people rave about it all the time. Why don’t you do something different, get your mind off of him.” She stares at me through the open cut-out between the kitchen and the front

of the store. “Make a wedding cake.”

“Yeah, that’s what I want to do, Cat. Make a wedding cake when I’m miserable over a man.”

She’s in the kitchen, at my side a second later.

“It’s his loss.” She wraps me in a warm hug and the prickling of tears stings the corner of my eyes, and I try to push it back.

“I’m stupid. I mean did I honestly think that the playboy of Climax Cove would ever settle down?”

“You’re not stupid. You didn’t mean to fall for him. You were having fun, but you’re just not that type of girl. Hell, I don’t think there’s a girl out there who can’t not develop feelings for a guy she’s sleeping with on the regular. Women are built differently than men and there’s nothing wrong with that.”

Cat, forever the optimistic one.

“I just want to smash something,” I say, clenching my fists at my side.

I glance down at the heart cookie I was making for sweetest day this weekend and before I realize what I’m doing, it’s crumbling in my hands.

“Okay, Ava.” Cat pries my hands open and the crumbs fall to the counter. “Let’s channel this anger into something productive. Why don’t we bake? You always seem calm when you bake.”

I glance to the sink with the burnt cupcake pans. Her gaze follows mine.

“Let’s not do cupcakes. Let’s dip things in chocolate or something.”

“I’m a baker, not a chocolatier,” I remark and she huffs, clearly annoyed with my woe is me attitude.

“Then let’s bake things and smash them.”

Her sentence gives me an idea and I could kiss her. I run to the backroom, finding all the supplies and piling bags of sugar candy and pounds of chocolate on the table.

“I’m loving this inspired look you have going on right now.” Cat’s finger circles around my face. “What are we making?”

“I’m making piñata cakes. Could you do me a favor and run down to Nail Me Hardware and get some small wooden hammers? If they don’t have wood, get the smallest ones and pretty duct tape.”

She looks at me like I’m literally growing a third head.

“Please, Cat. You’ll understand once I’m done.”

For the first time in twenty-four hours, Dane isn’t on my mind.

Progress. At last.

News got out quickly after the first mother and daughter duo stopped by after school and saw the small piñata cakes. A layer of chocolate or vanilla cake, domed in chocolate with sugary treats relieved once you break open the chocolate.

A line is beginning to form for the first time outside the bakery. Kids and adults wanting to get my latest creation.

“I need more.” Cat’s eyes bug out of her head, and Lily sneaks in taking a handful of hammers.

“Thanks for helping, Lily. I put a special one aside for you.” I eye the rainbow candy dome in the corner. She smiles and I’m sure it takes everything in her not to break it open.

“Thanks, Miss Ava.”

She disappears into the front of the store and I carefully place Skittles and chocolate gold coins on top of the cake, positioning the chocolate dome over the top of it.

In the corner of my vision, a head pops around the corner with a mop of messy hair and warm caramel eyes as warm and inviting as his dad’s green ones.

“Miss Ava?”

“Come on in, Toby.” I wave him over, stepping away to wash my hands.

“These cakes look awesome.” He eyes the trays lined with piñata cakes. The only baked good I’ve managed to make today.

“Thank you. Would you like one?” I ask, grabbing one from the tray and placing it on a plate.

“Ya, thanks.” His backpack is still swung over his shoulder.

“Did you just get back from school?” I hand him the small hammer.

“Yeah.”

“You can take the cake over to your dad’s work if you’d like.”

He shakes his head. “Are you coming to my game this weekend?”

My shoulders sag. I forgot about his championship game I said I’d go to. The thought of sitting on bleachers with Dane only a few feet away weighs in my stomach like an anchor.

“Of course. What time is it?” I plaster a fake smile on my face.

“It’s at noon.”

“Okay, I’ll be there.”

His smile only grows and I can suck it up with Dane for one afternoon for Toby's sake.

"Now, smash that cake," I say.

He grabs the hammer and his teeth bite down on his bottom lip. The first time he doesn't crack the chocolate so he goes at it a little harder the second time and it cracks open with small baseball bubble gum spread out over top of the cake.

"Whoa!" he picks one up and pops it in his mouth. "Thanks, Miss Ava." He climbs down from the stool, rushes over and hugs me.

My hand lands on his back. Toby doesn't show me a ton of attention, but this hug feels so good, I'm not ready to let him go yet.

"Anytime. Maybe we can make one together some time."

He steps back, his eyes wide. "Really? Even with my dad being a jackass?"

"Toby," I sigh, crouching down to get eye level with him. "Where did you hear that?"

"My grandpa. He said my dad's being a jackass because he let you go."

I do my damndest to suppress the smile trying to curve my lips.

"Well, sometimes people just don't work out. It's not your dad's fault and it's not mine. We just aren't a good fit."

"But you'll let me bake with you still?" His eyes hold so much hope that even if I didn't intend to, I'd say yes anyway.

"You are welcome here anytime you want." This time I initiate the hug and it might be my imagination but his arms are a little tighter around me.

It's right now that I realize, I didn't just fall for Dane, I fell for Toby, too, and what was left of my diseased heart shrivels up and dies.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Six

DANE

“MISS AVA IS HERE!” Toby runs out of the dugout, right into her arms.

Since when did those two get that close?

The clipboard is limp in my hands as she hugs him tight and then she kisses the top of his head. Toby smiles and runs back in the dug out while Ava takes a seat on the bleachers with a pink box in her hands, not even sparing me a glance.

“Dad, did you say hi to Miss Ava?” Toby says, grabbing my hand, beginning to pull me out of the dugout.

“Toby, I have to get the team ready.”

“Come on Dad, she made us something. I saw the pink box.”

Before I know it, I’m standing in front of her. The girl I’ve fallen asleep dreaming about and woken up with a hard-on for since the last time I saw her.

“Oh, hey Dane.” She sounds surprised and not at all affected as I am by being this near to her.

“Hey, thanks for coming.” I roll back on my heels. Toby’s head looking from her to me and back to her like he’s expecting something.

“What’s in the box?” Toby breaks the uncomfortable silence.

“Cookies. Baseball ones.” She opens the box, granting him a smile that used to make my chest feel light when she gave it to me.

Inside the box are baseball cookies for each boy with his name and number.

“Oh, awesome!” Toby reaches in, but Ava closes the lid before he can

grab his.

“For after. A congratulations on the win.” She winks at him.

“We haven’t won. The Cardinals are a tough team. They have the home run hitter.”

“Oh, I don’t believe they’re better than you and the Giants.”

She crosses her legs and I notice her outfit for the first time. She’s in jeans and a hoodie and somehow looks as good as when she’d strut around in her bra and underwear in front of me.

“Well, we better get to warming up.” I place my hand on Toby’s shoulder, pulling him to my side. “Thanks for coming.”

Just when I’m about to walk away, Charlie climbs the bleachers and takes a seat next to Ava.

“Hey, Toby, you’re gonna to rock this game. Point to the fence before you bat.” She laughs and I shake my head.

“Way to make him look cocky and arrogant,” I remark.

She lifts the box. “Like father like son, right? Maybe he’ll die alone like his father will, too.”

Fucking A. Seriously, she’s going to hammer this shit she’s been spouting all week in front of Ava now?

Charlie leans over and looks in the box. “Baseball cookies. Does this mean we can go back to the Eat Me cookies instead of the broken heart ones?”

Ava scoffs. “Charlie.” She glances at me and her face flushes that beautiful pink color it would when I’d kiss her sometimes.

Charlie looks up to me. “Oh, sorry.” Although her apology sounds genuine, I can tell Ava is mortified.

Not sure why? This is Climax Cove and things get around this town. I’ve known about her piñata smash cakes, two halves of a heart cookies, and how she’s purposely declared the week, red free, using black icing instead.

I get it, I hurt her but I wouldn’t change what happened between us. One thing Garrett got right is that I enjoyed my time with her more than any other girl. I regret the hurt she’s going through now, but it’s just better this way. Eventually, things won’t be so awkward.

“Well, we better get going.” I place my hand on top of Toby’s hat and he runs off into the dugout.

“Go, Giants!” Charlie pumps her fist in the air. “FYI, I’m only cheering on Toby and his teammates. Not you.”

I can't believe I take this much shit from my employee. If her brother and I weren't friends I might actually be able to fire her.

Ava pulls out her phone, burying her head in it.

"Good to know. Obviously, you're forgetting who signs your paychecks." I hide in the dugout, watching the rest of my friends sit down on the bleachers next to Ava.

The umpire calls me out to home plate, I shake hands with the Cardinals coach and when I walk back to the dugout, I can't help but let my gaze wander over in the direction of Ava. It's all I can do to keep walking forward because there she sits with my mom right next to her.

The game is over two hours later with a win for us, thanks to Toby's catch at shortstop and getting our third out in the game.

All the players gather their things and grab a cookie from Ava who is handing them out before they scurry off to their moms and dads.

"Thanks again for the cookies," I say to Ava.

"Here." She hands me a cookie with Coach on it.

"Thank you." My eyes instinctively close when I take the first bite. The woman has talents that extend far outside the bedroom.

"You're welcome. Congratulations." She smashes the box and then disposes of it in the recycling bin, and grabs her purse from the bleachers where all of what I guess are now *our* friends sit.

I never realized how interconnected our lives are until I see Cat swinging Lily around in circles, Charlie talking to Sydney and Marcus and Garrett shooting the shit. My parents stand, my dad talking to a couple of the other grandparents at the game.

"Dane," my mom approaches, swinging her arm through mine. "How come I never met Ava? She's wonderful." She thinks she's whispering, but based on the fact that Ava's turned around and that pink flush to the apple of her cheeks, she heard.

"She is," I agree, watching the pink turn full out red.

"Then how come you've never said anything?"

Are my mom and I close? Yeah. But she knows nothing about my female companionship and I think I'll keep it that way.

“Celebration at the bar!” my dad yells and the kids go crazy.

“Dad?”

I have nothing set up for a group this big.

“This is what’s great about owning your own place.” He clasps me on the shoulder. “Why did you put that arcade in for anyway?”

He walks past me to his car. My mom gives my forearm a tight squeeze and knowing eye and then follows my dad.

“I’m going with grandma,” Toby screams and runs after my mom. I wait by my car to see her wrap her arm around his shoulders, leading him to the car.

My eyes search the parking lot, and all that’s left of Ava are her taillights driving away.

Suddenly, alone doesn’t feel as good as I thought.

Later that night, I’m in the office going over orders and shipments when a knock sounds on my door.

“Come in.”

My dad steps in and the hope that had my heart beating extra fast falters seeing that it’s not her.

I’m surprised he knocked. Usually he barges in with a comment about how it was his office first.

“Mind if we talk?”

“Are you asking me permission?”

“Cut the bullshit.” He closes the door and sits down across from me.

“I thought you and mom left.”

“Your mom and Toby are watching some Galaxy movie, so I came back when I saw you weren’t home yet.” He leans back in his chair, his ankle resting comfortably on his knee.

Some say I’m the younger version of my dad. He’s tall and although his daily workouts have been exchanged with scenic walks, he’s fit and I wouldn’t want to run into him in a dark alley.

I remain silent because I’m still baffled by him initiating conversation and the fact that he didn’t start it by questioning a decision I’ve made with the bar.

“I’ve been hard on you,” he pauses for a second, seeming to collect his thoughts before he continues. “Your mom knocked me on the forehead today and I realized that maybe I’ve failed you in a way.”

“Failed?” I ask, a little stunned to hear these words coming from my dad’s mouth.

“Made you question yourself and what you can handle.” He diverts his gaze from mine.

“I don’t think I lack in self-confidence,” I say in the cocky way I’m accustomed to.

He chuckles. “Not to others, no. But I think maybe when you’re alone you do.”

I say nothing. Mother’s intuition is never wrong.

“Listen. I’m not into this heart to heart, psychoanalyze every little thing bullshit. I just want you to know, I appreciate you taking over the bar, keeping it in the family. And though you’ve made some questionable decisions—”

“Gee, thanks, Dad.”

His gaze meets mine. “You’ve made good ones too. Not only with the bar, but with Toby. You could have run off like Sara.”

“You know I love Climax Cove.”

He nods. “I saw Sara in town. Did she not want to see us?” There’s a sadness to his voice I haven’t heard in years. In general, we don’t talk about my AWOL sister, ever.

My chest tightens. I had wanted her in and out as fast as possible.

“We were just taking care of some business.”

“The adoption? She signed the papers?” I can see the agony my sister’s choice of lifestyle has had on my father. It’s probably given him the majority of his gray hair.

“She did.”

He nods his head a few times slowly, his eyes on the floor and his mind far, far away.

“Well, that’s done then.”

My dad’s never been one to talk about his feelings.

“Last thing. You’re a good man, Dane, and I’m proud to be your father. I’m not sure why you can’t find a woman to settle down with. Why you insist on not giving Toby a mother figure in his life, but your mom says you think you’re not good enough. So, I came here to tell you, that you are. Good

enough.”

“Thanks, Dad.” It’s strange. I’ve longed to hear my dad say something along these lines most of my adult life, but now that he is I find I have a hard time accepting it.

“Well, your mom likes the cupcake girl. She thinks she’s the one.”

“She had one conversation with her,” I deadpan.

My dad chuckles again. “Son, you of all people know your mother. She’s been seeing you and her a lot more than you think.”

God, my parents’ house is pretty close to mine, I can only hope to hell my mom didn’t see Ava between my legs on the deck.

He knocks on my desk. “I’ll try to be more encouraging with what you’ve done here. It’s hard to see everything you built change with the times. Reminds you you’re getting old. Because whether you like it or not, Dane, time doesn’t slow down. Life will just pass you by if you let it.” He smiles and then he’s out the door before I can even respond.

My dad leaves the door open on his way out.

“Good night, Mr. Murray,” Charlie says as she passes by my office and flips me the bird. “Good night, jackass. Front end is closed.”

My mind is swirling with everything I said to Ava, everything she said to me, and everything everyone else has been saying since we split.

The spreadsheets are a blur for the next fifteen minutes while I try to process it all, but the roar of a fire truck breaks through the silence, sounding so near it has me sliding my chair out to inspect on what’s going on.

I figure it has to be some drill the fire department was conducting, or maybe some false alarm, but when I get out to the bar area and look out my front window, the one truck Climax Cove owns is parked outside my place, and firefighters are busting down the door of the Mad Batter.

My heart’s never felt squeezed so tight. I’m surprised it didn’t pop out of my chest.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Seven

AVA

I WAS HAPPILY ENJOYING my sulk fest in my bed with a bag of potato chips when I heard the sirens. In the months I've lived here full-time, I'm not sure I've ever heard them before.

My phone vibrates a second later and I glance over to see my dad's name on the screen. Again. Figuring I can't continue to avoid him any longer I slide my thumb over the screen, propping the phone in the crook of my neck continuing to move my hand from the bag of chips to my mouth.

"Where are you?" His voice is panicked.

"In bed."

"Thank goodness. Ava, I need you to come down to the bakery."

I sit up. "Why?"

Rubbing the remnants of salt and vinegar on my yoga pants, I stand up to look out the window to see if I can see anything in the downtown area, but except for the red lights in the dark night sky, nothing.

"Just please. I'll meet you there."

"Dad, is this because of the sirens?"

A long stream of breath is the only thing I hear through the line. "All I know is Hank from Nail Me called and said he saw smoke coming out of the building, but no flames."

"What? I gotta go."

"Av—"

I click my phone off, and I'm running down the stairs when Charlie walks through the front door.

"Where are you going?" she asks.

I whiz by her right out the front door, stopping briefly to throw on my chucks.

By the time I reach downtown the entire street is filled with people, the windows and door of my bakery shattered. My footsteps slow outside the circle of people, gawking like the rest of them at the scene in front of me.

A warm arm wraps around me and my head falls to their shoulder for the comfort.

“Oh, Ava.” Charlie’s hand rubs up and down my arms. “We’ll fix it.”

I hadn’t even realized she’d followed me in my panic to get here.

Unable to watch my dreams go up in flames in front of my eyes, I bury my head into the crook of her neck. She soothes my cries, but a few minutes go by and her body tenses, all movement stopping.

“What is he doing?” she murmurs.

“Did you find her?” Dane’s voice rings through the noise of the spectators and my head lifts to find him covered in soot panic over every one of his features as he yells in a firefighter’s face.

“No. I don’t think she’s in there.”

“Did you check the storage room? She’s here night and day.” He moves to run back into the building.

“Dane!” Charlie screams and Dane looks over, relief immediately washing over his face.

He runs over, causing everyone’s eyes to follow his movements.

“Thank God.” He pulls me into his chest, his hand weaved in the strands of my hair pressing me to him. “I thought you were in there.”

I shake my head the little bit I can.

“Dane?” Charlie asks and neither one of them say anything, but I feel the shake of his head. “Did you go in?”

“I went in to find her.” He steps back, his two hands wrapping around my upper arms, inspecting me as though he just saved me from the building. “You okay?”

I step back, his hands falling off me. “I’m fine.” Walking by him, I weave through the crowd of people to the fire truck, but I’m stopped at the yellow caution tape. I dip under and try to put the fact that all the teacups and pots are now black, out of my mind.

“Excuse me,” I ask the man directing the other firefighters.

He stares down at me. “You shouldn’t be here. It’s dangerous.”

“That’s my shop.”

“I know.” His gray beard says he probably knows everyone and everything that happens in this town. “I’m glad to see you weren’t in there.”

“What’s the cause of the fire?” I turn to see Dane right behind me.

“Dane. I already told you to get out of here,” the firefighter snaps.

“Jim, you know I’m not going anywhere.”

Jim exhales a long and annoyed breath, his eyes never leaving Dane’s until they slowly turn toward me.

“We’ll have a full report in the morning. From the amount of smoke, you need to wait until the morning to go in. We’ll board up the windows for you, and lock it up once we make sure it’s out.”

“Jim?”

Dane’s hands land on my shoulders, squeezing them, standing so close his strong chest is supporting me.

Jim rolls his eyes. “If I had to guess I’d say it’s electrical.”

Dane’s hands leave my shoulders and I hear his groan. “Did you not call an electrician?” he asks me.

“Can I give you my phone number?” I ask Jim, purposely ignoring Dane. I’m not even sure why he’s here. He made himself pretty clear, and the way he’s acting right now screams boyfriend.

“That would be helpful.” He takes out his clipboard and clicks his pen. “Go ahead.”

I ramble off my phone number and then take a look at the store, not ready to leave.

“Come into the bar,” Dane urges, his arm wrapping around my shoulders again.

“No thank you,” I mumble, making my way to Charlie who’s sitting on the curb outside the bar.

She stands when I approach, her gaze moving between me and Dane.

I sit down next to her and watch the firemen go in and out of the bakery. The crowd slowly departs, all the local town folks stopping by our threesome to convey their sorrow for my situation.

“Ava,” my dad says, crouching down in front of me. “You’re okay.”

I nod, my eyes unwilling to leave the scene in front of me.

“They think it was electrical,” Dane adds in his two cents from next to me.

“I knew we should have gotten that building better inspected.” He turns around to watch the firefighters like the rest of us.

“Come in and I’ll make you a drink,” Dane says next to me, his hand landing on my knee.

I slide my leg over to shake it off.

“I need to talk to you,” he murmurs in my ear.

I shake my head.

“I’m going to talk to Jim and see what else I can find out,” my dad says to no one in particular and heads in the direction of the fire truck.

“I thought I lost you,” Dane whispers, or at least must think he whispered, but Charlie takes her cue and stands up, brushing her ass off.

“I’m going to join your dad.”

Charlie walks away, and Dane takes me by my shoulders forcing me to look at him.

“I’m sorry, Ava.”

“Thanks. Like everything else in my life, nothing goes as planned, but I’ll get through this. Just might take awhile...” Another loud bang inside has me turning my head.

Dane’s hand cups my cheek and he directs my head back in his direction.

“No, Ava, I’m sorry for being a jackass.” His eyes are tender and overflowing with sorrow. But I’d have the same reaction if his bar were currently burning to the ground.

“Okay.” I begin to rotate my neck back around to face the building, but his hand pressures my head to stay in place.

“I want another chance. When I thought you were in there...I couldn’t breathe. I ran in before the firefighters, searching every space for you. When I didn’t find you, I panicked. My heart sank to the pit of my stomach, and I swore to myself if I found you, I’d never let you go.” He grabs me and pulls my limp body into his.

I don’t reciprocate the hug. Instead, I lay unmoving in his arms, trying to process why he feels as though now is the time to tell me this.

I’m shoved back upright and he’s looking at me like he’s expecting an answer to his declaration.

“What do you want me to say?”

“I don’t know. Accept my apology.”

A laugh escapes before I can quiet myself. “Oh, you’re serious.” I stand up, brushing the dirt off my ass. “Always so selfish, Dane. You thought I was dead so now you want me?” I stare down at him. “I’m not a shelter dog, Dane, I’m not going to wag my tail and jump in your lap because you rubbed

my belly a couple of times.”

I walk toward my dad and the fire chief. Charlie glances between me and the curb where I can only hope Dane has disappeared from.

“Ava!” His deep voice rings in the night air, but I keep walking. “Mad Batter!” he yells again and this time Jim, my dad, Charlie, along with all the Climax Cove volunteer firemen are staring in his direction. I turn on my heels, ready to give him the evil eye with the hopes he disappears. “I *will* convince you that you’re meant to be with me.”

I roll my eyes turning around.

“Seven days from now you’ll be in my arms.”

“Dane.” Charlie’s tone is one of warning. “Now isn’t the time.”

“Even so, it’s a promise I intend to keep.” His voice seems to get louder as he continues, so I put my hand up in the air, giving him a wave to say *whatever, just go away*.

My dad’s ears perk up like a Doberman and he sets his sights on Dane. “He hurt you?” he asks me, bringing his gaze back around to me.

“No.”

With the smoke dying down, most spectators have left, leaving the four of us the only people other than the fire department.

“He did.” He steps off the curb to the street, headed toward Dane.

“Whoa, Vic, settle down,” Dane says.

Following my dad’s path, Dane holds up his arms in the air and the fear in his eyes would normally make me laugh, and a small part of me is saying ‘go daddy, kick his ass.’

“I told you someone was going to get hurt and it was my little girl.” My dad’s finger is already pointed and ready to poke Dane’s chest.

Now, Dane is still taller and overall bigger than my dad, but that Brazilian side of his temper is no joke.

“I just confessed to her how much I need her.”

“Ohhhhh,” Charlie coos next to me. She might as well wear a Team Dane pin on her shirt.

My dad’s footsteps stop and he turns to me, looking to me to see if this statement is true.

“I guess once he thinks I’m dead, it makes him realize what he passed on.” I cross my arms over my chest.

Dane ignores my dad and steps down off the curb on his side, his gaze locking with mine.

“I love you, Ava Pearson. Yes, it took me until that fire to realize how stupid I was, but I know now. I always was a slow learner.”

His footsteps are closing the distance between us and my heart is cracking open, begging me to let him nestle into that empty spot designated for him. Then the devil lands on my right shoulder and I’m reminded of the heartache he’s put me through. The fact that he didn’t care about us until he thought he could never have us again.

“Fear is ruling your emotions right now, Dane. Tomorrow when you wake up and realize, I’m here and I’m fine, you’ll go back to only needing one thing from me and that one thing is just a tiny piece of what I have to offer the man in my life.”

“You’re wrong.”

He steps up, and we’re practically chest-to-chest.

“Then you’ll have to prove it to me.” I grab his wrist and turn his watch to both of us. “Only time will tell.”

I walk over to Charlie who wraps her arm around my shoulders, sheltering me from him. He’s finally said the words I’ve longed to hear from him, but with everything going on I can’t even deal with it right now.

Either that, or it’s too little, too late.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Eight

AVA

Day One

I STAYED until two in the morning. Jim allowed me to walk through quickly after he'd done his investigation with him at my side and a helmet on my head. The damage isn't extensive, mostly just smoke damage, but enough that I'll be closed for awhile.

With a cup of coffee from Steaming Hotties and a baseball cap on my head, I head to the bakery to meet the insurance guy before lunch. I had to call Norma, the building owner last night. She was none too pleased to hear about the fire. Somehow, I managed not to point fingers that maybe she should have looked into the electrical panel I was asking about last month.

Marcus' truck, Garrett's truck, and Dane's Mustang are all parked outside the bakery, the three of them not in sight. I glance over to Happy Daze, seeing it dark and locked up still.

My foot leaves the curb to cross the street and echoes of hammering and sawing ring in the early morning street. Hank from Nail Me is walking down the street with a flatbed of lumber and drywall.

No. No. No.

By the time I reach the door, I find a crew of six people inside, three of whom are the men who own the vehicles parked out front, all hard at work inside.

"Dane!" I yell.

He walks out from the storage room area, his white shirt sticking to his skin and his pants swung low with his tool belt hanging off his hips.

I hate to admit it but that look really works for him.

“Good morning. I had made you some coffee, but better bet on Steaming Hotties.” He winks and leans back on the counter that’s still intact.

“What are you doing? The insurance guy is on his way.”

“Tom was already here. Took care of that and he gave me the okay to get working. Time is money and we need to get you reopened.”

I step closer. “I needed to get estimates and find out who I can afford.”

“Tom said he’ll be by later with a check. And we’re free of charge, so I’m pretty confident that we would’ve won the bid.” He winks and those moss-colored eyes draw me in.

“You aren’t doing this for free.”

He crosses his arms, his biceps bulging as the sleeves of his t-shirt rise, a classic you can’t stop me smirk on his lips. “Just go have some coffee and write down the color of paint you used.” He nods over to the prep table in the kitchen, set up with a cup of coffee, a muffin, and a paint wheel.

“You think this is going to win me over somehow?” I cross my own arms and jut out my hip.

He steps closer, his voice lowering into that deep timber that sends shivers up my spine. “It’s only day one. I still have six more, remember?”

Without another word, he turns on his heels and heads back to work.

Day Two

The usual crew is at the shop. Marcus, Garrett, some guys from Garrett’s crew, but today Dane’s Mustang is missing. As much as I want to be unaffected by the man and anything he does, it hitches when I notice that he’s not here today.

With the front windows on order, they’re concentrating most of their efforts in the storage room where all my supplies and ingredients were destroyed.

I sit at the prep table, looking over my list of everything I need to do in order to get the store up and running again when Dane walks in from the back room.

“Good morning. I didn’t hear you.” He sits on the stool across from me.

Again, with the sweat soaked shirt. Add on the backward baseball hat and

I'm busy convincing myself not to crawl over this table like a stripper and straddle him.

"Morning. I didn't see your car."

The usual smirk arises, his fingers tapping on the table. "Did you see the black pick-up truck?"

I nod, my heart skipping a beat for what day two in the win-over-Ava-game might bring.

"It's mine. I traded in the 'stang. I'm not up to pick-up level yet, but hey, if you want more kids, a car seat could fit next to Toby in the back so I figure we have a least a couple years with this one." His lips curl up further, and eventually he loses the battle, chuckling.

I try and keep the smile from spreading across my face. "What if I had triplets?"

"Then we'll get a Suburban." He points to himself. "See, not even a stutter."

I nod. "Good to know."

"Food for thought, right? Kids and marriage don't scare me, as long as you're part of the equation."

He slides the stool out and disappears back into the storage room.

Day Three

My front door shuts behind me, but my feet don't make the daily trek to Mad Batter because Dane is parked in my building's lot, leaning back on the front of his truck.

He pushes off and walks toward me, a coffee from Steaming Hotties in his hands.

I tentatively take it from him.

He circles around and holds out his arm for me to take like he's a debonair gentleman escorting me into a ball. "Let's go shopping."

"What?" I loop my arm through his.

"Shopping. You need some things so we're going to take a day trip."

"What day is this again?" I ask, falling into step with him.

"Day three. Why? Have I already convinced you that I'm not acting out of fear?" His footsteps stop and he looks down at me.

“I’m just curious, how long you’ll be able to keep this up for.”

He leans closer, opening the passenger side door for me. “Until you accept my apology.”

“I already accepted your apology.” I slide into the front seat of his new vehicle.

He shakes his head. “Not really. Not if you’re not willing to take me back.”

He shuts the door, circles around the front of the vehicle and hops in next to me.

“I promise, no griping, no arguing, and no whining. I will willingly carry things, haul things, and help with decision making all day.” He holds out his pinky. “Pinky swear.”

My pinky clasps onto his and the butterflies in my stomach start flapping their wings frantically at his touch.

“We’ll see.”

“You can’t break me, Ava Pearson.”

He was right, the entire day he was at my side, and by the time we headed back to Climax Cove, the truck bed was full of new supplies for the bakery.

Day Four

The bakery is coming along and since I missed yesterday, I’m eager to see how far the crew has come on the rebuild. I still need to do a big meal or something to thank all these people for helping me without any pay or complaints.

I’m about to cross the street when Dane approaches and puts his arm over my shoulder. I’d be lying if I said we hadn’t touched during our day trip yesterday. No smooching or hand holding, but our limbs brushed occasionally and every time they did, I thought I’d have to call the fire department to hose me down.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

He continues to lead me away from the bakery and right to the doors of his bar.

“A few customers have been jonesing for your cupcakes.”

We walk through the bar to the back kitchen. On the counter rests flour,

sugar, and an array of baking ingredients.

“This is yours for the day. I’ve closed the grill until dinner.” He winks and then turns on his heels, but peeks his head back into the room. “Of course, if you feel obliged to pay me back, I’ll gladly take payment in peanut butter and chocolate cupcakes.”

He chuckles and I hear the door shut behind him, leaving me alone in the bar.

A few minutes later Charlie comes in and pulls up a stool from the corner beside me.

“Still playing that hard to get role, huh?” she asks.

“I’m not playing anything.”

I look around for an apron, finding a section on the back wall where I see some.

I pick one up and put it over my head.

Charlie starts laughing and shaking her head.

“What?”

She points to the apron and my eyes venture down. On the front it reads, ‘I <3 Dane’ under it.

“He’s pulling out all the stops.” She shakes her head. “If I were you, I’d keep the whole chase-me thing up to see what else he’ll come up with.”

She vanishes into the bar and I’m left alone in a foreign kitchen with my thoughts about Dane. I’m not purposely playing a game of cat and mouse with him, but putting my heart out there in case he really isn’t in this is hard. What if he gets scared and changes his mind?

It’s in his kitchen that I realize why Dane gave me a space to bake. It wasn’t because the town wanted my cupcakes, it’s because my best thinking happens when I’m mixing and baking and creating. One thing is clear, he’s weaseling his way back in and I now know I want nothing more than for him to prove me wrong.

Day Five

I roll over and when I go to check the time I see that I have a bunch of notifications on Instagram.

That’s weird.

I open the app and that's when I see that Dane has tagged me in roughly twenty pictures of the two of us from our shopping excursion the other day. His profile picture is of me at his house staring out at the ocean. I'm not even sure when he took it, but I clearly didn't know he was capturing the moment.

The hashtag with the picture is #needmorenightslikethis.

I go to his photos and see he's erased any pictures of him with other women. I'm the only female on his page besides his mother and one of Charlie flipping him off.

He's definitely in it to win it.

Day Six

I haven't even had breakfast when there's a knock on my door. Charlie went for a run this morning and Cat is at Marcus' of course, so I open the door, finding Toby in pants and a t-shirt.

"I'm rafting the class three today." He jumps into my house and I spot Dane just stepping out of his truck.

"Oh, that's great!"

"Get your stuff." He looks around my apartment. "This is where you live?"

"Yeah, what do you think?"

"It's small." His gaze continues to roam around.

"Well, Miss Cat isn't here a lot, so it's just Charlie and I most of the time."

I'm still holding the door open when Dane approaches.

He's in shorts and a hoodie with a t-shirt underneath, his sunglasses resting on top of his head.

"Did you convince her?" he asks Toby.

"You're letting him raft another class three, huh?"

"I promised. And I never break a promise." He winks, walks in, and sits on my couch.

Toby takes the spot next to him, the two of them propping their feet on my coffee table.

"Has no one taught you any manners? I didn't ask you to come in, nor is it ever okay to put your feet on someone's table."

I shut the door and smack both their feet. They plop down on the floor.

“See, that’s why we need a woman in our life,” Toby says.

“You’ve upped your game to include Toby?” I cross my arms over my chest and cock a hip out to the side.

He shrugs and links his fingers behind his head. “Hey, all’s fair in love and war, right?” He pauses for a second, his gaze roaming up and down my body taking in my yoga pants and tight tank top. “Go get dressed.”

“Both of you need to say please.”

“Please,” they each say simultaneously in such sweet voices.

“I can’t be gone all day.”

“Yay! Thanks, Miss Ava.” Toby jumps up from the couch.

A half hour later, we’re at the rafting place and surprise surprise—they have reservations for three. Once our lifejackets are on and we’re about to get in the raft, Dane pulls his camera out and positions it like he’s about to take a selfie.

“Come on,” he calls us over and Toby and I huddle together with him while he snaps the picture.

A second later, my phone vibrates and I pull it out, looking through the plastic bag to find another Instagram notification.

Dane’s posted the picture he just took. Reading the caption #familyday makes my heart warm and go pitter-patter.

Day Seven (actually night of day six)

“Do you mind if we stop at the bar really quick?” Dane asks after we spent majority of the day on the rapids.

Toby’s asleep in the back of the truck after nailing the class three rafting again.

“Sure.”

When we arrive, every parking spot is taken, leaving Dane to go to the back and park in the alley where the deliveries usually come through. He stops the truck and pulls out the keys, glancing back to Toby who’s now steadily breathing.

Turning in his seat, he reaches for my hand and for the first time since our argument, I don’t pull away.

“Ava, tonight marks the end of day six. I know I promised I’d win you back in seven days, but I only have one more thing up my sleeve. I thought long and hard about what you said the night of the fire. Was I acting out of fear? Probably.”

My heart sinks.

“But if I didn’t love you, I’d have nothing to fear. I can’t help but want to protect the ones I love.”

My sinking heart has been tossed a life raft and wants desperately to latch on to it.

“I realized that most my life, I’ve lived in fear without knowing it. When I told you I couldn’t give you what you wanted, *that* was out of fear...fear of not being good enough, fear of hurting you, fear of hurting Toby, fear of me being hurt. Even without the fire happening, I’d have realized how much I want to take a chance with you to develop something more than what we had. Truth is, we weren’t friends-with-benefits, we *were* boyfriend and girlfriend. If you want more time, I’ll wait because I was living my life on a carousel, just going round and round. Our life together might be more like a roller coaster, but I want you next to me on it. Otherwise the ride isn’t going to be any fun.”

He leans forward and presses a kiss on my cheek and I can’t deny that it feels so right to have his lips on me again.

“I promise to never hurt you again.”

He opens the truck door, tucking his keys in his pocket.

“This is my last attempt to win you over.”

I could probably tell him he’s already won me over, but making him suffer a couple extra minutes until I see what he has planned inside doesn’t seem like that bad of an idea.

He nudges Toby awake, carrying him in his arms as we walk through the back door.

I hear Charlie over a microphone and quirk my eyebrows to Dane who only wears that smile I’ve wanted to kiss off him for the past few days.

He stops us at the opening of the hallway into the bar. Everyone from town is sitting around, eating the cupcakes I made yesterday. There’s a giant banner on the window that says, ‘Save the Mad Batter’.

Charlie spots us and smiles, placing the microphone down and coming toward us. “Welcome.”

“What is this?” I ask.

Then Cat grabs the microphone. “Okay, the first auction is a two-night stay at one of Garrett Shaw’s log cabins. Let’s start the bidding at one hundred.”

A bunch of hands rise in the air.

“Oh, hold on.” Charlie’s hand touches my arm.

“You going for it?” Dane asks, and Charlie nods, her hand up in the air.

“One thousand dollars,” she says.

The room gasps, everyone looking over their shoulders at her. Most of the crowd is smiling, but I can’t help but zoom in on the one face that is not. Garrett’s.

Cat slams down the gavel before anyone can up the bid. “Sold to the lovely Charlotte Rose for one thousand dollars.” Cat smiles from ear to ear.

Garrett slides by the table and Cat, his footsteps heavy on the floor as he makes his way over to Charlie. Without a word, he grabs her elbow and escorts her down the hallway.

“Settle, Garrett,” Dane says after them, but before either of us can see what’s happening, Cat’s announcing our presence.

“Our guest of honor has arrived!” All eyes are on us.

“What is this?” I ask Dane a second time.

“It’s a fundraiser. For you.” He knocks his free shoulder with mine since somehow Toby’s still asleep on his other shoulder.

“You did this?” Tears well up in my eyes.

He nods, shifting Toby’s weight in his arms.

“Here.” His dad comes and takes Toby from Dane and sits back down.

“Okay, they’re busy,” Cat says over the mic. “Let’s do our second auction. A moonlight cruise on a yacht from Marcus Kent. Let’s start the bidding at one hundred.” Again, hands go up in the air and as the people are busy bidding, I’m busy looking at my unlikely hero.

“So, did this seal the deal?” Dane asks, stepping closer to me.

“As long as we can make one thing clear.”

“What’s that?” he asks with a smirk.

“We might be monogamous, but the bedroom is always more like thirty-one flavors.”

“You mean you don’t want me to lose my dirty mouth?”

I shake my head. “No, I love my dirty talker. But you can’t lose the ‘you’re beautiful’ and ‘I love you’s’ either. Well, what do you say?”

“I promise to mix it up.” He holds his pinky out. “Pinky swear.”

I clasp my pinky with his, pulling him forward until we're chest-to-chest and I'm once again in his arms.

“Now kiss me.”

Epilogue

DANE

Two Years Later

TALK about using all my connections to pull this off.

It all goes to show how awesome Climax Cove and their residents are.

This has been a year in the making, considering the shrubs were planted last spring to grow into a maze this summer. A town silently pushed toward an Alice in Wonderland theme festival night without thinking twice about it. A girlfriend I somehow managed to keep oblivious.

“Can we go through the maze?” Toby asks next to me.

Do you know how hard it is to get a ten-year-old boy to sound excited to go through an Alice In Wonderland maze? For future reference, it takes a twenty-dollar bill and a new video game.

“You want to go?” Ava looks down skeptically at him.

Out of all the hoops I went through to get her to believe this act, I should’ve known this is the part she’d question.

“I think he’s throwing you a bone,” I lean close, whisper in her ear, and kiss her neck.

The distraction works. She places her arm around Toby, who’s catching up to her height wise and the two of them enter through the giant red heart balloon archway.

I follow behind, pretending to be checking the score of the Giants game when in fact, I’m busy texting Cat and Charlie to make sure everything is a

go once we get through this maze.

“Who did the maze?” Ava asks.

Toby’s now away from Ava since a few his friends followed us in.

So much for his video game, the kid can play last year’s Madden now.

I link my hand with Ava’s. “I don’t know. Want to find a spot to make-out?” My fingers tighten around hers, and she looks at me and smiles.

“I wouldn’t want to embarrass Toby.” Her words say one thing, but the spark of lust in her eyes says another.

If it were any other day, any other time, I’d corner her between two bushes and lick her own perfectly manicured bush. But today is about so much more than that.

“This way.” I purposely go a different way from Toby and his friends.

“A dead end?” Her hand slides down my front until she cups my package.

“I actually hadn’t planned that, but now...” Her thumb runs up and down my now bulging shaft. Reluctantly I reach down and stop her hand from moving. “Damn, that feels good, but let’s get out of here and then I can take you home. Remember, Toby is sleeping over at Carter’s tonight.”

I pull her into my chest, and she nuzzles into it like she always does. The fruity smell of her shampoo never fails to calm me.

“Let’s go.”

My hand glides down her arm until her hand is tucked in mine once more.

“What’s the rush?” Her footsteps falter, but she stays in step, eventually coming to my side.

“Just eager to have you in our bed.”

“I do like the sound of that.”

We navigate the maze and I allow her to take a wrong turn here and there since I practically mapped the whole thing out so that where we end up is right on the water. What seems like a lifetime later and with my heart pounding in my chest, we’re one turn away from the exit.

She takes the lead and I watch her round the corner.

“Oh, a tea party!” She glances back to me and then forward again. “Come on.”

If everything is on cue, Lily should be approaching her in a costume.

“Hey, Lily,” she says, bending down and grabbing the little girl’s hands.

Ava glances back to me and nods for me to follow.

I round the corner she did, emerging to see that Cat and Charlie did a bang-up job. Tables are filled with guests. They’ve covered the cement

walkway with black and white checkered flooring. The tablecloths are all different colors paired with an array of colored chairs and huge fake flowers hung all around.

I hang back, letting Ava take in the moment, soak up her surroundings and say her hellos. After awhile she turns back my way and holds a hand out for me to join her. I don't think she's clued into what this is all about yet.

Toby intercedes like he's supposed to and escorts her to a chair in the middle of the room. A big cushy chair you'd see a queen sit in.

Her gaze roams over to me and I see it then. The moment she realizes what this is. The lottery-winning smile on her face tells me I'm not about to make a fool of myself.

All our friends and family who are in on this moment—whether they've known for a long time or just found out when they arrived this evening—circle behind around us.

“Ava.” I clench and open my fists a few times to work out the nerves I can't seem to shake.

“Yes?” She bites her lip, waiting for me to pull out the box. Waiting for the magic four words.

“I could've taken you to a Giants game and flashed it on the jumbotron. I could've asked you while we watched the sunset on the dock the other night. There are a lot of ways I thought about proposing to you, but the fact that you love Alice in Wonderland isn't the reason why I chose this way. There have been perfect moments this past year where I could've asked you and it would have been wonderful. Never in my life did I think I'd be patient enough to wait and make sure you had the perfect proposal, but I did because that's what you deserve. Two years ago, I got lost in your wonderland and the last thing I want is a map to find my way out.” I fall to my knee and her hands move to her lips immediately as she sucks in a breath.

“Will you do me a favor and tolerate me for another fifty or so years?”

She slides off the chair and onto her knees until we're chest to chest. “Yes,” she whispers, her arms wrapping around my neck. But I stop her, holding her left ring finger until I can slip on the ring I got her.

She smashes into my body until I lose my balance and fall to the ground. Sprinkling kisses all over my face, she quickly looks down at me, worry teasing her brow.

“Is this because you love my cupcakes?”

“Well...”

She shakes her head. “Peanut butter and chocolate cupcakes everyday for the rest of your life?”

“You know better than that. I need variety so mix that up with some vanilla, salted caramel, and unicorn rainbow ones and we’re good.”

She giggles and sits up, pulling me up by my hand. “Deal.”

“I love you,” I say to her, bending down to kiss her lips.

“Not nearly as much as I love you.”

I’ll let her go on thinking that, but the truth is that Ava fills my life up in a way I didn’t think was possible. I was lost before she came around. I just didn’t know it until she found me.



Check out the rest of the Single Dads Club series today!

[CLICK HERE](#)

Cockamamie Unicorn Ramblings

IN THE BACK of Real Deal's Cockamamie Unicorn Ramblings we told you how Piper tapped into her cougar side, spying on all the hot camp counselors while picking up her kids, which spurred the entire Single Dads Club series. So, let's talk Dane ...

Originally, we had decided that each book in this series would happen during the same time frame. Each girl would be a camp counselor of the single dad's child. Then we realized, well, that would be slightly boring, but we wrote ourselves in a corner with Real Deal. Mostly, because as Rayne writes she detours off route and let's her mind wander. So, suddenly we had Ava coming in the morning disheveled from a night of sex and then we had her go off on Dane because of Toby at the camp. Which meant they had to have slept together twice instead of once which put a crimp in our original plot. I'm sure there will be twists and turns to Sexy Beast due to where we put Charlie and Garrett in Dirty Talker. Surprises await.

Here are some things we really didn't plot out...

Ava opening up a cupcake shop wasn't originally planned until Cat walked in one day and Ava was in the kitchen making cupcakes. Even then we had no

reason why she was baking and trying to perfect recipes. However, once we got a feel more of her character, we purposely did have Charlie bring the cupcakes in and have Dane be obsessed with them.

Originally, Ava and Dane were going to be sneaking around behind everyone's back during the camp season, but after we decided we needed more than another camp counselor and single dad story, we pushed their story up to right after camp got out. Plus, it was nice to see Cat, Marcus, and Lily living out their HEA.

Charlie wasn't planned to have such a big role in Dirty Talker, but she challenged Dane in a way we loved and it wasn't until after we finished writing the book did we realize, how is she always at the bar when she's actually a counselor ... "Hello Corner, we're Rayne and Piper, how do we get ourselves out of here?"

We weren't originally going to tell you all that Garrett's wife passed away, but we gave you that little nugget early because we're nice like that. lol Although, we didn't give you all the details on how and when. We have to keep you wanting more, right?

The same as with Real Deal, without the help of the following people in our corner we wouldn't have released this book.

Letitia from RBA Designs for the amazing covers and for putting up with how nitpicky we can be.

Ellie from Love N Books for line editing. You're new nickname is Speedy Ellie.

Shawna from Behind the Writer for her eagle eye proofreading skills and working through migraines to get this one done for us.

Enticing Journey Book Promotions for their organization and helping us out with all the Single Dads Club Series.

All the bloggers who carved out time to promote us and/or read and review the book.

Michelle New for yet another set of awesome graphics.

Our first readers of a really shitty, unedited copy—Heather and Angela.

Christine from Type A Formatting for such a pretty paperback.

All our early ARC readers, first for wanting to read our stuff early and for posting their reviews.

And of course, all our unicorns. <3 Your enthusiasm for our work knows no bounds. From sharing unicorn paraphernalia in our reader group and shouting from the rooftops to anyone who will listen that they should read our work. The best part of this new endeavor has been having you in our corner!

Can't wait for you to read Garrett's story. Don't forget we have one more couple from Modern Love that you've yet to hear from. Did you do the math? That's right, where are Lennon and Jasper six years later???

xo,

Piper & Rayne

BOOK THREE
HOCKEY HOTTIES

*Faking
It with
#41*



USA TODAY
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

PIPER
RAYNE



This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

© 2021 by Piper Rayne

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever.

Cover Design: Okay Creations

1st Line Editor: Joy Editing

2nd Line Editor: My Brother's Editor

Proofreader: My Brother's Editor

About Faking it with #41

Fake.

Being the heir to Jacobs Enterprises, I've been around fake people my entire life. I promised myself a long time ago that I wouldn't change for anyone. Which is the only reason I'm a professional hockey player who lives on the beach and does as he pleases without answering to anyone—except my father.

And now, my daughter.

Being a single dad wasn't in the plan but after a one-night stand who took off after the baby was born, this is my reality.

My dad's been harping on me to quit hockey and join the company for years and now that I'm a father, he's only intensified his efforts. Until he makes me a deal I can't refuse.

Insert Lena Boyd, the Jacobs' family PR rep. She's beautiful and intelligent and not at all the woman for me—ask anyone.

My dad needs us to act happily engaged and sell the idea that we're in love. If we're successful I won't have to join the family legacy—ever. Of course, I agree.

That's when things get complicated. I thought I had her all figured out until I found out there was more underneath her judgmental sneers and eye rolls. It feels like everything is coming together for the future I really want—with Lena—until my past ruins everything.

Faking
It with
#**41**



CHAPTER 1

"Let Lena in, Ford."

Ford

AS THE STARTING right wing for the Florida Fury, I'm used to hearing a woman scream in my bedroom in the middle of the night, but the wailing from the nursery down the hall that startles me out of a dead sleep... not so much.

My life has done a one-eighty in the last four months since my daughter was born.

I run a hand through my hair, walking into her nursery wearing a pair of sweatpants. There's only a crib in the middle of the room, so it's easy to find her even without the blaring siren of her scream. What can I say? My daughter has a good set of lungs.

I scoop her up, seeing her bright blue eyes matching mine, staring back at me. Please tell me she doesn't have that mischievous rebel living inside her like I do. My mom says the blue eyes made it difficult for people to be hard on me. That I've gotten away with too much in my life. And she's right.

I'd say she was smiling if I hadn't read that it's most likely gas. I've binge-read book after book on raising a baby over the past six months, though it's not done me much good. I still feel out of my depth.

I change her diaper and nuzzle her into my chest before I take her downstairs to warm a bottle. Once it's ready, I sit in the big lounge chair in the corner of my family room, seeing the letter her mother left me earlier today laying on the end table.

I'm really sorry, Ford. I can't do this. I'm not meant to be a mother. You're so good to her. Love her extra for me.

The anger swells inside me all over again. How does a mother leave her baby? Especially in my incapable hands. I'm fairly sure Britney thinks I'll be a good father because I have money. Not only from playing in the league, but because I'm a trust fund baby. I wanted to raise Annabelle without the help of a nanny since my arrangement with Britney was that I'd have Annabelle on my off days during the season. Now I'm a full-time dad, so I'm not sure I have much of a choice but to enlist someone else's help.

I had nannies growing up and it wasn't all bad. They could rarely keep me in line and we went through a full dozen of them before Mrs. Gardner arrived. She was a classic British nanny and wasn't scared of my rebellious antics at all. She retired once my youngest sister got into high school, but I'm wondering if she'd be available somehow. Then I remember how harsh her punishments were and the fact that I don't want to look to the nanny for answers of how my daughter's day was.

"I guess it's just you and me."

A small sound comes out of her.

"I hope you like *Yellowstone*. You'll see some horses, and don't worry, I'll cover your eyes at the bad parts."

I click on my DVR, pressing Play on the last episode I was bingeing. Maybe this is a bad decision, but as the music starts, her eyes slowly close.

"You just wanted to be with Daddy, huh? Well, that's one thing I'm used to when it comes to the female population. But you're a better date than any of them." I chuckle to myself and watch the show.

Feeling her weight in my arms reminds me how big of a responsibility this is and how I've never been a very responsible guy. After placing her in the bassinet next to me, I gently sway it back and forth until my own eyelids grow heavy. Since she has a crib in her room, I keep the bassinet on the main floor for when I need to set her down.

I come awake to the sound of my phone vibrating on the kitchen counter across the room—or more accurately, the sound wakes Annabelle. Daylight streams into the room and I can't believe the clock says it's ten in the morning.

I stand up with Annabelle and grab my phone off the counter. My sister Imogen's name flashes on the screen.

“What’s up, little sis?” I answer, putting the call on speakerphone.

“I should ask you that.”

Annabelle makes some kind of gurgling sound in my arms, so I adjust her.

“Is that my niece?” Imogen asks.

“No, it’s my date from last night. She’s looking for a tit to suck on.”

“Language, jeez, Ford.” Imogen blows out a judgmental breath.

“She’s four months old.”

“Do you want her first word to be tit?”

I chuckle. “It would make for a funny story.”

Another breath sounds through the phone as though she thinks I’m going to be the worst dad ever. Nothing I don’t already know.

“Well, I just wanted to give you a heads-up. We’re leaving the airport.”

I glance around at the dirty bottles stacked by the sink, the dirty diapers overflowing the garbage, and the basketful of washed clothes I’ve yet to fold that I set on the island two days ago and haven’t moved since.

“Who is we?” But I already know who she means. And he’s only coming here because word must’ve already reached New York that I’m a single dad now.

“Rumor is you’ve been left with a baby on the porch.” Imogen confirms my worst suspicion. “Dad says he doesn’t want you doing anything stupid. So I’m tagging along to play peacekeeper.”

“You gotta stop him. I don’t want him here. I can handle this myself.”

She sighs, familiar with the wall between my father and myself. One we’ve built brick by brick over the years. It’s the same old story—he wants me to run the family business and I want no part of it. He’ll try to use Annabelle as leverage to get me to leave my professional hockey career and take my rightful place as he sees it. He’s going to put a hard sell on me, I just know it. And with how exhausted I am, I might not have the usual fight in me.

“I don’t think I can stop him. In fact, I gotta go. See you in a bit.” She hangs up the phone.

My doorbell rings. I groan, hoping it’s my housekeeper who is somehow telepathic and knows I need her magic cleaning powers.

I open the door. Sadly, my wish wasn’t granted.

My mom barges in first, swiping Annabelle out of my arms like a professional thief.

“Nice to see you, Mom.”

But she ignores me because she’s already cooing at her first grandchild.

My dad’s busy on the phone, so I’m rewarded with a stern glare as he follows my mom in.

Next is my youngest sister, Morgan, who graduates from high school this year. She at least pauses and kisses me on the cheek. “What’s up, Daddy-o?” She laughs and continues into my beach house. “You don’t mind if I swim and lie out?”

“Have at it,” I say, looking at Imogen. “What kind of heads-up was that?”

She laughs. “Sorry, I didn’t realize we were so close already.” Her laughter continues as she walks past me into the house.

I move to shut the door, but another voice alerts me to someone else before the woman in question emerges from around the corner. Our eyes meet and I swear it’s like we’re two cowboys in a standoff in a western movie. It’s no secret the two of us dislike one another. Always have—except for that brief kiss on New Year’s Eve, but that was ten months ago.

“Lena Boyd,” I say, distaste clear in my tone.

“How much shit can you step in?” She shakes her head and tries to slide past me, but I step to the side, blocking her from entering my house.

“You’re not welcome here.”

She loses her footing for a minute and falters back. I don’t bother to grab her arm. It must be her casual day today. Jeans, a T-shirt, sandals, and an open sweater. Not very professional. Although with the way her tits are snugly fit into that shirt, I’m not complaining.

“Don’t be a bigger ass than you already are.” She steps forward.

I block her again. “Why are you here?”

“Because I have to spin this story somehow so you come out looking like the doting father and not some rich prick who chased off his baby mama.” She crosses her arms, clearly not in the mood for my shitty, sleep-deprived attitude.

“Let Lena in, Ford,” my mom says from behind me. “And you cannot raise my grandbaby in this filth.”

Lena shoots me a look because she knows I never disobey my mother. I step aside and she walks past me as though she’s the fucking president or some shit.

I slam the door and rest my forehead on it. Then I grab every ounce of patience and courage for what is surely going to be a shitty day.



CHAPTER 2

"The baby's not here, you can swear."

Lena

MY SHOULDER BRUSHES Ford's arm as I walk into his beach house that's not nearly as big as he can afford. As if he purposely picked a home that didn't showcase his enormous wealth. But what the house lacks in size, it makes up for in location. He's on a private inlet in the Gulf, along with a bunch of other wealthy people who live here.

Mrs. Jacobs sits in a chair, staring at her granddaughter as though she could hang the moon, while Mr. Jacobs lingers on the back patio, continuing his phone call. Morgan has already changed in the bathroom and walks out in a bikini that shows off way too much skin. Imogen is starting a pot of coffee and says she already placed an order with Grub Hub for muffins and donuts and they're on the way over as though we're planning a conference or something.

I sit on the couch.

Mrs. Jacobs holds up the baby to me. "Isn't she beautiful?"

She has Ford's eyes. That stunning blue of the lightest part of the ocean. The same ones that suckered me into kissing him on New Year's Eve. Not that it meant anything. The only reason he did it was because I came to Florida to force him back to New York to meet with his dad after his stupid stunt of fighting some guy in a bar. But sometimes late at night, I swear I still feel his lips on mine.

"She's gorgeous." I'm not lying. Annabelle will be a knockout someday. Given the genetics of her dad and Britney, how could she not be? It's not like

Ford to dip below model status for his hookups, and Britney was no exception.

We sit in silence for a second while Morgan comes over and bends down to kiss Annabelle's forehead.

"Jesus, Morg, I can see your ass. Don't you have anything else to wear?" Ford covers his eyes.

She turns around and juts out her hip. The bikini isn't crazy revealing, but the ties on either side that could easily be undone is what would worry me. "If I was someone other than your sister, you'd be drooling."

"Mom!" he screeches, looking incredulous. "Are you going to let her go out like that?"

"She's only going out on your patio." Mrs. Jacobs puts her face an inch away from Annabelle's, not paying full attention to her children's bickering.

"Give her a break. She's right. If she wasn't your sister, you'd probably have hit on her." Imogen comes in with a cup of coffee and sits next to me on the couch.

"Ew!" Ford exaggerates with a full-body shiver. "Don't say shit like that."

"The baby," Mrs. Jacobs warns.

"She's four months old," all three of the Jacobs siblings say in unison.

"If I'm not careful, your first word will be a bad one," Mrs. Jacobs coos, tapping her finger on Annabelle's nose.

"That would make it clear she's Ford's then." Morgan laughs and walks outside, half her ass cheeks hanging out.

Ford shakes his head and turns his attention back to us. "Why are you all here?"

I lean back on the couch. Has he really not figured it out yet?

"Do you watch any television, listen to the radio, or look at social media?" Imogen asks, then sips her coffee.

He sits on the ottoman by his mom, staring at Annabelle. "Look around, Imogen, does it look like I have time for that?"

"It is disgusting in here." The doorbell rings and she gets up. "Food is here."

She disappears down the hall and Ford sets his gaze on me. I hate that it unnerves me, makes me self-conscious that he'll say something and I won't be quick enough with a comeback. That's essentially our communication style. And with his mom in the room, he knows he has me because I would

never dream of giving him a hard time with her present. The amount of money the Jacobs family pays me is irreplaceable.

“So the story is out? The press knows Britney left?” he asks.

I nod.

“Fuck!”

“Language,” Mrs. Jacobs scolds.

“At the moment, she’s the one being raked over the coals. The public has a lot of sympathy for you. We need to keep it that way.” I speak the truth.

His forehead scrunches. “Seriously?”

Imogen returns with the food in hand and shakes her head at her brother. “You’re the hot hockey player and now a single dad. You thought you had a lot of women before? Just wait until they see you with Annabelle.” Imogen places the donuts and muffins on the counter, snagging herself two donuts.

I have no idea how she keeps her figure, other than she has a personal trainer five days a week.

“And that’s exactly why I’m here,” Mr. Jacobs’ deep voice says. I guess his phone call is over. “Imogen, call someone to clean this place.”

“I’m busy,” she mumbles over her donut.

“I have a cleaning lady,” Ford says.

Mr. Jacobs briefly looks at Annabelle without much interest and sits in the chair opposite Mrs. Jacobs. He’s dressed in navy slacks and a lime green polo shirt. His usual golf attire for when he goes to the country club. For a moment, I wonder if he’ll make it a point to golf while he’s down here. No one said how long we’d be in Florida.

“Then call her. Why isn’t she here now?” Mr. Jacobs says.

“Because I’m a single man. She only comes twice a week.”

His dad eyes him. “You’re no longer single.”

Ford looks around, giving his sister and mom a look that suggests Mr. Jacobs is stupid. It’s clear that grates on Mr. Jacobs’ nerves. I’ve never seen anyone get under Mr. Jacobs’ skin as well as Ford does.

“You’re not the only one here. A baby is messy. She can’t live in her own shit,” Mr. Jacobs barks.

“We really need to watch our mouths around the baby.” Mrs. Jacobs moves Annabelle onto an activity mat on the floor. She’s trying to get the baby to interact with some of the items dangling down, but Annabelle keeps sucking on her pacifier and staring at herself in the little mirror. I guess the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.

“She’s a baby, Gabi,” Mr. Jacobs says to his wife.

“Well, I warned you around Ford when he was a baby and look at him now.”

Mr. Jacobs nods, lips pressed together. “Noted.”

“What the fu—heck?” Ford raises both arms and looks at his parents in disbelief. “I know I might not live up to your standards, but a lot of people think I’m pretty awesome. And a damn good hockey player.”

Mrs. Jacobs sits up on her ankles and pats her son’s knee. “You are.”

“You’d be a better CEO if you got your head out of your ass,” Mr. Jacobs grumbles.

The smile that almost hit Ford’s face falters before it ever shines.

Here we go. Round one thousand twenty-seven between Ford and his father on why he’s not working for Jacobs Enterprises.

“I think it’s terribly sexist that I’m not asked to take over the company. This isn’t the nineteenth century, Dad.” Imogen starts her second donut.

Ford rolls his eyes and looks over at her. “You’re getting a graduate degree in art history.”

She opens her mouth for a rebuttal but Mr. Jacobs cuts her off. “You’re already there part time, Imogen, and do nothing but complain about it. You want to take over the company? Fine, quit graduate school and start full time next week and I’ll teach you everything I know.”

Her eyes widen and she stares at him for a beat.

“That’s what I thought.” Mr. Jacobs lifts his ankle to rest on his knee. He zeros in all his attention on Ford. “Having a baby is a lot of responsibility.”

These are the moments I want to leave the room.

“That wouldn’t change whether I work for you or play hockey. The responsibility of Annabelle is the same.” There’s a bite in Ford’s tone now. One he reserves only for his father.

“The difference is you wouldn’t travel for days at a time. You wouldn’t have the temptations you have when you’re a professional athlete. God forbid something like this happens again. You could have five illegitimate kids before you leave the league.”

Ford walks into the open kitchen and pours a cup of coffee. I’ve only been with the Jacobs family for a couple years, and during that time, I’ve witnessed Ford’s persistence to stay in hockey dwindle. A year ago, that comment would have set Ford off, and screaming and yelling would have commenced. Either he’s learned to control his emotions better—doubtful—or

he's losing the will to fight his father.

"I'm not gonna let it happen again," Ford mumbles, walking past his father with a cup of coffee in his hands. "It was a mistake. You've made your fair share of them, I'm sure."

His father's jaw tics. "We're not talking about me. It's the smart decision to come work for me."

"Why? So I can be gone all day and night like you were? At least with hockey, I have an entire off-season to dedicate all my time to her. Not to mention my days off."

Mr. Jacobs rolls his eyes while Mrs. Jacobs scoops up Annabelle. "She doesn't need to hear her grandfather and father fighting."

Imogen crosses her legs and pulls out her phone, always more than willing to witness the two of them go at one another.

"I'll just go with Mrs. Jacobs," I say, excusing myself and standing.

"Sit down, Lena. We need to discuss the PR narrative on this situation." Mr. Jacobs then turns his attention back to his son. "I've had to explain too many of your mistakes over the years. Now I have to explain that you're a single dad because the woman you knocked up isn't ready to be a mother."

Ford laughs dramatically. "Who the hell cares about what people think?"

Mr. Jacobs stands and points at himself. "I care, Ford. Perception is everything in business, and how people see you matters. I can't have everyone snickering behind my back because I can't control my own son, let alone a multi-million dollar company."

"I haven't embezzled money. I'm not an addict. I'm a fucking hockey player who likes pussy. That's all." Ford throws his arms out at his side. "So what?"

I cringe.

"It's not just the women. It's the fights. It's the..." Mr. Jacobs blows out a long deep breath. "I don't expect you to understand." He stands and looks outside at where Mrs. Jacobs is holding Annabelle. "One day you will. One day she's going to break your heart."

"She won't because I don't give a shit what she wants to do as long as she's happy."

Mr. Jacobs laughs. "There you go, Lena. Tell the press that Ford Jacobs is a reformed man, a single father who has his shit together. I'll wait until the story unfolds that you're out late at night while a nanny raises your kids."

"Nannies raised me."

Imogen smiles at her phone. I don't know what she's chosen to do now that she's about to graduate from college, but I do know that the girl loves gossip.

Mr. Jacobs steps forward and my breath lodges in my throat. "You act like you wanted for something growing up. I never sent you away to boarding schools, and yes, we had nannies, but only because to live the life we did, your mother and I had obligations. Obligations you'd like to forget you have."

Ford shakes his head. "I'm over this conversation. I knew you'd try to get me home again, but I've told you a million times and I'll tell you again, I'm a hockey player, not a businessman."

"It's not only about you anymore." Mr. Jacobs points through the floor-to-ceiling windows to where Mrs. Jacobs is holding Annabelle. "You're responsible for another human being now too."

"I'm not an idiot. I know that." He places his hands on his hips.

Mr. Jacobs is silent for a long time, but his eyes are focused on Ford. He finally raises his finger. "Mark my words, you're going to fuck this up."

"Is that what the problem is, Dad, you think you fucked up with me?"

"You have no idea what I think," he says, stuffing his hands in his pockets and walking toward the door that will lead to where Mrs. Jacobs is. "Lena, spin this in a positive light. Say Ford is excited to have more time with his daughter and up for the responsibilities of being full-time dad. Then get some pictures to show them bonding and give an exclusive to someone."

I hate when he dictates the plan of attack to me instead of asking my opinion. He hired me for my expertise, but that's what happens with powerful men. They trust no one but themselves.

"Now I have to let some schmuck take pictures of my daughter for a damn magazine? This is bullshit." Ford walks to the other side of the room and up the stairs.

"Man, that was a doozy," Imogen says once it's just the two of us in the room. "How are you going to pull this off?"

I blow out a breath and steal her fourth donut, taking a big bite. "I have no fudging clue."

"The baby's not here, you can swear." Imogen laughs, sipping her coffee.

I exhale on a sigh. Nothing about any of this will be easy. I have a feeling I'll be biting back curse words for months to come.



CHAPTER 3

"Whatever gets this over the fastest."

Ford

"SEE, you can't take pictures of her in a onesie," Saige says to Paisley after they change Annabelle's outfit and put on some kind of bow thing that wraps around her head.

Saige and Paisley act as if my daughter is their personal practice baby before they marry and have kids with my teammates, Aiden and Maksim. Speaking of, those two are sitting on my couch, laughing at some stupid prank show on the television. We've got a game tonight and shouldn't be sitting on our asses. We should be getting our heads in the game.

"When is Lena coming with the photographer?" Saige asks, playing peekaboo with Annabelle, who doesn't seem that into the game.

"I have no fucking clue. Soon, I guess." I strip off my fourth shirt to put on another one I picked up from the cleaners.

"Can you please stop stripping in front of my girl?" Aiden says.

"Why? You afraid she'll come over to my side?" I waggle my eyebrows.

"You have the baby she wants, so..." Aiden laughs.

Saige shakes her head. "I should clarify, I want a baby with you, not Ford. I love this little one, but she still has half his genes." She makes a silly face at Annabelle as if that's going to spur a laugh out of her.

"Hey, that's offensive." I button up my shirt.

Paisley eyes me. "You look too professional. Not like a single dad with a baby."

I groan. "Want me to get the shirt she spit up on earlier?"

Paisley shrugs. "I'm just saying." She goes over and snuggles up to Maksim.

"Relax, he's just testy because Lena's coming," Maksim says.

Just the name makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up. Lena Boyd. The woman drives me insane. Constantly at my father's beck and call. Doing whatever he wants her to do. Have some self-respect.

"Come on, I know you're hot for her," Saige says, still googly-eyed over Annabelle.

"You're kidding, right? The woman wears pants all the time and blouses that cover every inch of her body. Heels? Forget it. She's constantly in flats. And the woman is stuck up my dad's ass to top it all off."

No one says anything. I unbutton my shirt and grab my brown V-neck sweater without putting a shirt on underneath, then I push up the sleeves.

"This good enough?" I direct my question to Paisley.

"Much better. These pictures are going to make women's ovaries explode," she says.

"Kotik," Maksim grinds out his Russian nickname for her.

She blushes. "I didn't say mine. My ovaries only explode for you."

They bring their heads together in an Eskimo kiss that makes bile rise up my throat.

I can't believe my two best buddies have fallen in love. We're in the prime of our lives, hockey gods making bank, and they decide to put on a set of handcuffs. Not to say I don't like Saige and Paisley, they're awesome, but they've taken my boys away from me.

"I'm only doing this shoot to appease my dad," I grumble.

"I thought you hated your dad?" Saige asked.

I don't hate my dad. We don't see eye to eye on almost everything, but my dad is still a decent guy. He just doesn't understand me, and the more he tries to control me, the harder I push in the opposite direction. It's been our relationship for as long as I can remember.

"I have to do some things so he stays off my ass. As long as I'm playing hockey, it's just the way it is." I shrug.

"What's your long-term goal? Like after you retire from hockey, will you work in the family business?" Paisley asks, her psychologist's brain never staying in the therapy room.

"All I know is that I want to retire as a hockey player. While I'm still good and am still wanted, but as old as I can be."

“Amen.” Aiden and Maksim raise their water bottles.

“And then?” Paisley pushes.

“And then I’ll retire with my money from the endorsements, league play, and my trust fund. I’ll have no reason to work.”

She tilts her head. “But won’t you get bored?”

This is the first time I’ve really thought much about what will happen after I retire. I always felt like retirement was the finish line for me, but I’ll be lucky if I make it to forty still playing in the league. That’s young.

I quickly do the math, realizing Annabelle will be twelve if I make it that long. If she’s anything like me, she won’t want to be hanging with her dad all the time. I guess I’ll still be young enough to live my life the way I was before she was born, but to my surprise, a tinge of loneliness hits me right in the heart. I rub the spot, not understanding why it’s there.

“Being a single rich guy who lives on the beach and does whatever I want every day? Sounds terrible.”

“Are you saying you never want to get married?” Saige asks.

“You girls are barking up the wrong tree,” Aiden says before downing the rest of his water. “This man right here is the only one I can see never falling into monogamy.”

“That true?” Saige asks, clearly wanting to hear it from my mouth.

I shrug. “Haven’t ever thought much about it. All I know is right now, my hands are full.”

The doorbell rings. Thank God for the interruption, even if it is Lena.

“I’ll get it.” Paisley jumps off Maksim and heads to the door.

Lena’s familiar voice echoes down the hall from the door and my back straightens. I ready myself to do something I don’t want to.

“I love your pants,” Paisley says.

Sure enough, when the two emerge, Lena Boyd is buttoned up as tight as her ass. She’s wearing long pinstripe pants and a puffy blouse that hides the curves I know she has because I felt them on New Year’s Eve when she was in my arms and her lips were on mine. That night, she wore a pair of leggings that showed off what these pants hide.

“Oh, thank you. They’re more comfortable on the plane. And fall has set in back home.”

One thing I miss about New York City is Central Park in the fall. But I’m sure I’ll be beckoned back to Manhattan by my dad before all the leaves have fallen from the trees.

“I take it we have you two to thank for this adorable outfit.” Lena goes over to Annabelle, smiling at her. “She’s beautiful.”

“Isn’t she?” Saige beams as though Annabelle is her daughter, holding her up in what I’ve been told by the ladies is “blush pink.” The lace dress looks adorable on Annabelle, but she has shoes on that have no purpose since she can’t walk. “He was going to put her in a onesie. A Fury one at that.”

All the women turn to glare at me.

Aiden and Maksim laugh, sharing a look of better me than them.

“That could be cute too,” Lena says.

Cue record scratch. Did Lena Boyd just agree to something I want? Hell must’ve frozen over.

“Maybe we could take some at the game tonight? Do a few poses before you go on the ice.” Lena presses her finger into Annabelle’s stomach as though she expects her to laugh. I want to tell her to stop because I want the first laugh out of my baby girl, but I don’t.

Aiden raises his eyebrows. “Ford’s kind of serious before a game.”

“Of course, we can scrap it.” Lena waves off the idea, never making eye contact with me. I’m unsure why she’s being so agreeable with me at the moment. “Your dad just wants enough to convince everyone you’re happily settling into the role of single father.”

The room quiets and my face heats.

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t mean to suggest—”

“I am happy.” My fists tighten at my sides.

“Of course you are. I meant more that the surprise of it all hasn’t shaken you.”

She really can do a good spin job.

The doorbell rings again. I hope this is her crew because I want to get this photo session over with.

“I’ll get everyone in and organized.” She walks down the hallway as though she owns the place. Under other circumstances, I might show her around my place, but I’m already annoyed.

I hear her polite conversation with the people my family hired and/or the people she coerced to write up this story. The next thing I know, in walks a photographer, a videographer, a makeup person, and a smiling man whose eyes bulge out when he sees Maksim and Aiden are here too.

“This is Gavin,” Lena says. “He was my teacher’s assistant at school and does freelance work for a bunch of magazines, including *Sports Illustrated*,

so I called in a favor.”

All I hear is blah blah blah except for when my mind circles around to the fact that he was a TA and these two clearly have some kind of rapport. Maybe Lena isn't as wholesome as I thought.

I put out my hand. “Pleasure.”

His grip is firm, so I squeeze a little harder to win the battle. What am I winning? I have no fucking clue, but my dad taught me from a young age to be the strongest, most powerful person in the room. Since I opted for a career in hockey, there are times I switch that up to be the most charismatic person in the room and I do just fine.

“You're probably familiar with Maksim and Aiden. This is Saige and Paisley.” I point toward each person as I name them.

Gavin goes around the room, shaking hands with everyone.

“Let's get this photo shoot going since Annabelle's dressed and ready to go. There's a good chance she could spit up on her outfit at any moment,” I say.

The makeup woman plops down what sounds like a fifty-pound bag and pulls out stuff. She brushes something on my cheeks and puts a small amount of eyeliner on my eyes. I try to be a good sport about it, but I'm anxious to get this over with.

Gavin and Lena have decided that we should shoot in the family room and out on the patio with the ocean behind us.

I pick up Annabelle, who was chillin' in Saige's arms. She relaxes into mine like I hoped she would since it's been just her and me for the past week or so. I've lost all track of time. But the fact that Annabelle seems to recognize me makes my chest warm with a strange sensation I'm not familiar with.

Maksim, Aiden, and the girls all rush to leave, wishing us good luck, and I tell them I'll see them at the game tonight.

I sit on the couch with my daughter in my arms. The photographer snaps a few pictures, having me change positions a few times. Then we're off to the patio by the pool.

“You know what women love?” Gavin says to Lena. “Those things you wear that carry the baby on your chest.”

“Yeah, well, I don't have one.” I lean Annabelle on my lap, her back on my chest, and her pudgy little fingers grip my index fingers.

“That's a shame. They're a chick magnet,” Gavin says.

I don't bother asking how he knows. He probably wouldn't answer me even if I did. He's only really granted Lena any attention since we started and that's bothering me. I wish I had an explanation.

"What about him reading her a story? Maybe we can do some shots in her nursery," Gavin suggests.

Lena touches his arm and shakes her head.

"Why not?" I ask, forehead wrinkling.

"Since this is new, Ford hasn't had the time to decorate the room," she tells Gavin.

He tilts his head, then turns to give me his attention. "You knew for months that the baby was coming. I understand you didn't know about the mother leaving her, but—"

"Let's just leave it at this. I can get her a book." Lena glances at me as if I might have a book at the ready that I read to her every night.

She's four months old, it's not like she'd comprehend a storybook.

Lena must see my puzzled expression. "There will be more opportunities for those kind of pictures in the future. Let's just capture these and get this article out."

Gavin nods as if there's an underlying agreement between them.

"This is the last pose I'm doing." I say it in a tone that I'm sure no one will challenge.

Lena's phone rings and she holds up her finger, stepping back into the house.

"How about you on the floor and her under her jungle gym thing?" Gavin points inside.

"Whatever gets this over the fastest," I mumble.

They move the lighting back inside, and as I walk into my house, Gavin stops me with a hand on my arm. "Lena's a great girl. She worked hard to get here. I'd listen to what she has to say if I were you."

I narrow my eyes and my jaw tics. "She works for my father, not me. I have a game to get to."

He huffs as though I'm an asshole. Whatever. Lena gave him an oyster nestled with a pearl with this Jacobs' family heir exclusive and he didn't even have to fish.



CHAPTER 4

"I didn't peg you for a spy."

Lena

I SHOULD PUT in my notice with Mr. Jacobs right now because the thoughts going through my head about his son are far from professional.

Ford is model hot in a clean-cut, wealthy way. Men like him aren't usually my type. And although he's a pompous ass, seeing him with his daughter makes me want to jump him. Makes me wish the one kiss we shared had gone further.

He seems to have adopted the role of father as masterfully as he skates. The house isn't as messy as it was the day his family ambushed him, which I'm guessing means he's getting into a rhythm. There are prepared bottles in the fridge, neatly folded baby clothes in a laundry basket by the stairs, and Annabelle looks happy. Neither of them have bags under their eyes.

"That about it?" Ford asks, standing from the floor. He pulls Annabelle out from under the activity mat as she's getting cranky. "This dress is cute and all, but Annabelle's like me and wants to dress for comfort."

Gavin glances at me. Ford has no idea how hard it was for me to get Gavin to push aside his plans for this shoot, and I shamelessly used the fact that Gavin hit on me all through school to make it happen. I never did anything about it back then, but I did promise him dinner tonight as friends to thank him.

"Sure. We'll move on to the interview. Do you have someone to watch her?" he asks.

Ford's eyebrows raise. "Do you see someone else?"

Gavin nods. "Yeah, okay. So you don't use nannies?"

"Only when I have to. For out-of-town games. Otherwise, she has a babysitter when I'm playing in town." He flips up his wrist, an expensive watch adorning it. "She'll be here in two hours when I leave for the game."

Gavin groans. He's not going to want to do an interview with a cranky baby interrupting the whole time.

I raise my hand as though I'm in school. "I'll take her."

"It's fine. I'll feed her and lay her down, but you owe my babysitter some extra cash because she won't go down for her nap this afternoon now."

It's heart melting how much he already knows his little girl, but then I remember that although Britney left a week ago, Ford's had Annabelle for half the time anyway. During the time when his dad wasn't up his ass and I didn't have to come down here to straighten him out on New Year's Eve, Ford Jacobs has become a father. Responsible for a little girl. Amazing, really.

"I can do it," I say.

He carries Annabelle toward the stairs. "I wouldn't want to put you out." Then he's gone.

Anger bubbles up inside me that he's being a dick about this. I turn to Gavin and the crew. "I'll be back."

Walking up the stairs, I find myself tiptoeing because I've never ventured up here before. It feels private. Just as I stick to Mr. Jacobs' office, the kitchen, and the family room at the Jacobs' penthouse, I've done the same here. One time Imogen asked me to go to her room, but when I saw Mr. Jacobs in the hall in a pair of pajama pants and no shirt, I decided never to venture outside of the main rooms of the house again.

I hear Ford's voice before I reach Annabelle's room. "You look beautiful in the dress, sweetie, but I bet it's itchy. When you're older, don't let people dress you."

I peek in the room behind the door to stay hidden, addicted to seeing this big strong man be so gentle with his daughter.

"I'll never allow anyone to change you." He's cooing.

Annabelle lets out a little noise that could be a laugh.

I lean forward to get a better look.

"Are you laughing at Daddy?" He puts his face on her belly and vibrates his lips against her skin. She makes the same sound and he lifts his head. "You are laughing. That's not gas, right?"

The amazement in his tone has my hand landing on my stomach because I'm pretty sure my ovaries did a three-sixty. Who would have ever thought he had it in him to be this man? Certainly not me.

He does it three more times and Annabelle laughs every time.

Picking her up, he circles her around in his arms, his smile as wide and as bright as when he's on the rink after a win. I'm so enthralled that I don't realize until it's too late that he's stopped and is staring at me.

"I didn't peg you for a spy." He lowers Annabelle to the changing table again.

I slowly step into the room. "Sorry."

"At least this was something good for you to tattle back to my dad."

"Is that what you really think I do? Tattle?"

"You're my father's fetcher. So yes, I do think you tattle because that's partly what he's paying you for." He changes Annabelle's diaper without a problem and puts her in a cute onesie that says "Daddy's Girl" with pink lettering and small flowers.

"Your family is my business. I was hired to make you look good."

"You were hired to make sure to spin any fuckups." He picks her up and holds her.

"Yes, but—"

He spins to face me. "I've always been curious. Why?"

His anger spurs me to step back. "Why what?"

"Why would you take this job? You can't have much of a life. Always having to be on call to fly down here to stop me from having any fun. My dad doesn't even talk to you with a modicum of respect."

I say nothing about the way his father talks to me. He talks to me like a paid employee, and I've been talked to in a lot worse ways, so it doesn't get to me. At least Mr. Jacobs doesn't talk down to me, which is more than I can say for how he talks to his son.

"It's none of your business, but if you must know, I went to school for this."

"Sure, but why not work at some big firm? You seem like the nerdy type. Surely you had good grades." He takes the headband off Annabelle, and I swear I hear her release a sound like a sigh of relief. It reminds me of when I take off a tight dress and my Spanx after a long night out.

"I hate to break it to you, but jobs aren't just lined up waiting for you when you graduate college unless you know..." I don't finish because I'm

growing madder by the minute and I'm going to say something I shouldn't.

"What?"

I shake my head. "Nothing. Let's just get this interview over with."

He widens his legs and his blue eyes focus on me. "Come on. Give it to me, Boyd. I'm sure it's nothing I haven't heard before."

"I don't have a rich daddy to set me up in his golf buddy's business," I say. I saw it so many times where I'd be one of the top two candidates for a position, and it would go to the person with connections. No one knew my dad except for maybe the shelter managers.

He laughs smugly and it makes me want to smack his face. "I didn't use shit. My dad doesn't know anyone in the National Hockey League. I earned my spot myself."

"I wasn't suggesting—"

"Sure, you were. And if I had to work for any company, we both know it would be Jacobs Enterprises." He stops right next to me, leaning down so he can speak directly into my ear.

My breath hitches from the scent of his expensive cologne.

"Money isn't everything," he whispers.

I turn toward him. Our faces are millimeters apart, so close that Annabelle's hand touches my cheek, but he doesn't back away. "Says the trust fund boy."

He huffs and straightens up, moving Annabelle's hand from my cheek. "That's all you see me as, huh?"

"And all you see me as is some pathetic woman who does your dad's bidding and has to nag you to live your life on the straight and narrow."

He doesn't move. The longer he stands there with his gaze on me, the more I want to fidget. But I'm not going to show him how much he intimidates me. I straighten my back instead and force myself to not do so much as even blink.

"At least we have that straight." He holds out Annabelle for me. "Since you're the help, you won't mind watching her while I go do the interview with your boyfriend."

I accept Annabelle and he walks out without me saying a word. Damn, why can't I think of a comeback? Boyfriend? Does he think Gavin is my boyfriend? And if he was, what is it to him?

I look down to find Annabelle's eyes studying me. "Your daddy is a complicated man."

She smiles at me as though she understands, and I can't help but wonder what it's like when it's just the two of them hanging out.

Not wanting to interrupt the interview, I quietly go down half the stairs and sit with Annabelle in my arms. Her eyes are slowly drifting closed. She's surely tired from all the chaos of the photo shoot. I should probably go place her in her crib, but she's so sweet and cuddly I decide to stay where I am.

Gavin asks Ford, "How did you feel that day when you got the letter?"

Ford chuckles. "I can see we're not going to ease into this."

"Well, the article *is* about you being a single dad."

"My first thought was that now I don't have to share holidays." Ford's voice is even keeled, no emotion. Although I've learned his dry sense of humor since I started working with the Jacobs family, even I can't figure out how he's feeling right now.

I never did find out who leaked the existence of a letter to the press, but I suppose that's neither here nor there at this point.

"That's a joke," he says. "I think my exact words were, what the fuck?"

There's the Ford I know.

"I don't blame you. Have you heard from her?" Gavin asks.

"Her letter was pretty clear. I don't anticipate that I will."

"Sometimes parenthood can feel overwhelming. Maybe she'll return at some point."

"Are you a parent?" Ford asks. I imagine him on the couch, one arm slung across the back cushions, his ankle resting on his knee.

"No."

"Then don't make excuses for her. She abandoned her daughter."

"Is that how you see it?" Gavin asks.

I throw my head back and look at the ceiling. He can't even handle a bloody interview.

Standing, I step down the stairs and Ford's eyes narrow on me. "I think Ford meant—"

Ford holds up his hand. "I meant what I said. She abandoned Annabelle, and yeah, parenthood is fucking overwhelming. I'm barely sleeping, barely have time to make exercise and healthy eating a priority like I used to, but I wouldn't fucking leave her. Not for anything. Especially with someone like me. She knows nothing about me, except the size of my dick and my bank account."

The bitterness in his tone surprises me, maybe because he seems as

though he's taken this all in stride.

"Don't print that, Gavin," I say.

Ford's gaze narrows on me. "With all due respect, Lena, this isn't about my family. This is my daughter and me. I don't remember hiring *you* to do *my* PR."

"Don't talk to her like that," Gavin says. "Why do you think you can talk to her like that?"

He stands and so does Ford.

How have I lost control of this situation? I step closer to them. "I'm sorry, but you're a Jacobs and your dad hired me on your behalf. This interview is to calm down rumors that you can't handle being a single father. So please, let's keep Britney out of this and just stick to the fact that you're handling it like a pro and doing an amazing job with Annabelle. Look at her."

I glance down to see her asleep in my arms and discover I'm rocking back and forth. Where did I learn that?

The fury on Ford's face falls away and one side of his lips tips up. "You think I'm doing an amazing job?"

I blow out a breath.

Gavin looks back and forth between the two of us. "Is there something going on between you guys?"

We turn to him and say in unison, "No."

Ford steps over to me and we transition Annabelle out of my arms, his one hand brushing against my breast. A million little nerve endings go off in my body as though I'm thirteen and got felt up for the first time.

Thank goodness I go home tonight.



CHAPTER 5

"Two months."

Ford

WHO KNEW seventeen-year-old babysitters were so unpredictable? I got a last-minute call that something came up.

Now I'm in the locker room, having had no choice but to ask Lena to watch Annabelle. And of course Gavin said he'd love to go to a game and get pictures of Annabelle watching me play. That it'd really show how I make it all work. As though I don't know that he just wanted to tag along to be with Lena.

Thankfully, our goalie, Roadie, had some ear protector headphone things from one of his kids handy that I could borrow, so I left Annabelle in the hands of who I think is a competent person. My dad cares about nothing more than the Jacobs' family image, and since he's entrusted that to Lena, I figure she can sit with my baby strapped on her chest for a couple hours and return her safe and sound. And yes, strapped because she insisted on stopping on the way to buy one of those things Gavin mentioned earlier.

At least I got them front row seats so I can keep an eye on Annabelle during the game.

"So now you're making her babysit your kid?" Aiden asks.

"What choice did I have? I can't miss the game. Especially since we're playing Langley."

"As if anyone forgot." Aiden rolls his eyes.

"I get anxious when we play him," Maksim admits, sitting on the bench wearing only his jock strap.

“Seriously, put that shit away. I’m sick of seeing your monster cock.”

Maksim smiles, stands, and dances like a damn Chippendale dancer. Tweetie joins in because the two of them are never shy about what’s between their legs. Aiden ignores them, shaking his head.

I crack my neck, hoping to relieve some of the stress that’s building. I wish I could get that compliment Lena gave me out of my head. She thinks I’m doing a good job with Annabelle when I feel like a failure every damn day.

Did that Gavin think I’d actually tell him my true feelings when I got that letter? Idiot. I don’t know him, and I’m a damn hockey player. There’s no reason for people to think I have a sentimental side, especially my opponents. I get enough shit for being Richie Rich as it is.

“Where are Saige and Paisley? I have Annabelle in the front row.” I’m hoping they’ll be sitting close by. Those two never miss a home game.

“They’re with the wives and girlfriends,” Maksim says.

Fuck, I forgot about that.

“Want me to text Paisley and ask her to check in with Lena a few times and make sure Annabelle isn’t chomping on a pretzel or something?” Maksim finally gets suited up.

Aiden laughs. “I’d trust Lena with my kid. She looks... motherly.”

“Motherly? I’m not sure she’d see that as a compliment,” I say.

Aiden bends down to tie his laces. “You know what I mean. Like a multitasker. Responsible. The fact that she keeps you in line half the time is a good sign.”

I think about the trouble I’ve given Lena and wonder why she grates on my nerves. But I know the answer, don’t I? I feel like an asshole when I’m a jerk, but I hate how she’s at my father’s beck and call.

“I guess so, but it still makes me nervous.” I don’t really see the motherly side. Unless motherly means you hide what I’m pretty sure is a bangin’ body under those pants and blouses. I’d love to see Lena in high heels and lingerie. Fuck. I shake my head to get rid of that image.

“Relax. You need your focus on the game,” Aiden says.

“I’m gonna take a piss.” Maksim walks by, fully dressed now, to go do his stupid superstition.

I finish lacing up my skates and stand to put my phone in the locker. I’ve kept it on me in case Lena had any questions she needed answered before the game started. I catch a text message from my mom.

Mom: *Good luck on the game. Thank you as always for taking one for your dad. The press will be good. You'll see. Love you.*

Always the peacemaker.

Me: *Thanks Mom. It's done and you're welcome.*

Mom: *<3 Score me one tonight.*

I give her the thumbs-up and tuck my phone in the locker, allowing the music beating in the room to wind its way into my veins, to get me excited. Because if anything, I want to mop the floor with Langley tonight.

Aiden comes over and pounds his fists on my shoulders. "Let's go!"

"Let's go!" I pound back and we grab our sticks, filing out to the hallway.

By the middle of the first period, I've had my eyes on Annabelle more than the puck.

"Get your head in the game or your ass is on the bench!" Coach screams when I come to the bench during a line change.

I'm not sure why I'm worried. Annabelle has her headphones on and she's fast asleep in the carrier I gave Lena. Gavin won't stop stealing Lena's attention away from the ice and my daughter, and I'm growing irritated.

"That her boyfriend?" Maksim asks.

"No, just a friend, I think. He's the writer for *Sports Illustrated*."

Maksim's eyes light up. "Why didn't you say so? I gotta up my game. Maybe get 'Play of the Week.'"

"That's ESPN, dipshit." I use a towel to wipe the sweat on my face.

"Still, if I impress, maybe I'll get an article for my actual talent. Not a PR piece because I have money."

I turn to Maksim, and he's smiling and laughing. If he wasn't my best friend, my fist would be in his face right now. But he and Aiden razz me all the time about my money. As if the two of them aren't making bank themselves. I get it though. My trust fund is probably more than the team's lifetime salary.

"Seriously, he hasn't stopped talking to her the entire game." Maksim nudges me with his elbow.

"I saw. They're both boring as fuck, so I guess it's a match."

Maksim raises his eyebrows but says nothing.

I point at him. "Get your head in the game. Langley still has two legs to skate on."

"I think I've lost my edge with Paisley. She's made me soft. The other day she asked me to paint her toenails."

"And?"

"I did it," Maksim says.

"You didn't."

"Hey, I got the best kind of thanks for doing it."

I shake my head.

He points at me. "One day."

"Mark my words, I'll never paint a woman's toenails." I concentrate back on the game.

"I'd make that bet, but the chance of you ever really falling for a woman is slim."

I tilt my head at him momentarily before concentrating on the game. "What does that mean?"

"You have daddy issues." I see him shrug in my peripheral vision.

"That's a term for a woman, not a man."

"You have daddy issues. Shit, if your dad told you to have sex with a hundred different women, you'd probably go celibate."

"Richie? Celibate? Yeah, right," Tweetie chimes in from the other side of me.

Maksim is still staring at me, waiting for me to negate what he's saying. But damn him, he's right. Whatever my dad wants me to do, I do the opposite. And I know for a fact he wants an heir. I'm the last of the Jacobs name right now, and since Annabelle is a girl, I'm pretty sure he'll pressure me at some point to have a boy.

"I could totally be celibate. I didn't have sex at all this week," I say.

"Because you're taking care of Annabelle, but you won't last a month." Tweetie chuckles just as the referee on the ice blows his whistle.

"Bullshit. My hand does a fine job."

Tweetie laughs, climbing over the boards to get on the ice.

"Jacobs!" Coach yells.

I scramble to get over the boards, tripping and losing my footing for a second before I recover and hope no one saw.

"Nice fall," Langley says, skating past me. That fucking prick.

“Shamrock, you think Richie can go a month without getting laid?” Tweetie asks.

“Find the puck and score for once instead of always slapping those gums together,” I say.

And Tweetie wonders how he got his damn nickname. He’s constantly talking on the ice. Chirping at the other team is one thing, but he’ll have a full-on conversation out here with his teammates.

“I give him six weeks,” Aiden answers, and my jaw falls open that my best friend doesn’t have faith in me. “And that’s being really generous.”

The puck drops, and Aiden wins the draw and skates down the ice with it. Maksim is back in now, and Langley is flying down to catch up. Langley’s definitely a beat off tonight.

“Six weeks?” I yell.

“I’m done with this topic of conversation.” Just then Aiden scores.

While he’s doing his celly, I tap my stick on the glass at Gavin. He looks up and I point at him. “Leave her the fuck alone. She’s watching my baby.”

Lena gives me her classic expression when it comes to me—exhaustion and annoyance. She shifts in her seat so I can see Annabelle’s face, and I see that she’s asleep in her carrier still. Then Lena shoos me off with her hand and the audience laughs. I turn around to find us on the Jumbotron.

Coach has his hands on his hips, staring down the ice at me, so I skate away from the boards. I skate ahead and Tweetie slaps me on the back.

“Let’s make a wager. I bet you fall for that one.” He turns to skate backward, pointing down the ice toward Lena.

“That’s never going to happen.”

“You seem awfully concerned about that guy talking to her,” he says before skating away from me.

“Just score a fucking goal,” I yell after him.

He holds up his hands like, “Whatever, you know I’m telling the truth.”

He doesn’t know jack. “Tell him, Roadie.”

“What?” He stretches after not getting a lot of action down by him. What’s happened to Langley’s team? They suck.

“Tell him how protective you are of your kids.”

“You touch my kid and I kill you.” He laughs. “In all seriousness, I get you’re worried, but that PR girl could probably run a daycare. She’s just got that look about her.”

My eyebrows furrow. “What the hell does that mean?” And why does

everyone keep saying that?

Aiden skates by me. "I thought we were actually playing a game here."

I skate after the opponent on Aiden's back and push him into the boards. "Happy?"

He shoots the puck at me. "Score for your daughter, shithead."

I smile and wink, taking the puck with my stick and circling past a defender. Tweetie, Aiden, and I get into our usual rhythm, and they get me the puck right as I skate past the goalie then around the net and score on the wrap around. The red light on top of the net comes on and the buzzer blares.

I glance over my shoulder and see Lena and Gavin in deep conversation, not even noticing I scored. Well, that was for Mom, I guess.

Tweetie laughs his ass off and points at me with his glove covered hand. "You're jealous. Damn, Ford Jacobs jealous. I never thought I'd see the day."

"I'm not fucking jealous."

Tweetie follows me off the ice. "Then let's make a bet. See how long you can hold out with no sex. I mean, if there's no one you're not actively going after, why not?" He gives me a shit-eating grin.

"What could you possibly bet me that I'd want?"

Both of our asses land on the bench with a thud.

"You get bragging rights and can say you won. Please, everyone knows there's nothing we have that you'd want."

I shrug because he's right.

"Unless you think you can't do it," Tweetie says.

"Don't try that reverse psychology shit on me. I can do it. There's no one I want to sleep with anyway." I'll be so busy with Annabelle, I won't have to deal with temptation, so this will be an easy win. "Okay, then six weeks."

"Two months," Tweetie ups it.

"Have you ever even gone two weeks without it?" I ask him.

He laughs. "Right now, Tedi's got me on a three-times-a-day schedule. She jokes that I'm her breakfast, lunch, and dinner."

Of course Tweetie gets a fucking nympho for a girlfriend. Bastard.

I take off my glove and put out my hand. Deal sealed.

As if the universe knows, the buzzer goes off and the period is over.



CHAPTER 6

"Nah, I got everything you need."

Lena

THANKFULLY, Gavin accepted my excuse to get out of dinner with him since I had Annabelle. He looked disappointed, but my plate is way too full right now to be dating anyone. It's just not a priority for me.

I find myself waiting with a bunch of fans and puck bunnies for the team to leave the arena. I'm so annoyed I have to be here, but I'm happy it's dark out so no one really notices the baby carrier I have. Especially since I purposely set myself to the back.

A few players come out, and I recognize Aiden and Maksim in the small group. They come over to me, a few bunnies annoyed that they don't give them the time of day.

"He'll be right out. Coach wanted to talk to him," Aiden says.

"Thanks."

They nod and continue toward their cars.

"Carmelo's?" Maksim asks.

"Fuck no. I'm gonna go bury myself in Saige tonight."

"Thanks for the TMI," Maksim says.

Aiden laughs, sliding into his SUV, then drives out of the lot.

"Is that Ford Jacobs' baby?" A woman pulls my attention away from the parking lot.

I wrap my arms around the carrier and the baby inside. "Um..."

"It is!" The woman who's practically dressed like she's ready for the beach waves her friends over. "This woman has Ford Jacobs' baby!"

Before I can blink, a bunch of women swarm me.

I tightly hold the carrier, swatting away hands as they try to pull down the hood to get a look at her. “Stop it!” I will cut a bitch if they even think of touching Annabelle.

“Come on. He’s been so hush-hush,” another woman says.

“God, I wish I had his baby,” one woman whines.

“What an idiot that baby mama is for running off,” another says.

“Who would leave Ford fucking Jacobs?” a woman calls, trying to peek over all the women’s heads.

“Listen—” I put up my hand.

“Are you dating him?” a woman asks and snaps a picture, blinding me momentarily.

“No. I’m his publicist and please step back. She’s sleeping.” I take a step farther back, but they just follow.

“Oh, how darling,” one says and comes over to the side.

I whip around the carrier, putting a hand inside to keep Annabelle calm. “Please just go back to waiting for whoever you’re waiting for.”

“I had my eyes on Ford. I figured he’d need a nanny or two.”

“Hell, I was going to apply for the job.”

“And wear a slutty outfit every day,” someone else says, and all the women laugh.

I get them wanting to sleep with Ford. I mean, my libido is off the charts every time he enters the room, but to wait outside for him to come out and hope he picks you out of a group of women? Have some self-respect, ladies. You deserve so much better than that.

“Sorry, I’m only taking one girl home tonight.” Ford slides through the group and I swear the women’s hands touch any part of him they can reach. He flawlessly leads me through the crowd with his hand on my lower back. “Let’s go.”

The minute we’re clear of the group, women yell after him.

“Daddies need love too,” one says.

“Don’t you want company after she falls asleep?” says another.

Ford ignores them, walking us to a Mercedes I didn’t know he owned. The only car I knew of him having in Florida is a restored Bronco.

When he clicks her into her car seat, Annabelle wails.

He looks over his shoulder at me, back at the women, and blows out a breath. “Do me a solid and sit in the back with her while I get us out of

here?”

I nod and get in the back seat, running my knuckles down Annabelle’s cheek, trying to calm her.

“Thanks.” He buckles in the front.

The women have migrated away from the area where the players come out and are only inches away when he squeals his tires and leaves the parking lot. I refrain from mentioning anything about his driving with Annabelle in the car. He had to pick between two evils. Once we’re on the highway, he slows.

“So, is that a usual occurrence?” I ask.

“The women?” His eyes catch mine in the rearview mirror.

“Mmmhmm.”

“Yep.”

Annabelle plays with the little stuffed cow hanging from the top of the car seat while I stare out the window, not about to ask how many times he’s partaken in those women.

“They’re called puck bunnies, and they hang around wherever we are with the hopes they’ll be picked up by one of us.”

“I’m not an idiot. That was easy to figure out.”

“And I bet you assume I pick one or two up a night.”

“It’s really none of my business,” I say, wanting this conversation to end. He always beats me with his snappy comebacks and I’m not in the mood to second-guess everything I say on the plane ride home.

“Come on. Tell me. How many women do you think I bring home during the season?” He seems oddly amused by the blush filling my cheeks, and I really want to flip him off for getting off on making me uncomfortable.

I turn to look out the window. “I don’t want to have this conversation.”

“Come on. I can take it.”

I shake my head.

“Are you a prude?”

“What are you, fourteen?” I scowl.

He shrugs. “Some people probably think my maturity level never developed past that age.”

I tend to agree with them. “Just take me to the airport, then I’ll be out of your hair for the moment. I’m sure you can’t wait for that to happen.”

He blows out a breath. “I can’t believe you won’t answer the question. This is your moment to tell me exactly what you think of me.”

“You’re my boss’s son. I’m not going to degrade you.”

“Degrade me? So you must think the number is high, huh?”

I shake my head. “The last I checked, cameras don’t lie.”

We both know I’m referring to all the pictures of him out and about with various women.

He laughs and points at me through the rearview mirror. “There you go. Keep going. Give me a number.”

“I don’t really care to.”

“Sure you do.”

“I really don’t.”

Silence commences for a moment, and I cross my fingers that he’ll let the topic rest.

“Tell me your number if it makes you feel better.” We’re stopped at a light, so he looks directly at me through the mirror.

I hope the darkness of the interior hides the fact I’d never in a million years tell him my number. My mortification would be complete. “No.”

“It’s okay if it’s low. Actually, most guys would prefer low.”

I stare blankly at him. No way he just said that. First of all, why would it be cool if a guy has a high number and a girl doesn’t? But more to the point... “Why do you assume my number is low?”

“Well, you’re certainly not dressed like you want to have sex tonight.”

“Because I don’t.” Okay, not entirely true. I can admit to thinking about what it would be like to sleep with Ford, but not in any *real* way. I must be losing it because I actually look down at myself to see what I’m wearing. A pair of pin-striped pants and a blouse. It’s presentable and professional and there’s nothing wrong with it. “Are you comparing me to your bunnies who dress like they’re in the tropics regardless of the temperature outside?”

He laughs. It’d be interesting to know how he wants Annabelle to dress when she’s older. “I’m just saying, you never show your legs. It wouldn’t kill you to show some cleavage now and then.”

“For who? Do *you* want to see my cleavage?” I feel my body temperature rising. I hope we reach the private airport quickly. “Do you know how sexist you sound? Should I complain that you’re not showing off your groin cleavage whenever I see you?”

“Groin cleavage?” His forehead wrinkles.

“You know, those hip indentations arrowing down toward your junk.”

“Babe, what I have is not even close to being junk.”

I clench my hands, wanting to scream. “Probably diamond-encrusted,” I mumble to myself.

His laugh says he heard me. “I’m really enjoying you this trip.”

“Wish I could say the same.”

He turns into the small airport that his family jet flies in and out of. Thank goodness I’m seconds away from being out of this car before I go ballistic. Not that I think Mr. Jacobs would fire me. I’ve seen him go ballistic on his son quite often. Ford parks the car and my hand flies to the door handle.

“I’m just messing with you. Except the part about my dick not being junk. If I wasn’t on a sex diet, I’d show you.” He winks.

I shake my head and open the door. “You’re unbelievable.”

But as I stomp toward the small office where the pilot is supposed to be, Ford half exits his car. “I meant that as a compliment.”

I raise my hand in a dismissive gesture. And I have to admit to being pretty proud of myself for not raising my middle finger.

When I step into the small airport office, the pilot isn’t there. My shoulders slump and I pull out my phone, seeing a message from him. How did I miss his call? Quickly, I dial up my voice mail.

“Hey, Lena, I’m sorry, but there’s a problem with the plane and the mechanic doesn’t have the part, so we’re here until tomorrow. I’ll call as soon as I know something concrete.”

I end the call and plop down onto a seat. I didn’t even pack a bag because this has never happened before. Then I spring up out of my seat. Shit. I race out the door and see the taillights of Ford’s Mercedes in the distance. I fumble with my phone to press on his name so I can catch him before he gets too far.

“Second thoughts? I suppose I can show you, but you can’t touch.” He laughs and my teeth clench.

“I need you,” I say between gritted teeth.

“Say it a little breathier, more seductive.”

“Ford!”

“Oh no. That makes it sound like you’re going to bite my dick off. Not good.”

My shoulders slump and I walk farther into the deserted parking lot. “Just please come back and get me. There’s an issue with the plane and I can’t leave until tomorrow.”

“No need for excuses. You don’t want to be far away from me. That’s

sweet.” His brake lights flash right before he does a U-turn. “No worries, darling, your prince is on his way to rescue you.”

I hang up on his laugh. The man is maddening.

I watch him come back and he unlocks the doors. I’m unsure if I should sit with Annabelle or in the front, so I hesitate.

He rolls down the window. “Do you need directions? Okay, you put your hand under the handle—”

“I got it.” I open up the passenger side and climb onto the plush leather seat of the high-end car, the likes of which I’ll most likely never own.

“Do you need me to buckle you in?”

“Just drive,” I say.

“Whatever the madam wants, the madam gets.” He pulls out of the airport.

I take my phone from my bag and search for a hotel, ignoring him.

“You can stay with me. I have more than enough rooms.”

“That’s okay.” I continue to check, not finding a lot of vacancies unless I want to stay somewhere sketchy. Clearly something big is going on in Waterfall Springs.

“Unless you booked a room about a year ago, you’re probably done for. It’s Merfest weekend.”

I turn to look at him. “Merfest?”

“Yep. I’d like to see you in a coconut bra.”

I roll my eyes. “Seriously? A conference for mermaids?”

He holds up his finger. “And mermen. Men can have fins too, you know.”

“Fine, can you stop at a Walgreens or something?” I shove my phone back in my bag.

“Nah, I got everything you need.”

“I’m not using someone else’s toothbrush.”

He turns onto the highway back toward his house. I’m way too familiar with the route from the airport to his house, which says how much of a headache he’s been since I started working for his family. “It’s all new.”

“You probably own stock in Oral-B.”

“Proctor and Gamble, and yes, I do. My dad didn’t like them as an investment, so of course I bought a ton of shares. You’re a smart cookie.” He winks.

Before I know it, we’re in front of his beach house.

Lord, help me get through this night. Surely he has an off switch when

he's tired.



CHAPTER 7

"Lay her down."

Ford

AS SAD AS it is to admit, I've had more fun messing with Lena tonight than if I went to Carmelo's with the guys. Once Annabelle is fed and put to bed for the three hours max that she'll sleep before she needs me, I go into my bathroom and grab Lena a toothbrush and a pair of my shorts and a T-shirt.

She's on the couch, sitting with her back ramrod straight and her feet on the floor, looking as if she's here for a confessional.

"Relax." I place the stuff on the table. "You can take your shoes off."

"Thank you for this. Hopefully I'm out of your hair first thing in the morning." She slips off her black flats and wiggles toes that sport a vibrant pink I'd never have imagined would be her style.

"No problem." I sit on the couch and blow out a breath. "You can take the guest room. Top of the stairs, straight ahead."

She nods and scoops up the things I gave her. "Thank you."

"Maybe I'm not the big bad wolf you assume." I eye her as she stops her retreat to the stairs.

"I don't think that."

"Are you hungry?" I ask. I know I should let her go up to her room and hide out while I do what I usually do, but I'm kind of sick of spending my nights alone.

"I'm fine."

"I mean, I'm starved, so I was going to make something. If you want to

join me.” I inch toward the end of the chair, about to get up.

“Well... I didn’t eat at the game because I didn’t want to disturb Annabelle.”

I hold up my hand. “Then I’ll make you a late dinner. Go change and come back down.”

She doesn’t say anything else, but heads over to the stairs and walks up them so quietly she could be a thief.

I stare at my contents in the fridge. Hummus, chicken breasts, vegetables. All healthy and none of it appealing right now. So I pick up the phone and call for Chinese since there aren’t many places still open.

Unsure what Lena likes, I order a little bit of everything. I’ll be paying for the sodium in two nights at my game, but so be it.

Sitting back down in the chair, I turn on the television, keeping the baby monitor at my side. There’s a woman in my house and I’m not even thinking about sleeping with her. That’s a scary thought. But then again, it’s Lena. She despises me even if I don’t exactly feel different about her. She’s annoying as hell, but if I’m honest, there’s something about her I find... intriguing.

I hear the stairs creak before she turns the corner wearing my T-shirt that’s tied in the front and a pair of shorts that are rolled at least three times at the waist. Her sandy-blond hair is thrown up in a messy ponytail, and her expression looks almost shy. Not at all like the spitfire who can spar with me.

There goes that whole thought about having a woman in my house I don’t want to sleep with. In fact, right now, I’m reliving that kiss on my family’s plane on New Year’s Eve.

“I ordered Chinese. I don’t have anything worth eating,” I say.

“Thanks.”

“You can stop thanking me. I’m sure I’ve put you in enough shitty positions that I at least owe you dinner.”

She shakes her head but smiles, insinuating I’m correct. Of course I am. I’ve given her so much shit since she started, but it’s been more about my dad than her.

“If you want to go out, I’ll watch Annabelle.”

I rock my head back. “Oh, because I can’t stay home?”

“No.” Her eyes meet mine and there’s genuine kindness there. “I just meant you’ve really adapted to this single dad role and probably haven’t had time to do the kind of things you used to—”

“I never had to go out every night. I do enjoy staying in sometimes.”

“I was merely suggesting—”

“I know what you were suggesting. That I’m a manwhore who wants to go back to the arena and pick up one of those bunnies.”

She looks away from me and sits on the edge of the sofa. I have no idea why it’s grating on my nerves that she can’t allow herself to get comfortable. I’m not a monster.

“That’s not it.” Her voice is small.

“You think I’m a manwhore, right?” I shouldn’t push this issue. Just eat the Chinese, go to bed, and when I wake up, she’ll probably be gone.

“Can we please not?” Her gaze remains diverted away from me.

“Why? I won’t get offended.”

“Do you ever stop?” Her voice is louder now and her cheeks are turning light pink.

I’m starting to enjoy myself, just like in the car. “I’ll stop when you answer.”

She says nothing, and I catch her chewing on the inside of her cheek. Just when I’m about to press her again, she says, “I think you’re a professional hockey player. I think you’re Ford Jacobs, heir to Jacobs Enterprises. I think you’ve rarely gone without something you’ve wanted. I think that’s just normal life for you.”

“What’s normal life for me?”

“The girls falling for you, for one. Let’s not sit here and pretend you’re not hot as hell. And that you have money and you’re a professional athlete. You’re like the horse that wins the Triple Crown of horse racing.”

I tilt my head, intrigued that she paid me that compliment.

“I doubt you’ve been told no many times in your life.”

“Once in the seventh grade, but I was going through my awkward phase.” I wink to lighten the mood because although she’s complimenting me, I hear resentment in her tone. “What about you? You enjoy telling me no.”

“It’s my job to tell you no.”

All that comes to mind right now is when she didn’t tell me no or push me away when I kissed her all those months ago. When my lips pressed to hers and a strangled moan sounded from her throat. She definitely wasn’t saying no then. “True, but—”

“The kiss was just a New Year’s tradition. If there had been other people there—”

“You would’ve kissed another guy?” I cover my heart with my hand and

fall back into the plush chair. “You’re killing me.”

She stands from the couch. “I meant if there were other girls, you’d have been kissing someone else. Let’s remember I had to tear you away from a pair of women that night.” She remains on her feet, standing at the end of the couch. “I’m just going to go to bed.”

“Why are you always running away?”

Her footsteps stop.

The doorbell rings and I stand to go answer it, but on my way, I stop at Lena’s back. My hand wraps around her wrist, my finger running a figure eight along the inside. “Trust me. I might not have been where I wanted to be that night, but I was with *who* I wanted to be with that night. Stay and eat something.”

I inhale her scent, lavender and vanilla, and leave her standing there while I walk to the door before they ring the doorbell again and wake Annabelle.

After I pay the driver, I come back to find Lena still standing where she was, her cheeks pinker than I’ve ever seen. I’m not sure why I told her what I did, but I wanted her to know that I didn’t kiss her on New Year’s because she was the only woman there when the clock struck twelve. I kissed her because I wanted to. It’s as simple as that.

“Why does it matter to you?” she asks, glancing at me.

I take the white boxes out of the brown paper bag. “What?”

She slowly walks toward me at the kitchen counter. “Why are you so hung up on what I think about you?”

“I just like fucking with you. That’s all.”

She nods, and our eyes meet for a second. She probably knows I’m lying. And that’s exactly why I care. For some reason, Lena Boyd is the only woman who sees through me and the front I put up to my family, the world. And maybe that’s why I’ve been pushing so hard for her to tell me what an asshole she thinks I am. That I’m not worthy of that kiss on New Year’s. So I can hear what she really thinks of me and put her out of my mind. She’s way too good for a guy like me.

Light streams in my room and I squint, rolling on my sheets, exhausted and a little banged up from last night’s game. Damn Langley and his laser focus on

where I was every second. Even though he didn't play his best game last night, he's still a contender. I cringe, rising slowly until I remember Annabelle. I grab the monitor and see that it's off. Shit, did the power go out or something?

I run out of my room into Annabelle's. Her door is open, and I rush through to find Lena in the rocking chair, holding Annabelle and feeding her a bottle. Did Annabelle really sleep through the night?

Lena looks up and her gaze falls back down to my daughter. Her tongue slides out and licks her bottom lip. "I just thought as a thank you, I'd let you sleep in."

My heartbeat slows now that I know Annabelle is okay, and I rest my shoulder on the doorframe. "Thanks."

"No problem. That's a nasty bruise. Do you get hurt like that often?"

I look down at my stomach to see a black and blue bruise. "It's nothing."

Although that's obviously what's making me cringe when I move.

She places the empty bottle on the table, picks up Annabelle and puts her on her lap, then runs her hand in a circle on her back, patting lightly, holding my daughter as though she's a professional nanny. This is another layer of Lena Boyd I had no idea about. I see what everyone means when they say she's motherly.

Annabelle lets out a huge burp, and we both laugh. Lena picks her up and stands. It's then I notice she's wearing my T-shirt still, but the shorts are gone. And I finally get my first look at Lena Boyd's legs. They're as good as I imagined—long, shapely, and perfect for wrapping around a man's waist. Or his head.

"Last night must've been a big night. She's sleepy." Lena smiles at Annabelle.

I give my head a shake to clear my thoughts. "Lay her down."

I watch Lena lean over the crib to place Annabelle inside. My shirt runs up, but it's so big on Lena, I only get a glimpse of her ass for a moment before she's standing back up.

Turning around, she stays by the crib, not coming toward me. Her gaze falls over my body, her tongue sliding out of her mouth again as though she has no control. There's a hunger in her eyes that makes my dick chub. Could we cross that line? Surely being my family's PR rep isn't her life goal.

"I should go." She walks toward me, but I don't move out of the doorway. When she realizes it, her gaze slowly meets mine. "Ford..."

It's not clear what she wants from me—for me to press her to do what I think she wants me to, or for me to pretend there isn't something that feels like it's tugging us together, even if I can't explain what that is or why.

“Lena,” I say, mimicking her tone. I step closer, removing any distance between us. Her nipples poke through my shirt and brush along my chest. My arm winds around her, touching her waist, ready to hoist her up.

Her phone rings from her bedroom and Annabelle lets out a small cry, clearly not as asleep as we thought.

“That could be the pilot,” she says and squeezes around me, brushing her entire body along mine.

“Yeah.”

I watch Lena walk into the bedroom and shut the door. Fuck. I run my hand through my hair because there's no denying I almost lost all self-control and tried to sleep with her. It has to be because I need some female attention. God knows it's been too long at this point, even before I made that stupid fucking bet with Tweetie.

When I pick up Annabelle, she looks about a minute away from a tantrum and I realize I feel the same way. I need to get laid and I need it soon, before I end up fucking the last woman I should.

Sex diet be damned.



CHAPTER 8

"Don't let boys break promises."

Lena

WHEN THE PLANE TAKES OFF, leaving the beaches of Florida behind, I finally release the breath I've been holding. I didn't spread my legs for Ford Jacobs. Mission accomplished.

Now if only I could stop replaying his intense stare or the feel of his arms around me in his daughter's nursery. Not that it's much of a nursery. A crib, a rocker. No decorations.

I was just doing him a favor with Annabelle. He let me stay the night with no notice, so I was being nice, like anyone would, right? He played a hard game the night before and we were up late, eating and chatting about all kinds of things—where to get the best egg rolls in New York City, how he first got into hockey. The topic of his playboy ways was put aside, and as much as I'm surprised, I actually enjoyed his company.

I couldn't figure out how to turn the monitor off in Annabelle's room because the main unit looks like something NASA would use on a space mission, so I opted to turn off the one in Ford's room. Going into his room to turn off the monitor, seeing him sprawled out in only his boxer briefs, wasn't part of the plan. I can't lie, I stood there for a few seconds, watching him sleep. I didn't lie last night. Lots of women see him as the Triple Crown. He's got it all. If I hadn't witnessed his turbulent relationship with his father, I'd say he was handed not only a silver spoon, but an entire silver platter. But I know his deciding to play hockey and not take over the business caused a rift in his family. One that has remained unfixable.

Still, I can't stop wondering, if the pilot hadn't called and my phone hadn't woken Annabelle, would Ford have taken me to bed? Would we have kissed only to realize it was a mistake, or would the lust coursing in that room have been enough to keep us going until we quenched our thirst for each other? Afterward, would I have hated myself and been discarded like all the other women in Ford's life?

The fact that I have all these questions makes it clear the right decision was made. I can't sleep with him, even if it is for only one night.

I open my laptop, seeing an email from Gavin. I go through what he's got so far for the story. The pictures turned out awesome. Sending an email back to him, I ask him to send me everything before it goes to print.

Then my eyelids fall closed as I lean my head back on the headrest, thinking that I probably need to get laid. It's been way too long, and if I can just sleep with someone, maybe all these thoughts about Ford will disappear.

I walk into the Jacobs' house, surprised to hear Mr. and Mrs. Jacobs arguing in his office. Usually, he'd be at the Jacobs Enterprises office at this time of day. But I tend to do most of my work here with Mrs. Jacobs. I thought it'd be a light day, especially since the whole Ford baby mama crisis is well on its way to being spun to show Ford as a glowing single dad.

Deciding to head to the kitchen and hopefully convince Bennie to make me a sandwich for lunch, I find Imogen, Morgan, and Bennie huddled around a plate of small triangle sandwiches.

"What's going on?" I ask.

"They're at it again," Imogen says. "Dad's birthday party."

His party isn't for two more weeks. Usually, Mrs. Jacobs does whatever she wants for their parties and Mr. Jacobs just shows up in whatever she tells him to wear.

"They're arguing about the agreement they made," Imogen says, taking a triangle sandwich.

Before I can ask what she's talking about, Bennie says, "Heard you got stranded in Florida." There's a hint of mischief in his eyes.

"I did." I pick up one of the sandwiches, starved from not eating anything on the plane.

“And?” Morgan asks.

I still with the sandwich halfway to my mouth. “And what?”

They all stare at me, then Imogen pulls out her phone, types out something, and slides it over to me. There’s a picture of me with Annabelle on my chest and a suit-laden Ford walking to his car. The caption reads, “Ford Jacobs sports new car and new baby mama.” I laugh and slide it back, not bothering to read the article.

“They don’t know it’s you. It was too dark. You’re described as a sandy-blonde with a resting bitch face.” Morgan laughs.

I take the phone back, more interested in the article now. “The puck bunnies took this?”

They all nod, even Bennie in his Hawaiian shirt. The man is always wearing Hawaiian shirts and complains all the time about how he’s never been to Hawaii but how he’s prepared in case anyone wants to have sympathy and take him. You’d think the Jacobs would at this point.

I shake my head. “People are the worst.” I give the phone back after seeing the women said I was a bitch the entire time and wouldn’t let them look at the baby.

“You took what they want,” Imogen says with a smugness to her voice.

I scoff. “I don’t want your brother.”

Silence. No one says a word.

“What? I don’t.”

“Where did you stay last night?” Morgan asks with a shit-eating grin.

“There was a Merfest going on, so there weren’t any hotel rooms available.” My tone already sounds like I’m making excuses.

“Merfest?” Bennie asks. “There cannot be that many people who think they’re mermaids.”

Bennie might have a point. Especially since I didn’t call every hotel before Ford offered up his place.

“I slept in my own room.”

“Did you bring extra clothes?” Morgan asks.

“I borrowed a shirt and shorts to sleep in.” I shrug, feigning nonchalance.

Morgan elbows Imogen. “Right out of a movie.”

They both laugh. Bennie shakes his head and pulls a cake out of the oven. It’s chocolate and it looks delicious. I knew I smelled something good when I came in here.

“It’s not out of a movie. The plane needed a repair. I needed a place to

stay, so I stayed at your brother's. You've seen us. We don't exactly see eye to eye on everything. On anything really."

"That's the point, darling," Bennie says. "All that animosity boils up until you can't control your hunger for one another."

I tilt my chin down and look at him from under my brows. "Okay, Bennie, put down the romance novels for a night. This was nothing of the sort."

A door slams from elsewhere in the penthouse and we all quiet for a moment to see what might follow, but don't hear anything else.

"I take offense to the romance novel comment." Bennie turns his head away from me as if he's mad.

"I'm sorry, it's just..."

"What?" Morgan asks.

"I don't like your brother!"

"Well, that's clear, but those pictures are incriminating," Mrs. Jacobs comes into the kitchen. "Oh, are you doing the practice cakes for the party in a couple of weeks?"

"Sure am," Bennie says with a smile.

"This is the chocolate, right?" she asks.

Bennie nods. "Mr. Jacobs doesn't eat chocolate though?"

Mrs. Jacobs waves him off. "He won't even eat the cake. The majority of people like chocolate, so that's what we're having."

Morgan walks over to her mom and lays her head on her shoulder. "Are you and Daddy getting a divorce?" Morgan has a personality much like her brother—not much is ever taken seriously.

"He's trying to go back on his word. He told me that at sixty, he'd retire. We're still young enough to travel and see the parts of the world that don't have anything to do with Jacobs Enterprises." She takes a sandwich from the tray and bites off a piece of it.

"He's retiring?" I ask. If he retires, the family might not need a full-time PR person, which means I would be out of a job. The familiar anxiety about how I might shelter and feed myself makes my chest tighten and my breath come out shallow.

Mrs. Jacobs blows out a breath. "The man will probably never retire. I told him I'm going to start going away without him. Said I'd go to Africa on one of those safaris where there's hardly any signal. He told me that if I didn't have such an ungrateful son, he could've retired three years ago."

“Once again, he has one child who’s involved in the company.” Imogen shakes her head.

Imogen works part time at Jacobs Enterprises, but her position isn’t high up on the food chain. She has to finish graduate school this year first.

I don’t say anything about how Imogen has confessed to me that she too wants nothing to do with the family legacy. I think she’s just hurt that her dad doesn’t see her as an option.

“Anyway, on to more important things, the plane, okay?” Mrs. Jacobs asks me.

I nod, swallowing my second small triangle sandwich. “Yeah, it’s all good.”

“I’m glad Ford took you in.” She runs her hand down my arm.

Then Mr. Jacobs comes into the kitchen with a severe look on his face. “Fine, you can have your way, but I want six months to make the transition.” He shoves his hands in his pockets.

This is the odd thing about my position with the family. I’m treated like one of their own. I’ve witnessed the girls’ breakups, the fights between Mr. and Mrs. Jacobs, Bennie’s breakdowns. They don’t hold back with me. It’s nice to be a part of a family after living life alone all these years.

I don’t even really have a close girlfriend. Imogen is probably my closest friend. We go out for drinks and scope out guys, but we’re not “telling each other all our deepest secrets” kind of friends. When you’re responsible for making sure your dad gets to work after your mom dies at the age of seven you don’t have a lot of time for kid stuff like making a BFF for life. I took on the role of caregiver for over fifteen years—until I couldn’t do it anymore.

“I can do six months,” Mrs. Jacobs says, smiling at her husband.

He shakes his head and looks around. When he finds me standing there, he studies me for a moment as though he has to find the words. “Lena, glad you’re home safely.” He nods and leaves before I can say anything.

If Mr. Jacobs retires, that could mean I’m out of a job. And if I’m out of a job, how will I pay for everything? I make really good money right now, and it’s allowed me to live a lifestyle that I never could’ve imagined as a teenager—one with financial security. I don’t have to wonder how I’ll eat or whether I’ll be kicked out of yet another shitty apartment. This job allows me to pay the facility that cares for my dad. And without that paycheck, I’m screwed.

“See, girls, don’t let boys break promises. Your father promised me ages ago. I understand things haven’t gone how he wanted, but that was our

arrangement, and I wasn't going to let him get away with turning his back on it." Mrs. Jacobs takes another bite of her sandwich. "These are perfect, Bennie."

Bennie smiles wide, happy with himself. What does he have to worry about? The Jacobs will still need a cook. Maybe I can be his sous chef.



CHAPTER 9

"I wanted to celebrate."

Ford

I'M BECKONED up to New York City by my father a week after the photo shoot. I can't help but wonder if this has something to do with the fact that every woman on the planet now thinks Lena's my girlfriend, thanks to that picture and the accompanying article. There went my idea of picking up a woman to get Lena Boyd out of my fucking head. Not that I have time with Annabelle. Or that most of the bunnies would mind. But I can't have some money hungry woman threatening to tell her story to the press because I'm "engaged" and slept with her.

Everyone thinks I have this whole single dad thing under control, but truth is, I'm tired as fuck and I'm going to have to break down and hire a nanny soon. The only good thing is that Annabelle's become an awesome sleeper over the past week, sleeping at least six hours a night, plus naps through the day. But I'm gonna need permanent help soon. Live-in help, rather than just a babysitter here and there.

The only good thing about my father demanding my presence is that I'll get to experience New York City in the fall. I made sure to bring Annabelle's stroller so I can give my little girl her first experience of walking through Central Park.

The elevator stops on the floor of my childhood penthouse, and I step through toward the round table adorning the foyer. Giant flowers fill a vase, as always. A new fondness for the place I've both loved and hated over the years drapes over me because Annabelle will be a part of this now. I take a

moment to envision a year from now when she'll be walking into the penthouse on her own, searching for them.

"Ford." My mom comes around the corner, a smile on her lips. "Your father told me to stick around the house today. Where's my baby?"

She walks toward me, and I put down the carrier behind me and open my arms for her. Although she hugs me, she's laughing because we both know she meant Annabelle and not me.

"What's it like not to be the favorite anymore?" Imogen joins us, biting an apple and leaning on the wall.

"Nice to see you."

"Your girlfriend's in the kitchen." She tilts her head in that direction.

"We both know she's not my girlfriend."

My mom already has Annabelle out of the carrier.

I place Annabelle's bag on the foyer table. "What am I being summoned home for? His party isn't until next week. Oh, and don't forget, Mom, it's in and out for me since I have a game in Nashville the next day."

"We know." My mom rocks Annabelle.

Imogen walks over and kisses Annabelle's forehead. I love the way my daughter's getting doted on.

It's amazing how only months ago, I thought my life was over when I found out I was going to be a parent. Now, I can't imagine not having a daughter, even if I do sense myself losing who I was. That guy was kind of a prick anyway, so maybe it's for the best.

We all walk into the kitchen, because it's the place we seem to congregate when we're all home. Bennie's busy cooking, and Lena's on a stool with her legs crossed, a grape between her fingers as though she's ready to pop it into her mouth. She pauses when she sees me in the doorway, then her hand lowers.

"Ford." She nods.

"Now, is that anyway to greet your boyfriend?" my sister says.

"Cut it, Imogen," I say, but Lena's blush says these jokes have probably been going on nonstop in my absence. "Sorry about that. Puck bunnies can be kind of brutal."

"I'm a big girl," she says and finally places the grape in her mouth. She's in another pants-and-blouse set, hiding that rockin' body I saw a week ago.

"It seems to have died down."

"That's only because you haven't been seen together," Imogen chirps.

What do I have to do to get her to stop talking?

“Well, as long as I keep up my good guy act, we should be good.” I wink, and Lena smiles.

My mom looks between us. “You guys are amicable?”

“They’re screwing, so...”

My mom smacks Imogen on the back of the head. “The baby is here.” She looks at Annabelle with a smile.

“She can’t understand me.” Imogen holds the back of her head and walks to the other side of the large island between Bennie and Lena. “And I liked it better when that move was only reserved for Ford.”

“Bennie’s making homemade baby food,” my mom says.

“I thought you didn’t know I was coming?”

She laughs. “Who runs this household?”

I nod, knowing it’s her. “Where’s Dad? I want to get this over with so I can take Annabelle through Central Park.”

“He’s at the office,” Lena says. “We’re to go over there.” She stands and straightens the paperwork she was going through, slipping into her flats that were resting next to her chair. Stealing one more grape, she packs up her bag.

“Why are you going?” I ask.

Her smile fades, and she inhales and exhales as though I’m trying her patience. “I was asked to go as well.”

“But I haven’t done shit. Hell, I’m asleep every night at eight unless I have a game.” Anger simmers under the surface. I’ve been behaving myself and he’s still got Lena up my ass?

“Whine much?” Imogen asks.

“Don’t you have a job?” I snap.

“Well, I wasn’t born with a dick, so...” She looks at the ceiling. “No.”

“You do so, Imogen. Your father made a very nice position for you.” My mom shakes her head at my sister while simultaneously making funny faces for Annabelle.

“A position that means shit, Mom. I literally have nothing to do. He makes me go to meetings to pretend that I’m ‘important,’ but we both know I’m not. I’ve decided to say screw it and go to Europe. Find myself.”

My mom blows out a breath. “You already did that, it didn’t take. We should all be happy you didn’t come home with one of these.” My mom nods to Annabelle.

“It wouldn’t have mattered. Only the male heir means anything around

here.”

“That’s not true.” My mom shakes her head, but it was ingrained in us all when I was young that I’d be the one to take over. The firstborn male of the family has always taken the reins from the generation before. You’d think we’re fucking royalty or something.

“Well, have fun in Europe,” I say. “Don’t get in too much trouble, otherwise Lena shows up at your door.”

Lena scowls at me. “You act like I’m a bounty hunter or something.”

“You’re a fun-sucker.” I cross my arms.

“Now, now, happy couple. No fighting.” Imogen tries to pretend to make peace.

“Let’s go.” I tilt my head toward the door. We need to get this over with.

“I’m going to keep her,” my mom says, nuzzling Annabelle.

“Okay, but don’t take her to Central Park. That’s my thing.”

Everyone in the room laughs, but I’ll be pissed if anyone takes that away from me.

Then Lena and I exit my parents’ penthouse. Instead of driving my car, I hail a taxi, wanting to cut this as short as possible. I can’t imagine what my dad has to say to me. It better not have anything to do with me taking over the company.

We arrive at Jacobs Enterprises, and I’m about to pass by security without telling them who I am until Lena stops walking and clears her throat.

“Hi, Rick, can I have a pass and one for Ford as well please?”

I groan and walk over to her.

“Ford Jacobs?” Rick asks.

I glare at Lena, annoyed.

“This is procedure. You don’t want to be part of your dad’s company, you get cleared by security.” She gives me a saccharine grin.

I arch an eyebrow. “You’re feisty today.”

“Do you think I want to be summoned to the office?”

“Aren’t you always here?”

She balks. “You have no idea what I do, do you?”

“Here you go, Lena.” Rick slides over an ID badge. “I’m going to need

your driver's license," he says to me.

Again, my head twists toward Lena, who's biting her lip to stop from laughing. I look around as I pull out my wallet. "You honestly don't recognize me?"

Lena outright laughs. "You're mighty full of yourself today."

"I'm the son of the owner."

"The son of the owner who never comes here," she singsongs as I hand my ID to Rick.

"I never stop at the security desk when I'm here and no one ever says anything." But in all honesty, I haven't been to my dad's office in many years.

"Well, precautions. Never know what kinda crazy might pop in one day."

"Are you insinuating that I'm the crazy one?" I accept my ID back from Rick and stuff it back in my wallet.

"You do have some anger issues toward your dad."

I put up my hand and shake my head, looking at Rick. "How's it coming?"

"Just checking that he has you on his list of visitors today."

I grow irritated by the slowness with which Rick is working while Lena seems like she's enjoying it.

"Here you go," Rick says a minute later. "Stop back and return it on your way out so we know you've left the building."

"Sure, buddy," I say and stuff the guest pass in my pocket before heading toward the elevators.

"You're supposed to wear it. And maybe be nice to Rick. Your father's safety is in his hands."

I dramatically look back at Rick who, from a glance, I'd guess is probably in his early sixties and not at all in shape. This guy isn't chasing anyone down regardless of the threat they might pose. "Sure thing."

The elevator dings and I press the button to go up to the top floor. Lena rolls her head back, circling it as she stands in the opposite corner of the elevator. The urge to cage her in comes over me before I shake that thought out of my head pronto.

"Do you know what this is about?" I ask.

She shakes her head.

"Really?"

"Yes really. Do you think I'd let you be ambushed?"

I shrug one shoulder. “You do work for him, not me.”

She blows out a breath. “You really need to get that chip off your shoulder. Your family is not out to get you.”

“It’s not my family I’m meeting, it’s my father, and he wants me traveling up this elevator every damn day until I die of a heart attack at my desk. That’s not the life I want.”

Her plump lips say nothing, but her eyes speak volumes.

“What?”

She shrugs. “Nothing. It’s none of my business.”

“There are a lot of things that aren’t your business that you make your business. Let’s hear it.”

“I’m just saying, a lot of people would love to be in your position. Take over a successful, established company? A corporation the size of this one, just handed to you? I can’t even imagine.”

Annoyance brims inside me. “So I’m the douchebag because I don’t want it? Another spoiled brat move by Richie Rich for telling his dad to fuck himself?”

She shakes her head. “That’s not what I’m saying. I’m just saying understand where your dad is coming from. Understand that it’s hard for him.”

“You’re unbelievable.” I shake my head and look away from her.

“I could say the same.”

I whip my head back in her direction. Our eyes meet and neither of us looks away as though we’re in a staring contest and the first one to blink is the weakest.

“Let’s just agree to disagree,” I finally say.

Luckily, the elevator dings and I step forward before remembering that my mom would smack the back of my head if I didn’t let Lena go first. So rather than stomp off angrily, I hold out my arm for her to go first.

She does with a smug look and whispers, “Smile. People are watching.”

“You’d know,” I grit out, smiling and waving to a few people who say my name.

“Ford!” My dad’s assistant, Frida, rounds her desk and looks me up and down. “You’re so big.” She waves me forward. “Come down here, you’re too tall.”

“Hi, Frida.” I give her a smile. It’s been a long time since I saw her.

Lena sits on the couch, waiting to be called in.

“Hi, Lena dear. How nice to have Ford escort you here,” Frida says.

I’m pretty sure Lena is probably choking on her tongue as she tries not to say what she’s really thinking, and I chuckle.

“Yeah, it was a peachy ride,” Lena says sarcastically.

Frida doesn’t seem to hear it though, and her hands pinch my cheeks. “You used to have the chubbiest cheeks, but look at you now, all grown and handsome.” She steps back and I stand straight, my back stretching. “Where’s the baby?”

“With my mom,” I answer, and she frowns.

The buzzer rings and my dad’s voice comes through. “Send them in, Frida.”

Her eyes open as though she forgot momentarily that she’s working. She hurries around the desk and picks up the receiver, telling my dad we’re coming as she shoos us with her hand to get in there as though we’re late or something.

We both walk to the door until I realize again I need to let Lena go first, so I wave her in.

“Always the gentleman,” Frida says, smiling at us.

Lena rolls her eyes and steps in.

“Close the door,” my dad says, standing and rounding his desk. “Drink?”

Lena sits at one end of the couch, crossing her legs and sitting up straight. “No, I’m okay.”

“I’m good,” I say on the opposite side of the couch in a much more relaxed fashion.

My dad grabs a bottle of champagne and three glasses. Lena and I share a confused look, then look back at my dad.

“Thanks for coming down here today,” he says.

“It was right around the corner from my place. Not inconvenient at all.” I’m sarcastic.

My dad drills me with a disapproving look. “I’m sure the private plane was comfortable enough.”

He always reminds me of what he still does for me. I nod. Okay, my dad kind of schooled me there.

“Is there something I’m not aware of, Mr. Jacobs? I felt like things were under control.” Lena reaches into her bag and takes out a notepad and pen.

“It is, but I have some exciting news and I wanted to celebrate.”

I glance at Lena, and she looks at me briefly before we both turn back to

my dad.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“You two are getting married.”



CHAPTER 10

"Deal."

Lena

MY HEARTBEAT HAMMERS in my head and my pen drops to the floor, but it takes me a minute to reach for it because of the words that just left my boss's mouth.

"I'm sorry," I say, leaning forward like those men who can't hear out of one ear so they're always putting their good ear toward you. "I thought you just said Ford and I are getting married."

"I did." Mr. Jacobs leans forward and opens the champagne bottle. "It's like this... people have embraced Lena as the new woman in your life."

"Since when is being called a bitch embracing?" The words are out of my mouth before I can think better of it.

Ford snickers next to me.

"What I mean is that they were okay with another woman besides the baby's mother being in the picture. That got me thinking—"

"Why?" Ford asks, clearly not as baffled as I am as to why Mr. Jacobs would even suggest such a thing. "What's in it for you?"

Mr. Jacobs pours the champagne into three flutes and leans back. Ford is a mini version of his dad. Well, only mini because he's the younger version. They share the same blue eyes and darker blond hair, although Mr. Jacobs now has gray around his temples. Both of their bodies are strong and tall. And they both intimidate me.

Mr. Jacobs sets his gaze on his only son. "I'm assuming you still have no interest in running Jacobs Enterprises?"

I do not want to be here to listen to this conversation. I stand from the couch. "Maybe I should leave."

"Please sit," Mr. Jacobs says, his eyes never leaving Ford.

"You know I don't."

"Your mom wants me to slow down. To retire from running the day-to-day operations. The only way I can do that is if I sell someone controlling interest of the company and make sure I have a spot on the board. Since you're the next heir, you will also have a spot on the board."

"I don't want any of it."

Mr. Jacobs shakes his head. "It doesn't matter. You're already listed on all the paperwork. You're on the board. I have a very interested party, but not all men are as liberal as I am."

Ford cracks up. "Liberal?" He raises his brows.

"Some people are more conservative with their values, and having a son who blatantly picks up women, impregnates a one-night stand, and gets in bar brawls isn't considered trustworthy in a lot of circles."

"Why is where I put my dick any concern to your buyer?" Ford leans back in the couch, his ankle resting on his knee just like his dad is across from him, and they exchange an intense and challenging stare.

"I don't make the rules, but we do have to follow them. I need you to clean up your image for this deal to go through. And an engagement to a woman like Lena will go a long way toward doing that."

Ford stands and shakes his head, hands on his hips. "You're asking me to marry her?" He points at me.

I feel the sting of the incredulous way that sentence leaves his mouth.

"Excuse me, but I think you could do worse," I say.

Mr. Jacobs laughs. "I like the way you two challenge one another."

"I'm not doing it, Dad."

"Then you come home," he says matter-of-factly. "Come home and take over for me."

Ford scowls.

"That's what I thought. If I sell this company, all you have to do is hold a board position. You can play hockey until you retire, and after that, your life is yours. So I guess the question is how bad do you not want to run Jacobs Enterprises?" His dad stands, never looking at his son.

Meanwhile, Ford paces and runs his hand through his hair. I have so many thoughts running through my head that it's hard to make sense of them,

but they all come down to one word—no.

No way can I marry Ford. Why would I? The only thing that could possibly happen is that one of us would kill the other or eventually we'd give in to temptation and I'd be left heartbroken. Because Ford Jacobs is not a forever kinda guy. No bueno. No way. Not gonna do it. I love working for the Jacobs family, they've been good to me, but this is asking too much. And it's definitely not part of my job description.

"I can't believe this. No one will believe it," Ford says.

I scowl at him. "I'm starting to take offense here."

Ford looks over and his gaze locks with mine. "I'm not saying it because of you. It's me. Who would believe that Ford Jacobs would fall to bended knee?"

"No one thought you could raise a daughter by yourself either," Mr. Jacobs say.

"I have to. I don't have a choice."

"You have enough money to hire full-time nanny service, yet you're with Annabelle every minute you can be."

"Careful, Dad, you almost sound proud of me," Ford says and leans on the edge of the desk, his head hanging down.

"Excuse me," I say, raising my hand. "You're all forgetting that I haven't agreed."

Mr. Jacobs looks at his son then at me. "Excuse us, Ford. I want to talk to Lena on her own."

Ford straightens from the desk. "Why? If I'm going to be her husband, I wanna know what you're offering her to marry me."

Mr. Jacobs sits in the chair he was in before. "No. It's a fake marriage. It's Lena's business and her decision to share it with you should she choose."

My stomach tightens. As ridiculous as this idea is, I'm afraid he's going to make it hard for me to say no.

"Whatever." Ford storms out of the office and slams the door.

"I apologize for my son," Mr. Jacobs says, a comment he's made plenty of times before.

"No need."

"Lena, I know your situation. I'm sure that takes you by surprise, but I vet all my people thoroughly before letting them into our lives. I know about your father. About your upbringing."

My heart drops into my stomach with a huge thud and lands there like

lead. I suck in a breath, and tears of embarrassment prick my eyes.

He gives me a soft smile. “There’s no reason to be upset that I know. If anything, it only makes me respect the fine young woman you’ve turned into more. But if you agree to marry Ford for a small time, I’ll offer you enough money to start your own PR firm, enough that you wouldn’t have to worry about paying for your rent or your dad’s facility for many years. Depending on how well you managed the money, you could set yourself up for a long time. I understand what I’m asking. My son isn’t an easy man. You’ll be obligated to show up at events together, but I’m willing to give you a third now and the rest after it’s over.”

I tear my gaze away and walk over to the window and stare at the streets of New York City. A city full of possibilities. A city where things can go downhill really fast and I could go back to living out of my car. “What happens to my position after you retire?”

“I think you know that we will no longer need your services.” His voice is soft, as though he feels bad saying the words.

I nod, confirming what I already knew, and turn back to him.

“How much?” I hate asking, but I have to put a number to it. That’s the only way to know if it’s worth it.

He smiles, goes to his desk, and pulls out a pad of paper with his name on it. He scribbles a number and slides it across the desk.

I walk over and pick it up to read it. My eyes widen and I stare at the number for a moment, speechless. “This is too—”

“It’s not. Ford won’t make this easy even if he agrees to it. I want to make my wife happy, and to tell you the truth, I’m tired. Tired of fighting my son. Tired of it all. I want to spend whatever time I have left with my wife, traveling and experiencing the things I can afford to do but never had the time for. I honor my promises, and I promised my wife I would step aside when I was sixty. I had hopes my son would take over, but since that’s not an option, I’m going to sell. Unfortunately, in this industry, there are a lot of conservative people who don’t look kindly on a man raising his daughter alone after a one-night stand.”

I set down the paper and walk back to the window. “You can’t change that. They already know it.”

“You know as well as I do Lena that business is all about perception. The minute your engagement is announced, as sad as it is, people will forget the past. Most people don’t care if things are actually the way they seem, just that

they seem the way they want them to. As long as you two look and act like a couple in love, the new narrative will be what a wonderful family you're going to make. I've been in these circles a long time. Trust me on this."

"But how would we get out of it?" I turn to face him again.

"I'll have that conversation with you and Ford, but first you have to agree." He nods toward the piece of paper on his desk. "Is that enough money?"

I'm sick at the idea of doing this for money, but why would I do it otherwise? Upend my life and play pretend, for what? And if I'm not going to be employed after he retires, this money will make sure I never have to live out of a car again. It will give me financial security I've never before had in my life. Something I desperately crave.

Sure, I'm in PR and I'm used to spinning a story. But an outright lie feels different. If people ever find out it was a sham they'll judge me, maybe think I have no integrity, no dignity. But those same people likely don't know what it's like to wonder where your next meal is going to come from or wonder whether today is the day you'll be evicted from your apartment.

Then there's the question of how people will perceive me. Will they think I stole Ford away from Annabelle's mother? That I broke up what could possibly be a happy family?

And finally, how do I pretend to marry a guy I want to have sex with? That's the real obstacle here. If I let myself fall for Ford, I'll be in worse shape after this charade is over and the money won't matter. But I have no choice. I can't take care of my dad on my own. He needs to remain in that facility.

I draw in a deep breath, hands on my tummy willing it to calm down. "I'm in."

A smile displays his perfect veneers. "Great news, Lena." He leans over his desk and presses the intercom button. "Send in Ford, Frida."

"Sure thing, Mr. Jacobs. I just have to find him..."

"Frida, Ford is there, right?"

"Um..."

"Frida!" Mr. Jacobs' voice is sterner now.

"I'm here, relax. I just went to the restroom," Ford says through the intercom, then the door bursts open. "I can't believe you. You're still trying to control me. Too bad I didn't come with robot mode when I was born." Ford's eyes blaze.

While I was processing and getting what I want out of this deal, anger was consuming him.

“It’s a simple question. Do you want me to stop harassing you to take over the company? Do you want to finish out your hockey career without any pressure from me to do otherwise? I guess it comes down to how badly you want it.”

“I think I should leave you two to talk.” I grab my bags from the couch.

“Lena, sit down please.”

I do as he says, and Ford joins me on the other end of the couch.

Mr. Jacobs sits across from us. “Just listen to the arrangement. You announce your engagement at my birthday party next week. You marry at the end of the season, then you give it at least six months as a married couple. At that point, the company will be purchased and all paperwork will have gone through, and you can both do what you like.”

My eyes widen and I sit back. I didn’t think this plan would consist of that long of a time frame, but I guess billion-dollar companies aren’t bought in a day.

“We have to pretend to be in love for over a year?” Ford’s voice hitches. “And I’m sure there are events we’ll have to go to. Who plans the wedding? Why can’t we just be engaged and then break up?”

“The wedding is a must. If we do it at the end of the season, it should be just as everything is coming through. You have to remember, I need to schmooze the guy. If he thinks I’m desperate, he’ll lowball his offer and I won’t let this company go for anything less than top dollar. This is a charade I’m asking the two of you to keep up with.”

Ford leans forward, his forearms resting on his thighs, his head hanging low. Then he peeks at me. “Did you agree?”

I nod hesitantly. He rolls his eyes. That only infuriates me because he doesn’t know why I need to say yes, and frankly, it’s none of his business. He can judge me all he wants.

He looks at his dad. “No more comments. I’m a hockey player. Right wing for the Florida Fury. Not Ford Jacobs, heir to Jacobs Enterprises. No holding it over my head or making me feel guilty for years to come if you sell.”

His dad nods. “I promise. But—”

“Here we go.” Ford blows out a breath.

“Lena will move to Florida. You two will be photographed—often. I’m

sure Lena can arrange things, and she knows how to spin it so people believe it. You two need to sell this.”

“Great, so I’m marrying a world-class liar. Perfect.” Ford shakes his head.

“You’re going to need me on your side,” I tell him.

“There will be events up here you’ll have to come up for. Some with Annabelle and some not.”

“My daughter will not be used as a pawn.” Ford’s tone brooks no argument.

“Okay, then bring Annabelle when you want.”

Ford turns to me. “I’ll remain Annabelle’s primary caretaker. No need for her to get attached to you just for you to leave her after a year.” There’s a coldness I’ve never heard in his voice, and a chill runs up my spine.

“She’s a baby,” Mr. Jacobs says. “She won’t even remember.”

“Nonnegotiable,” Ford says.

Mr. Jacobs nudges the champagne glasses between us. “Deal. So are congratulations in order?” He raises his glass.

I look at Ford and he looks at me, both of our eyes filled with doubt, but we pick up the glasses anyway.

“Deal,” we say in unison.



CHAPTER 11

"No kiss goodbye, honey?"

Ford

LENA and I split after leaving Ford Enterprises. She takes her cab to who knows where and I climb into mine to head back to my parents' penthouse. I'm fairly sure I speak for both of us when I say we're in shock. Never did I imagine my dad would throw a fake marriage at me. Sure, it's just another way for him to control me, but sitting on a board is a helluva lot better than having him up my ass every damn day to take over the company. Something I was never going to do.

The elevator dings on my arrival at my parents' penthouse, and the silence makes me still for a moment. My eyes jolt to the spot where I left the baby stroller and I see that it's gone. Immediately, I pull out my phone and call my mom.

She answers and I hear Manhattan traffic in the background. "You're already back?"

"Did you know about this?"

She's silent for a moment. "I did."

"Mom!" I yell.

"Come meet me downstairs. I just took Annabelle for a walk around the block because she was getting cranky upstairs. But come down and we'll walk through Central Park. Surely you don't mind your mother being part of the memory?"

I sigh. "Give me five."

I hang up and go to the bathroom. After I take a leak, I stare at myself in

the mirror while washing my hands. Can I really go through with this? Lena practically hates me most of the time and now she'll be my roommate? Even if there is some kind of weird sexual tension between us, I'm still not on her list of top ten favorite people. Hell, I probably wouldn't even make the top one hundred.

I head down the elevator and find my mom talking with our doorwoman, Anessa. They're both gushing over Annabelle. That doesn't really get old—people loving on my daughter. She is the cutest baby in existence.

"Here he is," my mom says and gestures in my direction.

I nod a hello. "Anessa."

"I saw the magazines, but I didn't believe it until your mother told me. Congratulations." Anessa beams at me.

She's been the doorwoman since I was in high school. The condo committee didn't want a woman outside the building, but my mom took her side and fought to make it happen.

"Yep, I'm a father now."

"And you'll make a good one." She winks as though we share a secret.

We do. We're both unsure if I can handle this new venture. Anessa saw me in my glory days when my parents were traveling for my dad's work and I was partying.

"Thanks." I nod and smile.

We stand there for a moment until my mom says, "We should get going. Give this little one her first stroll through Central Park." My mom covers up the stroller to make sure Annabelle stays warm.

"Have fun, you two," Anessa says with a wave.

Since my parents' building is directly across from Central Park, we cross the first intersection and enter the park. The leaves have already begun to change into vibrant reds and oranges. A few are sprinkled on the ground. It's crazy to think that in only a few short weeks, the trees will be bare.

"She's never going to remember this," I mumble, staring at the trees and stuffing my hands in my pockets to warm them.

"No, but you will. And you can tell her all about it one day. It's a special time for you."

Ever since my mom beat cancer seven years ago, her attitude on life has changed. I don't know for sure, but I'd bet that was when my parents made the agreement about when my dad would retire. I guess maybe that's why he's been pressuring me so hard the past few years to take over the company.

Mom's diagnosis shook our family. Although she survived it after a grueling year, we all realized she's the glue that holds us all together.

"I can't believe you didn't warn me."

She glances at me, guilt in her eyes. "I'm sorry. I know it was a shock to you and Lena. Your father asked me to keep it quiet. I wanted to warn you before you went to his office, but I promised him. I wasn't happy with the suggestion at first either. I worried that you'd run, and I'd never see my granddaughter."

I swing my arm over her shoulders, "I'd never take her away from you."

She nods. "This is the kind of peace I need in my life." She glances up again, tears in her eyes. "You and your father have been at odds for so long. Now that you have Annabelle, I want it to stop. I don't want her to grow up witnessing the arguing and the fighting. You two can barely be in the same room right now."

"He's stubborn."

She huffs and swipes at her eyes. "So are you."

I take over pushing the stroller, needing something to do. "I don't want the same thing he does," I explain for what feels like the billionth time. "I worked hard to get where I am and I'm not going to throw it all away to work in an office every day until I die."

"I know. I know."

For a moment, all I hear are the leaves crunching under our feet and traffic off in the distance.

"I know your father's suggestion isn't ideal, but it's an end. Otis Sandersville has traditional family values, and appearance is important to him. All we have to do is convince enough people you and Lena are happily engaged, and eventually people will forget about the past and focus on the amazing future you're building for yourself and your daughter."

"And if Britney comes back?" I ask the one question that sometimes keeps me up at night. Because how will I handle not having Annabelle with me all the time now that I'm used to being her number one? How will I feel if the mother who abandoned her pops back up in her life?

I understand how tired Britney was. How much taking care of a baby sucks out of you. Especially since before Annabelle came along, we both lived the opposite of how a responsible parent probably should. But she abandoned her daughter. Still, she could have doubts about her decision and return, want partial custody back.

“Well, that could potentially pose a problem with the plan, but at the same time, it would be good for Annabelle. I guess we play it by ear.”

Would it be good for Annabelle? I honestly don't know. I guess if she were back for good. But having a parent pop in and out of her life like a Whack-A-Mole can't be good for a child.

We walk a little longer and eventually sit on a bench by the small lake in the park. Ducks gliding across the water leave small wakes behind them.

“Lena hates me.” I voice the biggest reason I'm not sure this will work.

“She doesn't hate you. You aggravate her, for certain. You egg her on all the time. The two of you banter too much.”

I refrain from telling my mom how turned on our banter gets me. There are some things you don't tell your mother.

“Listen.” She places her hand on my thigh. “This plan is one right out of the movies or something, but I'm sure we're not the first. It's not as though wealthy families haven't based marriages on strategic alliances before. And who knows? Maybe something will come of it.” Her eyebrows rise to her hairline.

“Don't go thinking Lena is going to change me. I'm not the happily-ever-after type, Mom. You know that.”

She laughs and puts her head on my shoulder. “One day, every playboy has to retire. Sooner or later, you'll be too old. I don't want you to die alone.”

“Jeez, knife me in the heart, why don't you? I'm just not looking for an exclusive relationship right now.”

“And sooner or later, ten years will have passed and you still won't be committed to anyone. Have you ever thought about what will happen if Britney doesn't return? Where that leaves Annabelle? I'm sure Imogen and Morgan will help and you'll always have me, but don't you want Annabelle to grow up with a mother?” She squeezes my knee.

“I'm not saying never, but we both know it's rare for relationships to make it when one of them is a professional athlete. You saw what those bunnies did and said with Lena.”

“Your two best friends seem to be doing pretty well so far.”

I shake my head. “We both know how different I am from them.”

“All I'm saying is you have a daughter now. Whether you like it or not, it changes things.”

“Well, for the next year, I'm already spoken for, so...” I shrug and she laughs. “I just hope Annabelle doesn't get too attached and has to adjust

when things end.”

My mom’s smile dims. Making her upset pierces my heart. I really hope she doesn’t cry when Lena and I get divorced. That this isn’t her way of getting me to commit to someone.

“Well, she’s young. And you and Lena might come out of this as friends. I don’t see Lena just leaving Annabelle high and dry once this is over.”

I nod because my mom makes sense.

“But I want my family back, and I’m sorry that it means putting you in a temporarily uncomfortable position, but I’m your mother, so my happiness trumps all.” She laughs and stands. Mom pulls Annabelle out of the stroller with the blanket, rocking her in her arms while showing her the ducks.

I watch the two of them together. If not just for myself, I’ll do this for my mom so she can get what she wants.

“Lena!”

The sound of my soon-to-be fiancée’s name pulls me from my thoughts. I look over to see her walking toward us.

“Hi.” She waves. She must’ve come here right from the meeting with my dad. Her eyes are red-rimmed, but she smacks on a pretend smile as she approaches my mom and Annabelle, who are watching the ducks and smiling. “Wait until she can feed them.”

“I can’t wait. I don’t want to rush it, because this age is precious too, but I can’t wait until she’s walking and talking,” my mom says.

Lena smiles at my mom. “It’ll be sooner than you think.”

They both look at my daughter, love lining my mom’s eyes and adoration in Lena’s. At least she likes my daughter.

“You know what? Her hands are probably cold. I’m going to take her back home.” I move to stand, but my mom shoos me down.

“You two stay here. We’re perfectly capable of making it back on our own.” Mom runs her nose along Annabelle’s. “Isn’t that right?”

“Mom,” I say.

She places Annabelle back in the stroller. “You two have plenty to talk about. See you at home.”

I watch my mom walk away as Lena comes over, sitting on the edge of the bench as though she’s afraid of me or something. We sit in silence and watch the ducks. There’s a mom and three kids a little ways down. One boy chases the ducks while the mom scolds him to stop. I feel a kinship with that kid. God, if Annabelle pays me back for all the shitty things I did to my

parents growing up, I'm gonna have my hands full.

"So how are you feeling about this?" Lena asks.

"I don't really know yet, but I don't have a choice. You?"

She nods. "I'm going to go through with it, but I'm worried."

"Can I ask you a question?" It's been on my mind ever since my dad sent me out of his office.

"Sure."

"Does my dad have something he's hanging over your head? Is that why you agreed to this?"

She slides back on the bench, crossing her legs. The heel of one of her sensible flats pops off her foot, dangling from her toes. All I can imagine are those pink toes underneath curling in pleasure. I mentally chastise myself. This could be bad if I don't get my desire under control.

She shakes her head. "No, he doesn't have anything on me."

"Are you sure? Because for the life of me, I can't imagine why you'd agree to this."

She turns to me. "I could say the same about you."

"I'm doing it so he'll get off my back and to make my mother happy."

"Well, let's just say I need what your dad is offering."

"Money?" I say derisively.

She whips her head in my direction. "You know what I find funny about you, Ford?"

"What's that?" I press my lips together.

"That you have all this money and you're not embarrassed to spend it, but you judge others for wanting it. It doesn't matter what your dad is doing for me. I didn't grow up like you. If your dad retires, I'm out of a job, and I know it's no concern of yours, but jobs aren't always easy to find. At least well-paying ones aren't. I have expenses, so I'm agreeing to marry you in order to have those expenses paid."

I'm thrown for a moment, speechless because I feel like a prick. She's right. I can't judge her when money has never been an issue for me. I don't know what that feels like. "You're completely right. I apologize."

She raises both eyebrows in surprise. "Don't play nice. We can't pretend this is going to be anything but horrible. We'll count it down like a prison sentence." She stands. "See you later and we can talk logistics."

I nod. "No kiss goodbye, honey?"

She narrows her eyes.

“What do you want your pet name to be? Babe, baby, honey? I’m not sure I can pull off darlin’, but I can try.”

“You can call me Lena,” she says with a straight face.

“What’s the fun in that?”

She blows out a breath like a teacher who’s on her last ounce of patience for the day. “There’s no fun between us. Welcome to hell, Ford.”

She turns and walks away, and I’m not ashamed that I notice my soon-to-be wife has a killer ass.



CHAPTER 12

"Clearly you don't like my dress."

Lena

I SLIDE the tape over the last box I have to pack and stare at the room filled with cardboard rectangles. I toyed with keeping the condo, but it seemed ludicrous to pay for an apartment I'll never be in. After our divorce, I'll find a new place to live.

I'd like to say these walls have stories, that they hold memories I'll never forget, but other than the comfort and safety this place supplied me, the only memories I have are of me coming home, snuggling on the couch, and watching movies by myself. Making dinner for myself. Cleaning the condo by myself.

Sure, I've had a few dates here or there, but my job with the Jacobses is demanding and things change at the last minute all the time. Eventually I just kind of stopped trying to find dates and figured if I meet someone, I meet someone and if not, oh well.

The movers are coming in the morning, after Mr. Jacobs' birthday celebration tonight where my engagement to Ford will be announced. He'll fly out for his next game, and we'll use the excuse of me moving as the reason why I'm not tagging along. I'll have to go to most of his games once I'm settled, especially the ones in the Fury arena, but I don't really mind that part.

I go into my bedroom, wondering who I'll be a year from now. Will I even want these things in these boxes? Part of me feels as though I should take a hiatus afterward and go find myself in Europe, South America, or

Australia. That sounds nice in principle, but not at all like something I would actually do. I'll put the money in the bank, earn some interest, maybe look for some really conservative investments to make even more money to ensure I won't ever find myself without again. But boy, it sure is nice to dream about what I could do with that money if I splurged.

My dress for tonight hangs in my empty closet. The heels I bought with Imogen two days ago rest on the floor below the garment. I'm so nervous to step out into their world on Ford's arm. I haven't heard from my fiancé in the past week, which doesn't surprise me. We both had our fair share of things to take care of in preparation for tonight.

A knock on my door surprises me, and I go to answer it. The eighteen-year-old doorman in training, Ricky, stands there holding a box. His cheeks appear red, and the way his gaze keeps darting away from me, I think he's nervous. He always seems nervous whenever I address him.

"Hey, Ricky," I say.

He holds the box out to me. "This was delivered for you just now."

I accept the box, surprised since I purposely didn't order anything because I won't be here much longer. I grab some cash from my purse for a tip and hand it over. "Thank you."

He nods. "Have a good evening, Miss Boyd."

"You too, thanks again."

He stays in place, and after an awkward moment, he turns to go to the elevator. The kid looks intimidated every time I have an encounter with him.

I carry the box to the kitchen counter and open it. The outside just has my name, and the return address is one I don't recognize. I must've forgotten about something I ordered.

Inside the outer box is a smaller *Fleur du Mal* box. This has to be a joke. I don't spend this type of money on underwear. Opening the box, I find a note.

It all starts with what you're wearing underneath. ~ Ford

He did not get me lingerie. I carefully open up the tissue paper to see in fact, yes, he did. A black pair of cheeky lace underwear and a matching bra that will barely contain my nipples rests inside. They're both sexy and gorgeous.

As though he knew the package just got delivered, my phone dings and I pull it out of my back pocket to see Ford's name.

Ford: *Your doorman doesn't have any fetishes, does he?*

I chuckle.

Me: *He probably likes black lacy things.*

Ford: *I take it you got the package?*

Me: *I did and it was unnecessary. And probably inappropriate.*

Ford: *If we were really together and getting married I'd be buying you lingerie. Trust me. Besides, this is all about appearances.*

I ignore the way his comment makes me feel. I've never had a man send me a package before, let alone undergarments. There's something weird about him knowing what I'm wearing under my dress tonight. I grab the box and head back down the hall.

Me: *No one is going to see me in this. Including you. I'm not sure why it matters.*

Ford: *Because you'll feel more confident.*

I can't really argue with him. It's hard to look at these two pieces and imagine not feeling that way.

Me: *Thank you, nonetheless.*

Ford: *I'll pick you up in an hour.*

That's unexpected. I figured I'd catch a ride over there myself. Mrs. Jacobs is having the party at their penthouse and I assumed Ford was staying there.

Me: *No worries. I'll catch a cab.*

The three dots appear immediately and I sit on the edge of my bed, waiting for his response.

Ford: *You're the future Mrs. Ford Jacobs. We don't do cabs in a cocktail dress. See you in an hour.*

This man... he could put it a lot less smugly.

Me: *I'm actually going to be Ms. Lena Boyd-Jacobs. And sorry. I didn't think people would care about my transportation.*

I set the phone on the bed and stand because my blood pressure is rising and I no longer feel as though I can sit still. How am I going to live with this man for a year? As I head into the bathroom to turn on the water for my shower, I hear my phone go off again.

Ford: *I would never allow my soon-to-be wife to meet me at a party. Especially one hosted by my parents.*

My hand squeezes the phone before hammering out a message.

Me: *Fine. See you in an hour. I'll be waiting downstairs in my lobby.*

I figured that would end our conversation, but the three dots appear again. I can't imagine what else he has to say now.

Ford: *Do you take me for a schmuck? I'll come up.*

Me: *No need.*

Ford: *It's going to be a long year if you fight me on everything.*

Me: *Fine. Do whatever. But I have to go if I'm going to be ready in time.*

Ford: *You might want to dig deeper into that box. If you were mine, you'd show up with a glow that shows you're a very satisfied woman.*

I drop the phone and ruffle through the tissue paper, finding a box with a vibrator inside.

Ford: *I'll take your silence as another thank you. See you in an hour.*

I don't bother responding, staring at this unusual gift from a man who barely knows me. How will I get through this year without sleeping with him? Ford is a gorgeous hockey player who obviously has more game than I gave him credit for. It's almost as though I can feel the first fracture of my heart, knowing our breakup is inevitable.

I've just finished putting on my lipstick when my phone goes off. Shit, I forgot to tell Ricky that Ford is okay to come up.

I rush into my bedroom, answer the phone, and tell Ricky to send him up. Then I open the door and use the dead bolt to keep it slightly ajar so I can finish getting ready. As I'm switching a few things out in my purse, I hear Ford curse.

"You live in New York City, you do realize that?" A second later, the door shuts and the lock clicks into place.

"You were on your way up," I say, coming out of my room carrying my shoes and handbag. "Just think, if something should happen to me, then you're off the hook. You could mourn my death for the next year."

"Morbid much?" he mumbles.

I emerge around the corner and stop so I can catch my breath. Ford stands in a suit that fits him like a glove. I've seen Ford in a suit plenty of times. After a hockey game where he didn't take the time to blow-dry his hair, so it's still a little damp on the edges. At functions or charity events with his family. He knows how to pull one off, but there's something different about it tonight.

The suit is black, which is more conservative than he normally wears. He doesn't wear a tie, but the top two buttons are undone with a suit jacket over top, buttoned at his waist. The gel in his hair shows off his golden tips.

"So she has legs," he says, pulling me out of my stupor.

I look down at my burgundy dress that has long sleeves and bells out at my waist over my thighs. "Is that a compliment?"

"Sure, if you weren't my date. Remind me next time to send a dress." He walks around my apartment, his fingers brushing along the boxes.

Having him in my space is uncomfortable. His presence seems to fill the whole apartment. Although my apartment is nicer than I think I deserve to spend on myself, it probably looks like a shack to him.

"You're not bringing all of this to Florida?"

Disregarding his question and his insults to my attire for the evening, I sit on the edge of a chair to put on my heels.

"Now those I could get on board with. Wear those and just those panties I got you." He shifts. "I'm already half hard."

"Good to know I don't completely repulse you," I say, standing and grabbing my handbag.

"Repulse me? Where did you get that idea?" He follows me to the door, reaching around me to grab the knob before I have a chance. His mouth is at my ear. "Remember, I'm your fiancé. You wait for me to open doors for you now."

I close my eyes briefly from the rush of his hot breath on my neck and the shiver that courses through me. We file out of the condo and I lock up while he waits. We head down the hall, and every step he's next to me feels weird somehow. I feel more aware of his presence than I ever have.

"Let's circle back to the repulsive comment?" Ford says, reaching ahead of me again to push the elevator button, purposely giving me a stare.

There's no one around. I don't know why he cares right now.

"Clearly you don't like my dress."

His gaze sweeps over me. "I like the dress if we were going to church. You should show off your legs more often, cleavage would be nice, and in all honesty, shorter sleeves." His nose scrunches. "Give a man a reason to give you his coat."

I look into his eyes, lost for a moment in thought of us walking the streets of New York City and having him shrug out of his jacket and place it over my shoulders. Damn my unrealistic romantic side. "So you don't like my

dress. Like I said.”

We step into the elevator. I wait this time, allowing him to press the button for the bottom floor and he smiles at me as though I’m a quick study. Makes me want to knee him in the nuts.

He steps in front of me, barricading me against the wall of the elevator, caging me in with both hands on either side of me. I swallow past the dryness that coats my throat.

Then he inches even closer and lowers his voice. “You’re mistaking what I meant. You look gorgeous and I bet you look even more stunning in the lingerie I sent you, but it’s for selfish reasons that I want to send you a dress. I want the tease of a slit up your thigh or a deep V that shows just enough cleavage to drive me wild. It’s purely self-serving that I want you to show off what you have, rather than hiding it. Believe me, when you walked down that hall, I was anything but repulsed.”

Ding.

The elevator doors open and Ford’s fingers run down the length of my arm, securing my hand in his. We exit the elevator and I’m sure I must be as red as a tomato. All I can think of is that I want to hear what comes out of his mouth next.

“Have a great night, Miss Boyd.” Ricky waves at us.

“Thank you,” I mumble, offering him a smile.

The next thing I know, Ford is leading me into the back of a black SUV and it’s time for the show to begin.

But if that wasn’t part of the show, what the hell was it?



CHAPTER 13

"Open for me."

Ford

I FILE out of the black SUV and hold my hand out for Lena. There are no obvious witnesses, but being a Jacobs my entire life, I know eyes are everywhere.

Her legs emerge, and damn, I just can't get enough of them. I always thought I was an ass man, but all I envision when I see her bare legs are them wrapped around me as I have her pinned to the wall.

Her soft hand slides into mine, and I help her out of the car and off the curb. I tell the driver I'll call when we're ready to leave.

"I'll just get a c—"

I put my finger to her lips, leaning forward. "You're forgetting already," I whisper. "I'm not going to allow my fiancée to get in a cab at the end of the evening and go home to a dark apartment by herself."

She lets out a breath. The same one she did in the elevator when I told her exactly what I thought about her dress and her in it.

This won't be an easy night for Lena. She's essentially going from being on the payroll to being one of us, even if my family already kind of treated her as one of their own. There will be a whole new level of scrutiny now. Women will judge her, and men will wonder what makes her so special to be the one who finally claimed me. She's going to be cornered, sneered at, questioned, and talked about behind her back. I grew up with it, so my skin has toughened over the years, but Lena is like a freshly healed wound, her skin still thin and fragile.

“Mr. Jacobs.” Anessa nods at us, opening the door. “Miss Boyd, you look spectacular tonight.” Anessa winks at me, and I shake my head, leading Lena to the elevators.

“Hi, Anessa,” Lena says, stopping me with a firm tug on my hand. “What is Libby going as for Halloween?”

She knows her daughter, Libby?

Anessa smiles, looking both ways before allowing the door to close and turning to us. “A unicorn. She loves them.”

“Who doesn’t?” Lena says. “I can’t wait to see the pictures.”

“I’ll make sure to grab lots. Have a good night, you two. I heard congratulations are in order.” Her gaze shoots to Lena’s left hand, who quickly slides it to her back.

Shit, I forgot earlier.

“Thank you. You know my dad, we better get up there.” I nod toward the elevators.

“Go. Enjoy your night.” She smiles as though nothing is amiss, but Anessa makes her living off of knowing what people want before they want it. Her attention to detail is the reason she’s the best doorperson in Manhattan.

“You too,” Lena says, waving with her hand that holds no engagement ring. Yet.

Once we’re secure in the elevator, I slide my hand into my pocket and pull out the ring I meant to give her at her apartment. Before I got distracted by imagining her in those heels with the bra and panty set I sent over. Her using the vibrator I sent along with it. Shit, I shake my head before my mind goes there again.

I take her left hand, resting my fingers lightly on her ring finger. “Lena Boyd, will you marry me?”

Her impatient gaze shoots to where the elevator is counting up the floors. “Just put the ring on.”

“Hey, I’m trying to be a gentleman here.” I place the ring at the tip of her finger.

She glances to the floor we’re on again. “Let’s not pretend this is anything but fake.”

“You’re no fun.” I slide on the ring.

Damn, that three-carat cushion-cut diamond looks good on her. I would’ve gone bigger, but my gut told me she would think anything larger

was too ostentatious. She admires it for a second, and I relish her smile as she watches it sparkle under the lights. If this wasn't fake, I would have pinned her to the wall by now.

"You didn't have to get anything so big. Now I'm scared I'll lose it."

I shake my head. "Would Ford Jacobs get his soon-to-be wife a chip of a diamond? Hell no. And it's insured."

She nods. "Thank you."

I bring my hand down to rest on the small of her back, stepping into her. She tries to shift away, but my hand molds to her hip, tightening to keep her in place. The elevator dings and the doors slide open. Moving my mouth by her ear, I whisper, "Showtime, wifey."

We step off and I straighten my back. Hell, I could pull this off in my sleep, but Lena looks pale and about ready to vomit.

"Trust me." I take her hand and walk us into the wolf's den.

All eyes shoot to us. I expected this, so I usher Lena casually to the bar.

"She'll have an Aperol spritz, and I'll have a whiskey neat."

The bartender nods and I grab a tip from my pocket, ready to put it in the jar.

"How did you know?" she asks.

I chuckle. "There isn't much I don't notice, Lena."

In all truth, I'm lying. Imogen told me how much they've been enjoying them lately.

"Bullshit," she says. "I've never had one around you before."

"Are you sure about that?" I tilt my head.

Then she does the cutest thing ever. She nibbles on her bottom lip while her eyes squint as though she's going over all the times we've been around each other.

The bartender puts the Aperol spritz down in front of her as Imogen walks up to join us.

"Good choice." Imogen holds up her own drink that matches Lena's to cheers her.

Lena looks at me and shakes her head.

"I can't tell you all my ways," I say, shrugging and accepting my whiskey before putting money in the glass jar. "What's up, little sis? Who's this?"

I eye the guy next to her like any big brother would. Tattoos up his neck, piercing in his lip, and he's dressed in a leather jacket and black combat boots. Not a bad-looking guy though.

“This is Jay. He’s an artist.” She smiles widely.

I sip my whiskey and nod. “Nice to meet you. I’m Ford.”

Imogen puts her arm through Jay’s and points. “This is my older brother. He plays on the Florida Fury.”

The guy looks unimpressed, but I’m gonna take a guess that he doesn’t follow hockey.

“And this is his fiancée, Lena. But they’re announcing it tonight, so shh.”

His eyes fall over Lena so intently she shifts her body closer to me. I switch my drink into my other hand and put my arm around her. She stiffens before she relaxes in my hold.

“Nice to meet you,” I say, not really meaning it.

Jay looks around. “Nice place. A little stuffy.”

“I’ll be sure to tell my parents.” I eye Imogen with a bored expression because we both know she’s using this guy to get attention from my father. She’s always had middle child syndrome. Thought she was the forgotten child. She says she wants to take over Jacobs Enterprises, but I know my sister—she doesn’t. She just doesn’t know what she wants to do with her life yet. She got access to her trust fund when she graduated college. She has money and time on her side, so why rush?

“Who’s that handsome young man?” My Aunt Claudia comes over, kissing me on the cheek. She eyes Lena. “Are you going to introduce me to your friend?”

“This is Lena Boyd.”

Unfortunately, my great-aunt Claudia is starting to forget things, so her forehead wrinkles as though she’s never seen Lena before.

“You know her, Aunt Claudia, she’s our family PR rep,” Imogen says.

Lena offers her hand. “It’s okay, I think I’ve only met you once or twice. Pleasure to see you again.”

They shake hands, then Aunt Claudia looks at me. “Girlfriend?” she mouths as though no one else can see her.

“Yeah.” If I tell my aunt now that Lena is my fiancée she’ll have the news spread throughout the party in two minutes flat and my dad won’t get his big moment to announce it to everyone.

A huge smile lands on her lips. “I knew you’d come back from the dark side. Your mom says the baby is with a nanny tonight?”

I nod. “She is.”

“You need to come home.”

“Or you come down to Florida,” I say with a wink.

She waves me off. “The heat makes me sweat under my boobs.”

I guess it’s clear I get my sense of humor from my mom’s side.

Lena chokes but recovers. “Sorry, went down the wrong pipe.”

“Aunt Claudia!” Imogen exclaims.

“I like her. My ballsac gets all sweaty in the heat too,” Jay adds, and I catch Lena cringe.

“Well, I guess I’ve just gotten used to it.” I shrug, wanting to move on.

She smiles and glances at Imogen and Jay. Her eyes narrow. “Imogen, you need to grow up.” And she walks away.

Imogen balks. “I hate this family.”

“You know you don’t.” I give her a light shove on the shoulder.

Just as I see the trace of a smile, my dad approaches.

“Don’t you two look happy,” Dad says, ruining my mood. “I think we’ll make the announcement now. People are asking a lot of questions.”

“Happy Birthday, Mr. Jacobs.” Lena smiles at him.

“Thank you, Lena, but it will be Eli from here on out. You’re going to be family, after all.”

He ushers us to the center of the room, then grabs a fork from the appetizer display and taps his glass that holds the same drink as mine. What can I say? The apple fell close to the tree, then rolled away.

The waitstaff appears with glasses of champagne, handing every guest a flute.

“I have an announcement to share. Tonight, I’m blessed with the best birthday gift.” My dad’s voice carries through the large room.

I tense, every muscle from my neck down to my toes tightening. After this, there’s no going back. I look at Lena and she’s staring at the floor, shifting her stance.

Lowering so my lips reach her ear, I say, “Own this. Sell our happiness. Hand on my chest.” I put my arm around her waist, tugging her toward me.

She’s just as stiff as I am, but there’s no going back now. She tentatively puts her hand on my stomach, over my suit jacket.

“Ford not only blessed me with a grandchild this year, but he’s giving me another daughter. They’ve been sneaking around for a while behind our backs.”

My jaw clenches through my father’s lie.

“But Ford has proposed and Lena has accepted his hand in marriage. A

wedding is on the horizon.” Dad raises his flute in the air. “To the happy couple. Welcome to the family, Lena.”

He holds out his arms and Lena steps away from me and into his. Then my mom comes over and gives us fake congratulations. Morgan, Imogen, and Jay follow shortly before all the party guests line up to offer their best wishes.

Once it’s over, my breathing finally slows, as though the moment of impact is over and it’s all smooth sailing from here. That is, until my dad taps his glass with that damn fork again and everyone in the room starts in on a “kiss, kiss, kiss” chant.

A strangled cry comes from Lena next to me, but as I told myself this afternoon, we’re selling this because we have no other option. I tug her toward me with force so that her hands land on my chest. She really is the perfect fit. I put my finger under her chin, inching it up to look at me, then I bend and capture her lips.

When she doesn’t move, I murmur, “Open for me.”

Her lips soften, and I lick the seam. Her hands slide up my chest and wrap around my neck, bringing her breasts flush against me. Our kiss is languid and lulling and heart-thumping goodness. She tastes like citrus and I find that I can’t get enough.

Her tongue grazes mine and passion threatens to overflow from inside me. To take her, to have her, to claim her. By the time we stop, I think we’re both mystified as to what just happened, but we smack on our smiles at the applause in the room.

Yep, I’m royally fucked.



CHAPTER 14

"I can't not do it."

Lena

FLORIDA COULDN'T BE MORE different from New York City. It's been a week since I moved down here and I've rarely seen Ford. He signed him and Annabelle up for some daddy and me things on the days he doesn't have games. Or he's training, but he always has the babysitter here for Annabelle. I know he said he didn't want me to care for her but it feels insulting—as though he doesn't trust me to watch her. Whatever connection I felt with him in New York City vanished the minute the party was over. Isn't that the point though? I keep forgetting the word fake between the words Ford and fiancé.

I head downstairs late morning. I slept in because I don't have much to do. Turns out all the Jacobs have been behaving themselves recently.

There's coffee in the pot, so I pour myself a cup, happy it's still hot. Which means Ford and Annabelle didn't leave that long ago. I'm starting to feel lonely. Not that I had a ton of friends back in the city, but I had places I knew and liked to visit. Maybe it's because I'm not that familiar with the area.

Ford said I could drive his Bronco while I'm here since he's usually in his Mercedes with Annabelle. He's not risking her traveling in a truck without a top. I glance at the keys in the dish next to the landline phone. Who has a landline anymore?

Screw this. I dump my coffee in the sink and head upstairs to get dressed for the day. After putting on my bikini with a pair of cut-off jean shorts and a

tank top, I pack a towel, sunscreen, and the book I've been reading off and on lately. Back in the kitchen, I jot down a quick note for Ford to tell him where I am. No sense texting him because I know he doesn't care. But in the strange event he is wondering when he gets home, there you go.

I lock up and leave the house, then I'm standing beside the vehicle. The Bronco is all custom done with a shiny navy blue paint job and brown leather seats adorned with white stitching. Then my gaze falls to the stick shift. He didn't say anything about that. Good thing I was forced to learn to drive my dad's car when I was far too young, so I know I've got this. I hop inside, press on the clutch and brake, insert the key, and start it up.

I close my eyes. The sun beats on my head and the humidity soaks into my skin. This is awesome. I can't believe it took me a week to get out of the house. Sure, there's a beach at Ford's place—and a pool—but there are no other people. And I just need to be around people today.

I ease off the clutch and give it some gas. The Bronco sputters for a second before kicking into gear, then it's smooth sailing and I'm rolling down Ford's street. When I reach the stop sign, I glance at the radio to see that of course Ford has it set to play from his phone.

Pulling out my phone, I plug it in the jack and switch on Blondie. My dad had such a crush on her when I was growing up that he played her nonstop. Now I love her too.

I stop to get a smoothie, then I park the Bronco by a long pier and explore the small downtown area of Waterfall Springs. About fifteen minutes into my exploration, a man's voice says my name. I turn away from the window of the cute beach shop that sells jewelry and sundresses to find Tripp Newton, Florida Fury's PR representative.

"Hi, Tripp," I say, smiling. I've had to converse with him a lot due to Ford's antics in the past.

"I just heard the news. I'm surprised, to say the least." His hand lands on my hip and he draws me close, pressing a kiss to my cheek. The exchange is friendlier than we've ever been, but I guess this is more social than work related right now.

"What happened?" I ask. What PR nightmare has Ford started now, and how am I not in the know? A million possibilities run through my mind.

Tripp tilts his head, his gaze moving to my left hand and my empty ring finger.

I clutch my hand. "Oh yeah. Big news, right? I'm not wearing my ring

because I was afraid to lose it in the sand. Can you imagine?”

Truthfully, it's in a jewelry box in the bedroom I'm staying in. I can't wear it. I feel anxious the entire time it's on my finger.

“From the picture I saw, it's quite the ring.” Tripp rocks back on his heels. He's wearing board shorts and a cut muscle tee that shows his lean arms and biceps. “I was just headed to play beach volleyball. Do you want to join me?”

I sip my smoothie, not sure what to say.

“It's just me and a few friends who get together every weekend to play. Super chill.” He points.

I follow the direction of his finger and see two sand volleyball nets set up on the other side of the road. At least Tripp Newton wants my company. “Sure.”

“Cool. Let's go. I'll make sure to tell all the guys you're taken.” He winks. “But you gotta tell me, when did you and Ford start dating?”

“Remember New Year's?” I ask. Ford and I decided to pretend our relationship started when I had to drag him out of the party because his dad insisted on seeing him. The night we kissed for the first time.

“Oh, you two left...” He nods.

“Yeah, so we were in hiding for quite a while. Especially with the whole Annabelle thing.”

He nods. “Makes sense. Where is he now?”

We cross the street. “He's with Annabelle at a daddy and me class.”

He chuckles. “I gotta say, I'm shocked at the way he's taken on the role of daddy so well. I hope he takes on the husband role with the same ferocity.”

“I'm sure he will.” I smile.

Lies. All lies. The more I have to lie to people, the more the fact that I'm doing this for money leaves a sour taste in my mouth.

We approach the volleyball courts, and the warm sand feels good in my sandals but makes it harder to walk. Tripp puts his hand on the small of my back, presenting me to his friends, who are all men. I raise a hand to wave hello when the sound of a car squealing to a stop jars me. Cars honk and we all turn to see what's going on.

That's when I see Ford in his Mercedes with the window rolled down and his sunglasses tipped to the edge of his nose, staring at where I am. It's clear he doesn't like what he sees.

I narrow my eyes at him. What does he care? He's left me alone the entire

time I've been here.

"Shit, he doesn't look happy," Tripp mumbles from behind me.

Ford pulls into a parking spot clearly marked with a no parking sign and files out of the car in a pair of shorts and a shirt that shows off his big biceps and the strength of his shoulders.

"Tripp." Ford smacks on a smile and walks over with his arm outstretched. "I see you ran into Lena." They shake hands, then Ford comes over to me, putting his arm around my waist. He presses a chaste kiss to my cheek. "You heard the news, right?"

"Where's Annabelle?" I ask.

"She's at Aiden and Saige's. They want to pretend to be parents or some shit." He straightens and eyes the rest of the guys. "Are we playing volleyball?"

"Well, I was..." Tripp says.

"I'm game. You playing, sweetie?" He looks back at me. "Want to be on the same team?"

"I was actually going to finish my smoothie." I hold it up in front of me.

Ford lets his grip on me go and holds out his hand for the volleyball. "Cool. Let's play."

Tripp appears tongue-tied but heads over to the court. Meanwhile, I can't strip my eyes off of Ford after he acted so protective and possessive over me. It shouldn't turn me on, but damn, who thought he cared so much? Certainly not me.

I sit on the cement ledge that separates the beach and the small row of parking before the street. Ford takes charge, dictating how the game will go and who is on whose team. He puts Tripp on the other team, which I assume was on purpose.

There's burning anger in Ford's eyes that's so hot, I grow wet. Damn, I can't get turned on by him going caveman just because I was conversing with a man we both know. What does that say about me?

The game starts and Ford is all over the place, barely allowing any of his teammates to handle the ball. He spikes it on Tripp, and Tripp ends up sprawled out in the sand. Ford doesn't glance my way at all during the match.

This continues over and over until finally one of the other guys steps in and they lose the serve. Mid-game, I'm way too hot in this sun, so I take off my tank top and pull out my sunscreen. I'm spreading the lotion on my chest when I glance up and see Ford's hooded eyes set on me. My skin comes alive

with awareness and my heart pounds. I have to bury this want I have for this man. I have to.

“Ford,” one of the other guys says.

Ford dives to the ground, hitting the ball with his fist to get it up in the air. A puff of sand floats up, and when he stands, he’s covered.

Is there anything he’s not good at?

“I’m going down to the beach,” I announce, taking my small bag and heading in that direction. I’m done with his alpha side and him trying to show that he owns me. We both know he doesn’t own me, doesn’t even want to.

“Wait for me. We’re almost finished,” Ford calls.

I don’t stop, and the squawk of a police car grabs all of our attention.

“Looks like you have more important things to take care of.” I point to where the cop has pulled up behind Ford’s Mercedes.

He runs over, already explaining the situation before he reaches the police officer.

No doubt he’ll get off because of who he is.

“Nice to see you, Tripp.” I shoot him an apologetic look.

“Don’t look like that. I kind of like the jealousy thing. Makes those doubts I had about you two disappear.”

I should be offended, but I shrug and head down to the beach. Stopping a few steps from the water, I take off my sandals and jean shorts and shove them into my bag. Walking along the shoreline, I dodge small kids running back and forth to the water. Some people are building sandcastles and others are just lying out, allowing their skin to soak up the sun.

“We need to talk,” Ford says, suddenly alongside me and breathless.

I roll my eyes and walk closer to the water, but he only follows me.

“Is that Ford Jacobs?” a man says.

“No shit!” someone else says.

Before I blink, Ford takes my bag off my shoulder, drops it in a dry spot in the sand, and places his hands on my hips, ushering me into the water.

“I’m not swimming,” I say, trying to turn around.

“Just go. I’m not in the mood to sign any fucking autographs. And we need to settle some business.”

“Why do I have to go into the water? You can’t drown me in broad daylight.” I turn and place my hands on his sandy chest. Jeez, it’s way too muscular for me to be expected to think straight when I’m touching it.

His face twists. “What the hell are you talking about? Just keep walking.”

Then his arms wrap around my waist and he tugs me toward him, pushing us fully into the water.

I take a mouthful of saltwater before I emerge to the surface. “Jesus, Ford!”

“Sorry, but you refuse to listen to me.”

“In case you forgot,” I say, looking around and lowering my voice, “we’re not actually engaged.”

“You need to start believing we are because your behavior and attitude are convincing people we aren’t.”

“Are you talking about Tripp?” A wave washes up and our bodies rise and fall. “Give me a break.”

He lifts my hand. “You have to wear the ring.”

I tear my hand away. “I don’t want to. It’s too expensive.”

He groans and eyes the area around us. “You understand that I can afford to replace it?”

“So what? That doesn’t mean you should have to.”

A couple slowly make their way closer, obviously recognizing Ford from the man’s creepy smile. Ford nods, giving him the look to say, “Hi, but now isn’t the time.” His hands reach for my waist and he pushes me the other way again, but I lose my footing and a wave comes, leaving me no choice but to wrap my legs around his waist to stay afloat.

“Now you got the idea,” he says.

I still because either I’ve caught a sea cucumber between us, or there’s something very hard between his legs. Could he want me like I want him?

I blink a few times before I recover. “You don’t own me and I don’t appreciate the jealousy act.” I’m lying about the jealousy thing.

“Sorry, but it pissed me off. He had his hand on the small of your back. That part of your body is mine until this is over.”

I laugh and rock my head back, trying to unhook my legs until I find he’s taken us even deeper. There’s no hope that I can stand here, which leaves me no choice but to stay glued to him. Short girl problems.

“Stop playing games. We know exactly what this is.” Unable to stop myself, I grind along his length and he tugs me even closer, raising his hips to thrust into me. “It’s all fake.”

“There’s nothing fake about what’s happening right now.” He pulls me closer, his hand that faces away from the beach reaching down. His knuckle grazes my nipple.

It pebbles and I resist a full-body shiver, my eyes closing. “We can’t do this.”

His lips hover over my neck right under my ear. “I’m sorry, but you in that bikini...” He groans and I feel that groan centered between my legs. “I can’t not do it.”

I run my core along him, needing a release from being wound so tight. “If we cross the line now, how will we survive an entire year?”

His lips press to my neck, his tongue traveling up my ear. “Don’t you ever want to say fuck it all and just do what you want?”

Um, yeah. Like right now. Right now, I’d love to, but it doesn’t change the fact that we have to get through an entire year. I’m not sure I can have him once and never again, because Ford is a chaser. I’m only tempting if he can’t have me.

“We can’t,” I say, my voice strong, firm this time.

He grunts, stripping his body off of me. As we emerge from the water, I catch a few people with phones out. We’ve floated down the beach from where my bag is, so I wait patiently as Ford signs autographs and people wish us congratulations. Once the crowd disperses and we head toward my bag, it’s clear that Ford Jacobs is mad at me.



CHAPTER 15

"And stop biting your lip."

Ford

I'M in the locker room, getting dressed for the game.

"You're quiet tonight," Maksim says.

I shrug. "I'm fine."

"Fuck you. This is exactly how you were when you found out Britney was pregnant." Aiden eyes me from across the room.

He's right, and I hate that my first reaction at the news I was having a kid was depression. Especially now that I can't imagine my life without Annabelle.

"Your fiancée not doing it for you?" Maksim asks.

There are a few lingering stares from some of our other teammates, and I scold Maksim with a look. Of course I didn't keep the truth from my friends, but I know they'll keep their mouths shut.

"Just think of the outcome," Maksim whispers. "He's off your back for good."

And that is some great fucking news, but it would be a helluva lot better if I didn't actually want my fake fiancée. I almost took her in an ocean. With spectators. If she would've let me, I probably would've let it happen, bet with Tweetie or not.

"The pictures look like you're enjoying your fiancée," Tweetie chimes in, coming to stand in front of me.

"What's not to enjoy?" I say and adjust my pads.

He has a smug smile. "Guess you lost the bet."

“Guess again.”

His eyebrows rise into his hairline. “You’re telling me you just got engaged and you’re not hitting that? No fucking way.”

I shrug then stand. “You know how competitive I am.” I grip his shoulder. “She’s tried a few times, but I just keep reminding her how good it’ll be in a few weeks.”

He rolls his eyes and shakes his head before he walks back over to his area, but he must believe me because he doesn’t argue the point further.

Of course, pictures emerged of Lena and me in the ocean. My dad thought it was a great PR move and called to applaud her over the whole thing. She sheepishly thanked him, but we both know what transpired in that water. The minute she found me rock hard at her core, she ground all over me. All my dick could think about was sliding into her wet pussy.

It’s been two days and my body still aches from not having her. She turned me down, which was the smart decision. The right one. She’s a hundred times smarter than me because while all I thought about was how I could have sex with her in an ocean without people realizing, she was thinking of the long year ahead of us.

Someone turns on the music and everyone runs through their superstitions before the game. Maksim goes to take a leak, and I sit down across from Aiden.

He’s eyeing me. “Want to talk?”

I shake my head.

“You sure?”

“I can handle my shit.”

“I know you can. But you’re not used to catching feelings.”

I glance up to see Aiden’s raised eyebrow. The one to suggest he sees right through me. But he’s wrong. There are no feelings, it’s pure lust involved.

“It’s just attraction, and anyway it’s probably because she’s the only woman on this earth that I can’t fuck right now. That’s the only reason I have blue balls.” I basically just repeat what Lena said to me.

He nods. “Like a chastity belt, huh?” He laughs.

I finish tying my skate and stand. “Fuck off, Shamrock, I’m serious.”

“How bad you want your dad off your back?”

“You know I want him to piss off about the whole business thing and just let me play hockey in peace.”

He lifts his shoulders. “Then just beat off to the image of her. Or fuck someone else discreetly. Or go celibate for the next year. But you cannot let this thing explode, and if the two of you sleep together, that’s exactly what’s gonna happen. It’s gonna end before you reach the altar.”

I knew Aiden would make sense, and that’s why I didn’t want his opinion. Always the voice of reason. I wanted to hear it from Tweetie, who would’ve said fuck her and deal with repercussions after.

“Let’s go,” I say.

Aiden allows me to go first, and we all cheer our captain on when he joins us in the hallway and we head toward the ice.

On the ice, Aiden skates toward me. “One thing you need to do is get her ass to your games. She needs to be here, cheering you on.”

I nod. He’s right. If we’re supposed to be in love, she should be here, but I hate asking her to do anything she doesn’t want to do. Hell, I know what that feels like because it’s practically been my entire life with my father. But if we’re going to own this, we have to sell it.

I drop my bag in the foyer when I get home. Annabelle’s babysitter, Rylee, is on the couch with the monitor next to her.

“Hey, Rylee, how was she?”

She stands, and since she’s only seventeen, she always looks intimidated when I arrive home. I’ve been dragging my feet on having in-house help because there’s no way I can hire someone who could report I’m in a sham of an engagement.

“Great as usual, although she didn’t want the bottle, so Miss Boyd came down and she got her to take the bottle before bed.”

I nod. “Okay, thanks.” I dig out cash for her and walk her to the door. “I have a game tomorrow night. You available?”

She nods. “I’ll be here at the same time.”

“Perfect. Thanks.”

As I shut the door, the stairs creak and I don’t have to turn around to know she’s standing there. I turn around and there she is on the stairs in a pair of sweats and a half shirt that shows her stomach. Her nipples poke through the fabric and my mouth salivates at the thought of her nipple on my tongue.

“Hey, wifey.” I walk across the room and put my bag in the closet.

“Did Rylee tell you about Annabelle? The bottle?”

She joins me in the kitchen, and the open floor plan does nothing to diminish the sexual tension. I loosen my tie, but I still feel as if I’m suffocating.

“She did. Thank you for your help, but you don’t need to do that.”

“I want to,” she says, and something in her tone has me looking her way.

“Maybe we should establish some rules,” I mumble, my eyes diverting to her flattened stomach. I shrug off my jacket and place it on the counter, folded in half.

“Rules? What are you going to say? I can’t come down when Rylee is here? The fact that she comes at all when I’m home is already offensive enough, just so you know. Rylee probably thinks I’m some bitch who won’t take care of your baby.”

The anger in her voice surprises me. I was giving her an out.

“You don’t have to take care of my baby because you’re not really my fiancée.”

“Aren’t you always saying we have to sell it? Well, we aren’t selling it to Rylee, and just so you know, a seventeen-year-old girl has a shit ton of power on social media.” She goes to the fridge and takes out the leftover Thai food she got delivered last night.

“Well, you’re not coming to my games.” I sound like a whining seven-year-old complaining to his parents about them not coming to see me play.

She stops with the silverware drawer half open. “Do you want me to come to your games?”

“I’m just suggesting that you should be with the wives and girlfriends.”

She shuts the drawer and puts the takeout container on the counter, along with a fork. “Answer the question, Ford.”

I stare at her, distracted because of how much I want to see those pink lips swollen red from my kiss. I blink. “I can’t.”

I step away, taking off my tie and unbuttoning the top few buttons of my shirt. There’s no fucking air in here.

“Can’t what? Be civil? I knew this would be hard because we don’t see eye to eye on much, but am I that unbearable to live with? To be around, so that you have to always be gone with Annabelle?” She raises her hands and I’m rewarded with a glimpse of her underboob.

“I’m not used to it, okay? Give me some time.”

Her shoulders fall and she stares at me until I have no choice but to look at her. “Maybe we should scrap this whole thing. Your dad can find someone else. Someone you’d rather—”

“No,” I bite out.

Her hands go up in the air, and once again, underboob is all I can focus on. “Then what do you want? I can’t live like this anymore.”

“I want to fuck you, okay!” I sit in the chair, staring at the monitor on the table for a moment to make sure I didn’t wake Annabelle. “I can’t see straight when you’re around.” I nearly whisper the words.

“Oh. I thought you hated me.”

I glance up. “My dick definitely doesn’t hate you.”

She bites her lip and her eyes squint as though she’s thinking. Just one of her many habits that turns me on so fucking bad. “Well, we can’t.”

“I know that. And stop biting your lip.”

She frees her lip, and her eyes widen. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize,” I say.

“Okay, I take it back.”

“Good. Fine.” I stand. “Whatever. I’m going to bed.”

“Okay,” she says, her hands locked behind her on the counter, her tits pushed out almost as an offering.

I close my eyes briefly so I can get my jacket. “Good night.”

“Good night, Ford,” she whispers. I hear her staggered breathing when I lean around her to get my jacket and tie. “It was a good game.”

“It was a shit game. I played like a fucking rookie.” All I could think about was her and what it would be like if she were there with Annabelle in her arms. To look up and see someone was there for me.

“I thought you played well.”

“You watched?” I ask, pausing in front of her.

She leans back and our eyes lock. She bites her lip again and nods.

“What did I say about the lip?”

Releasing it, she’s quick to say, “I’m sorry.”

We stay like that for a moment, my willpower draining with every second. “God, I want you so bad.”

“It’s only because I’m the one thing you can’t have,” she says.

It’s like someone has sliced me open. “What?”

“It’s easy to figure out why you want me.” She slides away from me—whether it’s from the displeasure I’m sure is flaring in my eyes or she just

needs space, I can't say. "You can't have me, so you want me. It's going to eat away at you. But we'll get through it. Want me to tell you a million bad things about myself? Your desire will wane, I promise."

I lean my hip along the edge of the counter. "Is that what you think? That I want you only because I can't have you?"

She shrugs and picks up her Thai food. "Name one other thing you've never been able to have?" She sits on the couch, crosses her legs, and buries her head in the noodles.

For fuck's sake, she's right. That must be it. "Okay, tell me something bad about yourself."

She laughs, but there's something in her eyes that I can't read—disappointment, maybe. "I rarely shave my legs in the winter. As soon as cold weather hits, I don't bother unless I have a date, which is hardly ever."

"But you'd shave if you were dating someone?" I ask, sitting on the chair.

"Sure, but not my armpits." She laughs, giving away that she's kidding.

I shake my head, but maybe this will help me get her out of my system. She's just the carrot hanging in front of a bunny, or the steak in front of a dog. I have to avoid temptation until someone comes around who I *can* have. This is easy. I got this.



CHAPTER 16

"We're not even close to done."

Lena

BASED ON THE OTHER NIGHT, Ford wants me to attend his game. So I pay Rylee for her time after she arrives—since I don't have her contact information—grab Annabelle, and bundle her up in her car seat with her ear protectors. Once I've packed her bottle and snacks, along with a few stuffed animals, we head out to the arena.

Thankfully, Paisley and Saige were willing to help me out by getting me tickets.

By the time I reach the seats with Paisley and Saige, my arm is on fire. They introduce me to Saige's best friend, Tedi, who I've heard a lot about but haven't met yet.

Once I set the carrier on the seat beside me, I let my arm sag in relief. "How do moms do this?"

I look at the two of them. They both shrug because they're not moms.

"I think moms have superhuman strength," Tedi says. "I'm one of five and my mom made us walk behind her with a rope and each of us had a handle to hold on to."

"That explains your fuck-it bucket list," Saige jokes with her friend-slash-assistant. She nods to me when I look surprised. "But the joke is on her. She screwed Tweetie as part of her fuck-it bucket list and now they're the hottest couple... well, besides you and Ford."

A few heads turn in my direction. The other wives and girlfriends. A few whisper or smile with a knowing look like I won't be here long. They're

right, I'll be here for about a year.

"Shut up. We aren't serious." Tedi shakes her head and waves Saige off.

"Says the woman in the girlfriend and wives section." Paisley is giving her shit now. Then she puts her hand on Tedi's shoulder. "I'm totally kidding. God knows I never thought I'd be here."

"Me either," Saige agrees.

"So I'm not the only one then? How many women has Ford had sit here?" I eye the women in front of us.

Saige waves me off. "Don't worry about it. You're here now and that's all that matters. But since I've been coming, just Britney, and all she did was hand Annabelle to Paisley."

They all give me reassuring smiles, and I reach into the carrier to check on Annabelle. She's still asleep. I'm nervous about Ford's reaction when he finds out I'm here. I really hope this is a good surprise.

Tedi announces that she's heading up to the concession stand, and as soon as she's out of earshot, the other two women turn in my direction.

"So tell us what's going on with you guys," Paisley says.

A few rows separate us from the other wives and girlfriends. Because of my circumstances growing up, I never had a girlfriend I trusted to have my back. But these women know the truth of my situation and are with the men Ford trusts with every fiber of his being. Surely they'll understand if I tell them about last night.

"Can I ask you a question?" I look around again and they huddle together. "Ford told me last night that he wants to sleep with me," I whisper.

"Oh." Paisley nods. Clearly her psychology degree gives her some insight I don't have.

"And?" Saige asks.

"I said that he only wanted to sleep with me because I'm the one thing he can't have."

Paisley smiles.

"Do you think I was right?" I ask her.

"I think that it's your choice. But I understand why you would think that. This is a long-term arrangement, you don't want to mess it up."

Saige is quiet, so I set my eyes on her. "What?"

She shakes her head.

"Come on. I'm dying to figure this out, and other than Imogen and Morgan, you two are the only women I can talk to who might understand.

And they're his sisters so..."

Saige exhales. "It's just... I'm a lot like you. I was terrified of crossing the line and getting hurt. God knows I'm not sure there's a woman who would vouch for Ford Jacobs, but I held myself back from Aiden for a long time, and now I think to myself... why?"

"I'm sure you had reasons," Paisley says.

"I had fear. Fear ruled my decisions. And when it didn't, things worked out. We're really happy. But what if it hadn't worked out?"

"You could have been hurt?" I fill in.

She nods. "True. But I see now that I would have healed. Eventually. Never ever would I ever date any professional athlete after that, but I would've recovered." She straightens and leans closer. "The two of you are in unusual circumstances. Neither of you can sleep with anyone else while you're pretending, so why not have fun? One thing I'm almost certain of is that Ford is good in bed." She holds up her hands. "Not from personal experience. At some point, Ford is going to fall for someone, and who's to say that woman can't be you?" She places her hand on my knee. "Maybe there's something underneath the lust. But you'll never discover it if you don't quench the lust first."

I blow out a breath and the lights dim in the arena.

"It's a big decision. Good thing you have a year to make it." Paisley tilts her head supportively. "Just make sure you're clear about what you want from it and your expectations afterward if you do cross that line. That should help keep anyone from getting hurt. Communication is key."

Everything they've said makes sense, but my biggest concern isn't being hurt. I am concerned, but more than that, I don't want to live uncomfortably for the rest of the year. I thought maybe we'd develop a friendship, but clearly if we keep dodging one another because we're lusting for each other, we'll never even get there.

When the announcer introduces the players, I get up from my seat. I see Ford notice me and he stops skating for a moment, a slow smile spreading across his lips.

Yeah, who am I kidding? This has gone way beyond lust for me.

Figuring I should stop and talk to Ford after the game, I wait with the other puck bunnies outside once again. At least Saige, Paisley, and Tedi are with me this time. Annabelle did awesome throughout the game, but right now she's in Saige's arms because she needs to get to bed and found comfort there. Saige is very maternal, so I understand why.

This time, no one talks to us, and when the players emerge from the arena, Tweetie comes out first. Tedi runs up to him, jumps in his arms, and kisses him as though it's the end of a movie. She's really staking her claim. Everyone in her life except her seems to know those two will have marriage bells one day.

"Great score in the second," she says.

"Thanks, babe." He lowers her to the ground, taking her hand and winding through the throngs of fans over to us. He bows his head in greeting. "Ladies."

"Tweetie," we all say in unison.

"Have a good night."

"Try not to break anything tonight," Saige says, and we all laugh.

"Don't be jealous. Tell Shamrock to up his game if you're not breaking furniture," he calls behind us.

"Hey, my woman is satisfied." Aiden sneaks out and moves to capture Saige in a hug, stopping cold. "What did I miss?"

"I had a baby while you were playing." She offers him Annabelle and he stares at her for a moment.

Moving in close, he whispers loud enough for us to hear, "Three goals. You know what that means." He winks.

"Ew," Paisley says. "Give me the baby. Innocent ears."

Saige hands Annabelle to Paisley. "See you guys later."

They leave, which means it's just Paisley and me.

"Ever wonder what takes them so long?" she asks, rocking Annabelle.

"Gossip," I say.

She chuckles. "Probably."

Annabelle grows fussy, so I offer my arms and Paisley hands her over before digging into the bag for one of her pacifiers. It truly takes a village to handle her while Ford can do it all himself.

"Fuck that." Ford's voice pulls my attention away.

I look up to see him and Maksim coming our way. Ford glances up from the ground and stops in his tracks. Our gazes fix on one another and I think

adoration fills his.

“Come on, *kotik*, let’s leave the happy couple alone,” Maksim says to Paisley.

“Bye, Lena.” Paisley squeezes my shoulder, then they leave.

One of the puck bunnies comes up to Ford’s side, but he steps forward, his eyes on me. He bends down and kisses Annabelle’s forehead. “Is she okay?”

I nod. “Just cranky and past her bedtime. I hope—”

“It’s great. I’m glad you came.”

I’ve never seen Ford so earnest. So willing not to crack a joke about how I invited myself along. Another sign that things are turning, our road maneuvering into foreign territory.

“I’m going to kiss you,” he whispers before his lips press to mine.

It’s only a quick peck on the lips, but I feel as if I licked the end of a battery. I’m tingling everywhere. I love this look when he’s in his suit, but his hair is still slightly damp and he smells like clean sheets. It’s hard not to get lost in him.

“Let’s go home.” He raises his voice so the people around us can hear.

Maybe that was all part of the act. Maybe I just can’t figure out what’s real and pretend anymore. I suppose a kiss gives the appearance that we’re a couple, but he could have taken my hand or even grabbed Annabelle.

He picks up her carrier and we walk toward his Mercedes. “Did you bring a car?”

“I had an Uber drive us.” Which I will never again do with the car seat situation. Not having a base to snap it into is beyond annoying.

“Next time I’ll get you a car service, okay? We should get you a car while you’re here.”

I wave him off. “The Bronco is fine. I just know how you feel about Annabelle riding in it.”

He turns with the back passenger door open, holding his arms out for Annabelle. I pass her over, and he nuzzles his head into her neck. It’s the most tender moment I’ve seen him share with her. He gets her in the carrier and snaps it into place.

After shutting the door quietly, he opens the passenger door for me. “It really means a lot to me that you came.”

“I got the idea you wanted us here. I would’ve come to earlier games, but I didn’t want to step on toes.”

He blows out a breath. No sharp comebacks on his tongue. “Never.”

Something about the way he says it has me leaning forward to press my lips to his and slide my tongue into his mouth. His hand wraps around my head, holding me to him. Our tongues slide and graze, and moans erupt from deep in our throats. The kiss is consuming and intense and a throbbing pulse lands right between my legs. I want this man.

He presses me into the hollow car door opening, and I slide my hand down the front of him until my fingers anchor into the waistband of his slacks. I’m starved for this man. Saige is right—someone has to get him, it might as well be me.

A few whistles call out from somewhere behind us, but Ford doesn’t stop, his mouth unrelenting.

I finally pull away, my cheeks heating from our witnesses. “Maybe we should cool it.”

He rests his forehead on my shoulder with a groan. “That did nothing to quench my thirst for you, Lena. I hope you know that we’re not even close to done.”

I inhale and make the decision to step off the ledge. Whatever happens, happens. I relinquish control because I’m taking something for me this time. “Who said I wanted to be done?”

“Fuck, you might be the death of me.” He captures my mouth in a soft, quick kiss, steps back, and waits for me to slide in the front seat.

Once I’m secure, he rounds the hood of the car and folds himself into his seat. He shoots me a look that I can only see thanks to the glow of the parking light above, but I interpret it as a promise. I clench my thighs together with the thought of what he’s going to do to me once we’re alone and how long I’ve waited to find out.



CHAPTER 17

"I need some space."

Ford

I DRIVE out of the parking lot. She finally made the move and I'm going to take advantage no matter if it's a bonehead decision. I want her and lately I feel like I can't breathe around her.

"You gotta hold that thought for about twenty minutes. Think of nothing else but that kiss and where it might've gone if we were alone."

"And your daughter in the back seat?" she says with a laugh.

I ease off the gas. "Yes, God, I hope she goes down easy tonight."

Lena squirms in her seat. I really hope she's thinking about having me inside her, what my hands will feel like on her skin.

The drive to my house seems as though it takes about an hour longer than it does, but when I pull in the driveway and park my Mercedes next to the Bronco, the rush of passion recedes for a moment and I decide I need to really make sure this is what she wants.

But the minute the garage door shuts behind the car and I glance at her, she leans in and crushes her lips to mine. My hands land on each side of her face, not wanting her to go anywhere. Our tongues rush into one another's mouth, and we collide with a force so strong, I know I've never wanted anyone like I want Lena.

The question plagues me though. Do I only want her because she's forbidden? I really hope that's not it and I don't wake up tomorrow thinking my dick made a mistake again. Wouldn't be the first time.

I tear my lips off hers, and her swollen red lips glisten, making me go

rock hard. “I need you now. Let me get Annabelle to bed.”

I open the door, head to the back, and grab Annabelle. Meanwhile, Lena slowly climbs out of the passenger seat, following us inside.

“How about I make the bottle while you change her?” Lena offers as I take Annabelle out of the car seat.

“I think I want to kiss you again,” I say, leaning into her as she pulls the formula from the cabinet.

Over Annabelle, I kiss the living shit out of Lena. *Sorry, little girl, but you’ll never remember this anyway.*

“Hurry,” I say.

“Just go and worry about yourself.” She chuckles.

I walk upstairs to Annabelle’s room and change her diaper, then I put on the onesie she’s slept the longest in with the hope that she sleeps through the night again. I’m not even done when Lena’s leaning on the doorframe.

“I guess I’m faster,” she says with a coy smile.

“You don’t need to worry about me being fast.” I wink and sit in the rocker.

Lena hands me the bottle before sitting on the floor. Her legs are propped up with her arms around them as she looks around the room. “You really need to decorate this room. Make it hers. She’s getting older.”

“Have at it,” I tell her. “She has what she needs.”

She shakes her head. “Men.”

I poke her side with my foot. “What does that mean?”

“It means your attention to detail sucks. She needs pretty things in here. And look at her closet.” She rises and I’m rewarded with her perfect ass in a pair of jeans. I can’t wait to spank it. “Half of these have tags. You need to dress her in more than just onesies.”

“Because my mom bought most of them. I’m not putting her in a dress every day. And shoes? Explain why she needs shoes.”

She laughs and comes back over. “Still, paint the room. She’s growing every day, and pretty soon she’ll need a space that feels like hers.” She leans over me and watches Annabelle, who is unusually fussy with the bottle, taking more breaks than usual and squirming in my arms. “Is she okay?”

It’s then I notice the sweat along Annabelle’s hairline. “Do me a favor, can you get the thermometer in my bathroom?”

Lena’s face turns serious and she heads into my bathroom, returning a minute later with my thermometer. “You know this isn’t accurate for a baby,

right?”

I take it from her and scan Annabelle’s forehead. It says she’s just over one hundred. What the hell? She’s been healthy since birth. “What do we do?”

Lena smiles at me. “We need a real thermometer, and babies run hotter anyway. I’m taking it you don’t have the old-school kind?”

“The ear thing? The nurse told me to get this when I had strep last year.” I hold up the thermometer.

“Strep, huh?”

I tilt my head. “I have big tonsils.”

She laughs and goes to the large closet where I stuffed most of the things people have bought for Annabelle. “Big tonsils. That’s interesting.”

“It’s not the only big thing of mine.”

She bends down, digging through items. I don’t remember anyone giving me a thermometer. I got a lot of clothes and shampoo. Enough shampoo to last Annabelle’s entire life. “Do you often compare your member to others?”

I pick up Annabelle to burp her since she’s not eating. “Might only be Maksim who beats me. But Maksim beats everyone.”

She glances at me over her shoulder. “I do not need to know that.”

“Well, if things go the way we want tonight, it was a warning to prepare yourself.”

She pulls out a box and sets it on the changing table, looking at me before opening it. “Prepare myself? Should I do some Kegel exercises?”

“It wouldn’t hurt.”

Her head is buried in the box, so I have no idea what reaction my comment earned, but she pulls out a thin thermometer. “Thank you”—she turns over the box—“Aunt Claudia.”

“The only practical one in my family.”

Annabelle lets out a huge burp and we both freeze because she’s never sounded like that before—like a grown man who just did a keg stand.

Then I feel warmth on my back, and the rancid smell of vomit fills the room. When I pull her away from my chest, I see that she looks flushed and sweaty. “I think she’s sick.”

“Let’s take her temperature, and after, you should call the doctor.” Lena reaches for Annabelle, so I pass her over. “Go change and I’ll get her out of the onesie to prepare her for you to take her temperature.”

I stop, unbuttoning my shirt. “What do you mean, prepare?”

“We have to take a rectal temperature.”

My eyes widen. “Rectal?”

“In her anus.”

I want to cover my ears and scream. “Anus and my daughter should never be used in the same sentence.”

She laughs and wipes Annabelle’s mouth with a wet wipe.

“How do you know so much?”

“I used to nanny through my summers in college.”

It makes sense now how she takes everything with Annabelle in stride.

“You can do it. Let me know what it is.” I start to walk away, but she keeps one hand on Annabelle and grabs my wrist to stop me.

“You’re her father. You have to learn and I’ll teach you.”

I shiver all over, unwinding myself from Lena’s grip to go change. The entire time I’m changing, I can’t stop thinking about putting something in my baby girl’s butt. How uncomfortable for her and ugh, I just can’t do it. A man has his limits.

Minutes later, I’m in a T-shirt and sweats. Lena looks me up and down as though she’d like to eat me up with a spoon. Twenty minutes ago, I was game for it, but now I’m thinking about all the times I’ve had anal sex with someone else’s daughter.

“I don’t think I can do it,” I say with a pleading look.

“Yes, you can.” She tugs me closer. “I’m going to put her on her stomach and arch her up. We’ll put the thermometer in some Vaseline then gently insert it in her bum.”

“Fuck, stop saying shit like that. Just be vague.” I reach for the thermometer and retract my hand with a full-body shiver before I touch it, fully aware that I’m acting immature. This is my daughter, and she needs me. I’ve been put in more uncomfortable situations since she’s been born than my entire life before she existed.

This is your daughter and she needs you, I repeat in my head, then pick up the thermometer slowly.

“Okay. Okay.” She places her hand over mine. “We’ll do this together.”

She dips the thermometer in the Vaseline and raises it up, moving it toward Annabelle’s little bottom. I want to close my eyes, but Lena’s staring at me, not Annabelle. “You can do this.”

“I know I can. I just don’t want to.”

Slowly, we insert the thermometer and Annabelle doesn’t even flinch.

“Now we just wait a minute.” She raises her wrist to look at her watch.

“A minute?” I groan and rock my head back and forth. “What if she’s sick?”

“Then we call the doctor.”

“Then we go to the hospital,” I say definitively.

“No, we’ll call the doctor and go from there.”

She’s insane. I’m not taking any chances at this time of the night. She might think I’m crazy, but we’re going to the hospital.

Finally, a minute goes by and we retract the thermometer. She raises it up to the light. I have no idea how she’s even reading the fucking thing, it’s so small.

“She’s one-oh-four,” Lena says and bites her lip, diverting eye contact.

“Let’s get her dressed, we’re going.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Ford.”

“Lena,” I bite out, panicked for my daughter.

She shrugs. “Fine. But—” She must see something in my expression because she cuts herself off from the fight she wants to give me.

I put on Annabelle’s diaper and a new onesie, taking her downstairs to her carrier. Lena comes down with her computer and a sweatshirt.

“By all means, anything else you’d like to grab?”

“We’re going to be there a while. The emergency room at this time of night will be busy.”

“You don’t have to come,” I say.

She stops and glares at me. “I’m coming.”

“Fine then, let’s go.”

I’m anxious and angry and lashing out, I know, but I can’t help myself.

We file into the Mercedes and Lena puts on her seat belt while I get Annabelle in the back.

“You drive. I’m sitting back here with her,” I say.

She chuckles and climbs out, rounding the car and accepting the keys over her shoulder once she’s in the driver’s seat.

“I don’t understand why this is so funny,” I say while she pulls out of my garage and reverses down the driveway.

“Because you’re overreacting like a first-time parent.”

“I *am* a first-time parent.” My anger is apparent in my tone. “She probably caught something at the game. You shouldn’t have taken her.”

“It wouldn’t have happened that quick and now you’re blaming me?” She

turns out of my neighborhood.

“I’m just saying. She’s a baby.”

“And you’ve had me take her before.” Her eyes are narrowed in the rearview mirror. “I thought you wanted us to be there.”

I run a hand through my hair. “Not now that she’s sick.”

“It’s not from the game. She caught a bug. I’m sure she’s okay.”

“Did I miss you going through med school?”

She drives in silence.

Of course, I can’t control my anger. I hate having no control over this situation right now. “What is this, *Driving Miss Daisy*? Hit the gas.”

She blows out a breath and accelerates.

“It’s not *The Fast and the Furious* either,” I bite out.

“What the fuck do you want?” she yells, and I’m taken aback by her anger. “I’m about to pull over and you can handle this yourself while I hitchhike back to the house.”

“Hitchhike? No one hitchhikes anymore. Might as well just cut off your own head.”

I notice her hands tighten on the steering wheel and she pushes back in the driver’s seat.

Thankfully, the hospital signs come into view. I touch Annabelle’s forehead, which is still hot and sweaty. Lena pulls into the emergency area and puts the car in park.

“What, are you not coming inside?” I ask, getting out and unhooking Annabelle from the carrier base.

“I need some space. I’ll see you in there.”

We’re barely out of the car, the door not even shut, when she slams on the gas and drives away.

I guess I’m not getting laid tonight. Just as well. I probably dodged a bullet.

Annabelle squawks and I look at her. “You’re my number one anyway.”



CHAPTER 18

"Can I ask you a question?"

Lena

I WANT to drive away and leave him on his own because of the ass he's being. Blaming me for taking his daughter to the game and getting her sick? Screw him.

But instead of leaving, I park in a spot and think. We were this close to having sex. Maybe this is yet another sign from the universe that we need to keep our distance from one another in that respect.

With a sigh, I get out of the car, grabbing my computer bag and sweatshirt. I want to hear it from the doctor's mouth when they say what's wrong with her. Although I think it's a bug of some sort and she'll recover with some Tylenol, fluids, and sleep, I could be wrong. Ford's right, I'm not a doctor.

When I enter through the emergency room doors, I find Ford arguing with the nurse that this is an emergency and his daughter needs to be seen as soon as possible. I walk over to see that Annabelle has thrown up again.

I take the carrier, but Ford grips it harder until he sees that it's me, then he loosens his grip, an apologetic expression on his face. Getting some wipes from the diaper bag, I clean Annabelle, but her bottom lip trembles and she cries softly. I pull her out of the carrier, not caring that she's covered in vomit. Holding her, I continue to clean her up as I rock her.

"Is this the mother?" the nurse asks with a nod in my direction.

Ford looks at me for a moment, his back stiff. "Yes."

I try not to act surprised he said that.

“Let me get a nurse.” The woman leaves the desk and heads into the back.

Ford comes over to me. “They wouldn’t have allowed you in otherwise.”

I nod, but in this moment, I feel a seed of something that’s been planted inside me. To have this man as my husband and Annabelle be our baby... what would that life look like? Shaking my head, I try to decipher when my brain changed its mind about Ford Jacobs. When did he turn into a man I’m envisioning as my husband and not the spoiled prick who makes me nutty?

He comes toward me, taking over the cleaning while I hold Annabelle, and I know from the outside that we look like the real thing. “I just want to find out what’s wrong with her. What if it’s something serious?”

I don’t say anything, allowing the anger between us to disperse a little. This is his daughter. Of course he’s protective of her, and if it makes him feel better to bring her here, then what really is the harm? “Hopefully it’s just a cold.”

He throws away a handful of wipes. “Want me to take her?”

I hand her over because she is his after all. I take the diaper bag and lean along the wall, watching him with her. He’s kissing her forehead and murmuring to her. I’m not close enough to hear, but I’ve never seen this look on his face before. It takes me a while to piece it all together, but it’s a look of love and concern. When you think you might lose something you can’t live without. Seeing that facial expression on Ford sears my heart. Yeah, I think maybe he could be someone’s husband and a damn good one at that. But I’m not sure that’s something he wants.

The nurse comes out from the back. “Okay, Mr. Jacobs. Come with me.”

We file through the doors and are ushered to a room with a small bassinet. The nurse takes Annabelle from Ford’s hands, placing her in the bassinet.

“She’s thrown up, what, three times?” He looks at me. “And her fever is one hundred and four. We took it the right way.”

The nurse looks at him in question, taking the stethoscope from around her neck.

“You know.” Ford moves his ass out and points.

I bite my lip to stop from laughing.

“Rectal?” she asks.

He cringes. “Yes.”

“Okay. That’s good. Let me get her vitals and we’ll go from there. You

two sit down and relax.”

I sit. Ford paces.

After the nurse listens to Annabelle’s heart and lungs, she touches her forehead, putting the thermometer in the armpit. Ford shoots me a glare and I shrug.

“She is running hot,” she confirms. “Her lungs and heart sound great though. I’m going to talk to the doctor, and we’ll see where he wants to go from there. Let’s just keep her in her diaper for the meantime.”

“How long will that take?” Ford asks.

She smiles at me as though she understands what I deal with when in reality, I don’t know this version of this man who cares about someone who’s not himself. “Not long.”

“That’s not really an answer…”

“Ford, just relax.”

He looks at me and I square my shoulders. Better for me to take his wrath than the nurse.

The nurse leaves and he sits on the doctor’s stool, wheeling it over to Annabelle who seems as though she’s slowly falling asleep.

And so we sit in silence, waiting for answers.



Less than an hour later, we’re told that Annabelle is being given some Tylenol and being admitted for a one-night stay, leaving the ER to go to the pediatric wing. They’re concerned with how high her fever is and the fact that she’s a little dehydrated. It takes a half hour before we’re situated in her room. Annabelle sleeps peacefully in a thinner onesie the hospital supplied and is hooked up to a bunch of monitors.

I’m curled into a chair in the corner of the room. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have questioned you about bringing Annabelle here. You’re her father.”

Ford tears his eyes away from his daughter. “No, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have blamed you.”

A few beats of uncomfortable silence pass.

“I hate hospitals,” I admit, pain in my voice. “Maybe that’s why I was reluctant to admit this is where she needed to be, I don’t know.”

“Why?” he asks, turning his chair to face me with his hand still on

Annabelle.

“Don’t you ever think about the dead bodies in the morgue or the fact that someone could be dying in this building right now?”

His eyebrows rise. “Pretty morbid. Babies get born here and people cheat death here too. Survivors.”

I nod. “I guess I never saw the good. I saw the fixing. But it was always temporary.”

“Why were you in a hospital so much?”

Now I have to decide if I want to tell him the truth, the most personal part of my life. As I look at him, I can tell that he genuinely wants to know, so I tell him. “Because of my dad.”

“I’m sorry,” he says, voice rough.

I shake my head. “He’s alive.”

“So he’s the survivor?” he asks with hope in his voice.

“He was an alcoholic. I had to bring him to have his stomach pumped a few times.”

“Jesus, I’m sorry, Lena.”

“Don’t be.”

“Where is he now? And your mom? You never talk about them.”

I tighten my arms around my legs. “My mom passed away when I was seven. My dad is in Tall Trees Assisted Living Facility back in New York. He lives there because he got drunk one night and went the wrong way on the interstate. Got into an accident and now he’s brain damaged. Doesn’t even really know who I am anymore.”

Admitting the truth is painful, but at the same time, it feels almost as though I’ve set down a heavy sack that I’ve been carrying around everywhere.

His mouth hangs open. “Lena…”

His tone tells me he’s figured out that my dad’s situation has something to do with why I agreed to this entire ruse between the two of us in the first place.

“Your dad is paying me a large sum of money.” I wipe the tears escaping, feeling ashamed of what he’ll think of me. A man who’s never wanted for anything other than to play hockey.

He says nothing.

“I know what you must think—”

“Don’t go assuming you know what’s in my head. It’s a complicated

place.” One side of his lips tilt up.

“It’s expensive. The home he’s in. Sure, Medicare takes care of some things, but he needs more than the bare bones care, and in order to pay for that plus my own expenses...”

“I get it. I already knew you were doing it for money. But now I feel like maybe you felt like you *had* to do it. Like you had no choice.”

“If your dad retires and your family doesn’t need me anymore—”

“Lena,” he says, and I stop talking. “You don’t have to justify your reasoning to me.”

“I just don’t want you to think...” I look at him and his eyes are on me.

He glances at Annabelle, then stalks over to me and slides into the chair next to me. “Since when do you care what I think?”

I don’t tear my gaze away from his. “I have no idea.” Another tear slips, and he catches it with his thumb. “But I’m not a gold digger, and I know you deal with a lot of women like that. I’m afraid that’s what you’ll think of me.”

His hand cradles my head, making sure our eyes don’t leave one another. “Well, you did agree to marry me for money.”

I try to shift my head to the right, but he holds it tight.

“That was a joke. I don’t think that of you.”

I nod and he releases my cheek, coolness seeping in after the warmth of his hand. “What do you think of me?”

He stretches his legs out in front of him, crossing his arms. “I think I can’t get you out of my head and it scares me.”

I shove him with my shoulder. “I meant about me taking money from your dad.”

“I think you’re smart. You’re right. You have expenses and he’s using you to get the most he can for his company, so why shouldn’t you get your share? I knew you didn’t agree because you’ve been hot for me and wanted to marry me.”

“I might not have been hot for you then, but I am now.”

His head slowly turns toward me, a smoldering haze of want filling his blue eyes. “What exactly are we doing?”

I shake my head, gaze remaining fixed on his face. “I have no clue, but it could go south.”

“I know.” He places his hand on my thigh, running it up and down. Need throbs between my thighs. “But I’m not sure I can be in close proximity and control myself.”

“You hate me.”

He scowls. “I never hated you. I teased you.”

I tilt my head at him incredulously.

“Well, you did strip the fun out of my life.”

I chuckle. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“Why did you kiss me on New Year’s Eve?”

He blows out a breath. “You’re the complete opposite of any girl I’ve ever been with, and I think because you despised me, I thought it would be fun. That I’d make you uncomfortable and then maybe you’d avoid me at all costs. I hated how you were always entangled in my business, but then...”

I kind of know what he’s going to say, but I don’t fill in the blank for him.

“Then that one small kiss sprouted this need inside me and I wanted you. Hell, I would’ve taken you right there on the plane if I thought you’d be into it,” he says.

“But...”

“Then the news about Annabelle came and I couldn’t make sense of where my life was going. People act like I don’t know what they think of me. And having a child as a result of a one-night stand doesn’t disprove their theories. All the girls, the parties, the fights—the more it pissed off my dad, the more I did it, as immature as that sounds. I think... no, I know that I always felt like my dad was going to find a way to get me out of hockey. That he’d manipulate or use leverage in some way to get me to work at Jacobs Enterprises. I wanted to live it up every second before the inevitable happened.”

“And now?”

He stares at Annabelle, a soft smile on his face. “I don’t want Annabelle growing up thinking her dad’s a sleazy guy. That he sleeps with women and discards them. Don’t get me wrong, most of the women know what they’re getting into, but I want to set an example for my daughter on how she should be treated. I don’t mind coming home after the games and taking care of her. Believe me, I’m just as surprised as everyone else.”

“Funny, right?”

“What?”

“That you got the opposite of what you thought you wanted and it’s been good for you. You’re happy.”

He nods. “But, Lena, that doesn’t mean I’m a great guy. I’m scared to sleep with you because I’m scared that once I’ve had you, I’m going to bolt and ruin this whole situation.”

His honesty strikes me hard. It’s my fear as well. I haven’t been in a ton of relationships, but I’m not the girl who sleeps with random people either.

“I know,” I say softly.

We both sit straight, our eyes on Annabelle. We’re in a crap situation with no clear way out.



CHAPTER 19

"Relax. It's just an orgy."

Lena

TWO DAYS after Annabelle has a day without a fever and seems to be recovered, we're on the Jacobs' private plane, heading to Manhattan to attend a party with Otis Sandersville. As Mr. Jacobs informed Ford and me on a mutual speaker call, this is it and we better sell our happy engagement.

Morgan will stay back and watch Annabelle at the Jacobs' penthouse, which leaves no buffer between us.

At the hospital, we were honest with one another. We're both fearful of crossing the line, but we'll never know if we don't. Annabelle being sick has been something we can focus on and put all those issues to the side. But tonight, we have to sell this relationship, and if we feel uncomfortable or awkward, someone is bound to notice.

Ford leaves me in the foyer, dropping our bags and saying he has to run out. Mrs. Jacobs takes Annabelle immediately, baby-talking with her about being sick.

Bennie's in the kitchen making everyone lunch, so I go visit with him. "Hey, Bennie."

He hugs me, kissing my temple like a father would. "How are the beaches?"

"Good, but I missed the first snowfall, right?"

He nods. "A week ago, and it was beautiful."

"It's all melted now." I pout, upset to miss the first snowfall of the year in New York City since I've been born.

“I heard you’re coming for Christmas. A photo shoot has been scheduled.” His eyebrows waggle as though it’s big doings.

“I know. I booked it.” I chuckle. “It’s good PR to show a happy family.”

He pushes a cup of his homemade salsa and a bowl of chips my way, knowing that’s my favorite. “I suppose so, but things are good?”

I’m fairly sure Bennie knows about the deal. He’s heard me complain about Ford enough to know I wouldn’t just fall head over heels and accept an engagement, but I tread lightly anyway. “They’re great. But weird.”

“Weird?” he asks, peeling some apples. No doubt making homemade baby food for Annabelle.

“Things are developing.”

“How so?”

Oh, screw it. “Do you ever feel like…” I lean over and whisper, “The help?”

He chuckles. “Hello.” He runs his hands down his Hawaiian shirt. “I’ve been wearing these as a hint and never been invited once.”

In their defense, the Jacobs go to Europe way more often than Hawaii.

“I think I’m falling for him.” I bite my lip.

“Shouldn’t you have fallen before accepting that three-carat ring?” He glances down.

I look and see my ring isn’t on my finger. Shit, I need it tonight. I’m so bad at wearing it, Ford’s always giving me shit, but that’s some high-priced jewelry.

“Bennie,” I say, insinuating he understands.

“Okay. So what if you are?”

“I don’t come from this. I’m supposed to work *for* them, not be one of them.” It’s just another one of my fears where Ford and I are concerned. That even if Ford and I make it past day one post-sex, he could wake up one day and realize I’m not the kind of woman he’s supposed to be with.

“Says who?”

I blow out a breath, dipping a chip into the salsa. “The world. It’s just the way it is.”

He shakes his head, dropping some apples into the blender. “That’s nonsense and you shouldn’t think that. You’re both the same species.”

“Species?” I chuckle.

“The heart doesn’t care about money or status or the hierarchy of the wealthy. That’s why there are fairy tales.”

I dip another chip in the salsa. “There are fairy tales so the poor can have hope. And why do people think the prince is all that?”

“You’re confusing me now, because from what you’re saying, you’re smitten with the prince.”

I clench my fists on the counter. He’s right. “I can’t help it. I’ve always been a self-confident person, you know, but why do I allow money to intimidate me?”

He leaves the blender and sits on the stool next to me, taking my hands. “Because it’s something you lacked. The security money gives people isn’t something you’ve ever had. They have the one thing you were always working for, so in essence, you feel as though they’re more successful than you. I can’t speak for the other generations, but Ford was born with that money. He didn’t earn it.”

“He is now,” I say.

“Yeah, and believe me, that kid worked hard to be where he is. No one handed him that hockey contract. He fought for it just like you did to get through college and get out of your car. You two are a lot more alike than you think.” He pats my hands and goes back to his task. “At some point in every rich family’s story, there was someone poor who had a dream. Remember that. So take that money you’re getting and build your own empire.”

He smiles at me, making it clear that he knows the arrangement. I shouldn’t be surprised he knows the specifics. He knows everything that goes down in the Jacobs household.

“Thank you,” I say, feeling so much better.

He winks. “That’s what I do. I give pep talks. Imogen was just here...” He stops talking and looks at me with that smile that suggests that what happens in the kitchen, stays in the kitchen.

I’m getting ready in one of the guest rooms when a knock lands on the door.

I open it and see a box with a bow lying on the floor. Excitement bubbles in my stomach. Taking the box into the room, I open it. The note on top of the tissue paper is in Ford’s scrawling script.

You didn't think I'd forget, did you? If you'll allow me, I'd love the honor of sliding this off your body later tonight. ~ Ford

I undo the tissue paper to discover a champagne-colored dress with a slit high up the one side, just like he wanted. The dip in the fabric for my cleavage is equal on the front and the back. I've never in my life worn something this elegant or this revealing. My excitement turns to nausea, wondering whether I can pull this off.

Digging in farther, I find another item wrapped in tissue paper with a note.

I'm going to be thinking about you wearing this all night. Torment me. ~ Ford

I blow out a breath, and sure enough, there's a pair of panties that are barely there, merely a square of fabric. There's no bra, but he did include little sticky things for my nipples. Does he go to these stores or do they just package it all for him?

I lay it all out on the bed and head into the shower, where I shave and lotion every inch of my body.

When it's time to put the dress on, I step into it as there's a knock on the door.

"Hold on," I say, holding together the back of my dress.

I open the door to find Ford in a tuxedo. He looks phenomenal, as though he belongs in a men's cologne ad. "I was going to send my sister to zip you up, but I want to do it."

I laugh as he slides into the room, shutting the door and locking it.

"Now that's a dress." He stays a foot away, his gaze soaking me in. "Damn, don't leave my side tonight."

I'm hyperaware of his gaze running all over my body. Unsure where we stand, I take his notes and behavior to mean that he wants to try again to have our night together, that after reflecting since Annabelle's illness, he still wants to cross the line.

He raises his finger and twirls it. I turn around. Stepping up behind me,

Ford zips the dress but doesn't pull away. I'm positioned in front of the mirror and he towers over me so it's easy to catch a glimpse of us. A couple. An engaged couple.

"Beautiful," he whispers, staring into the mirror.

I swallow hard and lock eyes with him in the mirror. "Yes." But I'm talking about us, or even just him.

"Did you like my gifts?"

"I did. Thank you."

"You're missing one thing." He puts his hand in his pocket and holds my engagement ring in front of me. "If I find you without this again, I'm going to spank you."

My eyes flare because I can tell from his voice that he's serious. My panties grow wet with the thought of being bent over his lap in my thong. "I..."

He kisses the nape of my neck and I close my eyes. The scent of his expensive cologne and the waft of heat from his body on my bare back add to the sensation.

"We need to go now before we don't make it to the party. Let's go, beautiful." His fingers brush a path down my arm until his hand locks with mine.

I grab my clutch and we leave the confines of the bedroom, stepping out into the world as the soon-to-be Mr. and Mrs. Ford Jacobs. I repeat to myself that I can do this. And for some reason, with Ford at my side, I believe I can.

We stop in the foyer, where Morgan is holding Annabelle. She's getting so big, you can practically hold her on your hip now. She smiles and runs her hand down Ford's face.

"Love you, baby girl. Be good for your aunt and make sure she's not doing anything naughty like having boys over." Ford looks at his sister with a stern expression.

Morgan rolls her eyes. "Give me some credit."

I say goodbye to Annabelle with a kiss to the top of her head and she reaches for my hair. I'm able to sneak away before she gets a hold of it though because if she did, we'd be here a while.

"Call me if you need me? Call 911 if it's really bad. Don't wait for me," Ford says. I gently nudge him toward the elevator, but he whirls around. "And no boys. Or friends. Or parties." He points, but I give one last little shove and he stumbles into the elevator.

“Relax. It’s just an orgy.” Morgan laughs, giving him a small wave as the elevator doors slide shut.

“She’s kidding,” I say.

He squeezes the bridge of his nose. “She’s only eighteen.”

“And fully able to watch Annabelle. She’ll be asleep in an hour.”

He blows out a breath.

It’s endearing that he doesn’t want to leave Annabelle. I know she’s not actually mine, but I’m kind of ready for an adult night out, even if I’m pretending to be someone I’m not. There’ll be no interruptions tonight. As Ford places his hand on the small of my back when we reach the lobby, I wonder whether that’s a good or a bad thing.



CHAPTER 20

"I'm sure you'll rock that too."

Ford

WE WALK into the party and all eyes turn toward us. Lena tenses next to me. I bend down and whisper in her ear, "Relax."

She doesn't though. I'd thought about reminding her to use the toy I bought her the first time to relax her. Then when I went into her room to zip up her dress, I thought I could do it for her—slip my hand under the slit of her dress, slide the thong over, and watch her come on my hand. But it just didn't feel right. Then again, I've been waiting a fucking lifetime for it to feel right.

There's too much at stake. I don't want to just take her, I want to have her. And more than once.

We check our coats and I slip the ticket into the pocket of my slacks. Grabbing two champagne flutes off a server's tray, I hand her one. "This will relax you."

She sips it and smiles at me.

I take the opportunity to kiss her on her cheek because she's so cute. "Save the blushing for after."

"I'm curious, how do you think we're going to have sex with Annabelle there?" she asks, because I haven't filled her in on my plans for after we ditch this party.

"We're not going back to my parents' place, we're going to a hotel. A suite."

The flute almost slips out of her hand, but her grip tightens. "No. Don't

waste money like that.”

“Believe me, it’s gonna be the best money I’ve spent in months, maybe years.”

“That’s a lot of pressure.”

“Let me add that we do nothing if you don’t want to. It’s completely up to you.” But I really hope she wants to. I mean, she did kiss the living shit out of me after the game. I see her clench her thighs sometimes and I wonder if it’s to soothe an ache I’ve caused.

She finishes her champagne, puts the flute on a table, and wraps her arms around my neck, pushing her body into mine. “I want to.”

And damn, my dick chubs.

“Then let’s get this party over with.”

“Ford.” My dad’s voice is like razor blades on my balls, ruining my moment with Lena.

“Be nice,” Lena whispers, linking her hand in mine as though we’re a united front.

We both turn and see my father standing with a short-statured balding man. I assume he must be Otis Sandersville. A petite brunette next to him has her hair in a bun and a dress similar to the one Lena wore to my dad’s birthday party, aka hiding every inch of skin.

“Dad,” I say, holding out my hand to shake his. I see my mom escaped and I wonder how she managed that.

“Hi, Eli,” Lena says, hugging my dad as though they really are more than employee and boss.

“Lena, you look stunning.”

She blushes. “Thank you. Ford surprised me with the dress.” She winds her arm through mine and rests her head on my shoulder.

“He always does surprise me with the interests he pursues. I’m not sure Gabi would like it if I tried to pick out her dress.” My dad laughs.

We all carry on as though it’s funny when he really just insulted me. I bite back my reply because Otis is here.

“May I see?” the woman next to who I’m still assuming is Otis asks, holding out her hand to Lena.

Lena stares for a moment, clearly not understanding the question.

“The ring, darling,” the woman says.

“Oh. Yes. Of course.” Lena holds out her hand, and the woman comes so close to the ring I’m surprised she doesn’t have one of those magnifying

glasses like at the jeweler's.

"Very pretty. And expensive." She nods to me as though complimenting my good taste.

"Let me introduce you." My dad looks at Otis. "This is Otis Sandersville and his wife, Penny." Then he gestures to me. "My oldest, Ford, and his fiancée, Lena Boyd."

We all shake hands, and Otis sets his gaze on me. "You've made the magazines and newspapers a lot of money."

I nod. "I think the internet more."

We both laugh.

"You like to be the center of attention?" he asks.

Lena stands like a statue next to me.

"I'll admit I was a bit wild when I was younger, but Lena's shown me a new way of life." I look down at her, and she forces a smile.

"And, Lena, taking care of a child that isn't yours? Commendable," Penny says.

Lena looks at Penny instead of Otis. "No child should be motherless."

Penny nods and glances at Otis with a soft smile. "Won't it be hard knowing she came from Ford being with another woman?"

"I—" I'm ready to dive in and save her. She's not supposed to be raked over the coals, I am.

But Lena places her perfectly manicured hand on my arm, softly implying she has this. "It was before Ford and I truly got together. Sure, there was a kiss at midnight on New Year's Eve." She glimpses at me with love-filled eyes. "But it was complicated, what with me working with the Jacobses. We had to tread carefully. Like you, I'm familiar with the unknown, of not knowing when my next meal would be, and I couldn't risk my job."

I freeze. Where the hell is she going with this? This man might be richer than my father. Certainly they're on the same level at least.

My dad glares at Lena, then at me. Questions in his gaze. Questions I have no answers for.

"I see you've done your research." Mr. Sandersville smiles at Lena. "I guess I assumed you came from the same mold as the Jacobses."

Lena shakes her head. "No, that's why I keep taking this ring off. I'm afraid to lose it. Too expensive." She holds it out again and Penny holds out her own hand, where there's a simple gold band.

It's then I take in their clothing. Penny is in a presentable dress, but

nothing like I'm used to seeing women in high society wear. Otis is in a suit, but it's not Armani or perfectly tailored to his body. These are frugal people who don't show off the amount of money they have.

"I'd want it locked to my hand." Penny laughs, and Lena joins in. "We tend to stick to core values. Money is security and nothing more."

Lena's smile could light up the room.

"I told Otis I thought you must be a saint. Taking on Ford alone is a big feat." She looks at me. "No offense."

I hold up my hand that I take none, even though I do.

"And then his sweet daughter. We've seen a few articles with the three of you, and you make a beautiful family. And you're right about no child being motherless. We ourselves have adopted two children of dear friends of ours who unexpectedly passed."

"That's so very kind of you," Lena says.

"Turns out maybe I was wrong about you." Otis turns to me while I'm still processing this whole exchange between Lena and Penny. "You know, they say the worth of a man is in the woman he chooses."

"Can't say I've ever heard that before, but it's the truth. This woman has changed me." I wrap my arm around Lena's waist. I mean every word. I'm not acting, although Lena probably assumes I am.

"Do you smoke cigars? Come join me on the balcony," Otis suggests.

"This is where we part." Penny squeezes Otis's arm.

"I'll be back in no time," he says.

I bend down and give Lena a kiss on the cheek. "You made me hard," I whisper in her ear.

The soft moan my words elicit only makes me think of when we leave here and whether we'll even make it back to the hotel room.

"Don't be too long," she says. Her touch lingers on my arm as I walk away with my dad and Otis.

"Never." I wink and catch her hand falling to her stomach.

"Oh, he is a charmer and very handsome," Penny tells Lena, but I'm out of earshot before her answer.

We file out to the balcony where my dad and Otis say hello to certain people they're used to doing business with. Standing around a tall table, Otis pulls the cigars out of his pocket, handing us each one. We pass around the cutter and lighter until we're all situated. I stop a waitress to ask for a whiskey.

“I know we’ve been in talks about me buying a majority stake in Jacobs Enterprises.” Otis is the first to breach the subject as to why we’re all here.

A topic I don’t want to be a part of. It’s not like I don’t feel any guilt over my dad selling what my ancestors built. I do. But I can’t bring myself to want the life my dad wants for me. I would if I could.

“We’d remain forty-nine percent stakeholders and hold positions on the board, but you’d have majority ownership, yes.” I can’t tell from my dad’s tone whether he’s upset with me still or if he really is okay with letting part of the company go so he can travel with my mom.

“Is there something I don’t know?” He sucks in smoke and billows it out into the crisp night air.

“Not at all. Why do you ask?” my dad says.

“Because from what I understand, your business isn’t in jeopardy. Quite the contrary. You’ve brought it back better than ever after your father tanked it.”

My dad’s hands tense on his glass of whiskey, and I worry for a moment that his anger about Otis talking badly about my grandfather will undo this entire situation.

“I have no one to hand it down to, and I promised Gabi that once our kids were grown, I’d step away. Unfortunately, my son has more love for a puck and a stick than a boardroom and an office and my two daughters aren’t interested. That leaves me no option but to sell.” My dad briefly looks in my direction.

“You could remain owner. Hire someone you trust to run the day-to-day,” Otis says, and I can’t help the chuckle that escapes me. Otis raises an eyebrow in my direction.

“If my father still had controlling interest, there’s no way he’d be able to keep his hands off of it. He’s a bit of a control freak.” I glance at my dad. “Sorry, Dad, but it’s true.”

He gives me a terse nod.

“I understand. Not sure I could do it either,” Otis says. “The temptation to pop in the office would always be there.”

“Exactly,” my dad says with a satisfied smile.

Otis puffs away on his cigar for a moment. “And you both want to sit on the board. That’s part of the deal?”

We both nod.

“And you, Ford, you’ve cleaned up your act? I don’t want any bad press.

I don't want to have to be putting out press releases because you've had an orgy with fifteen women or something."

My eyes widen. I guess my dad was right to assume we needed this fake engagement.

"You just saw him with Lena. They're in love. A wedding is in the works for the end of the hockey season."

"That so?" Otis poses his question to me.

I nod. "Yes."

"Okay, we'll sign the papers the day of the marriage."

"Seriously?" I ask, and my dad's hand lands on my shoulder. "I mean—"

"No." Otis laughs. "The day after, but I do want to ensure that you are marrying her. You've done a one-eighty in a short amount of time, Ford. Some leopards never change their spots."

"I assure you, I do... did."

He smiles and nods. "Can't wait to get the invitation in the mail. In the meantime, Eli, let's put a meeting on the books after the holidays. We can work out some more details, then let the lawyers do their thing." Otis raises his cigar, puffs another billow of smoke, and leaves the patio.

My dad turns to me. "I told you the man is inflexible. How the hell did Lena know about them not having any money when they started out?"

I shrug. "How am I supposed to know?"

My dad gives me a look and rejoins the party.

I do the same for a bit, making the rounds and schmoozing with everyone like I'm expected to. I receive the many congratulations on my engagement with a smile and tell them what a lucky man I am.

Finally, I've had enough so I seek out my *fiancée*. I spot Lena talking to a group of women, including my mom. I come at Lena from behind, surprising her, which makes all the older women smile.

"You ready?" I whisper, and the fact that she steps back into my embrace I take as a yes. "Can you all excuse me while I have a moment with my fiancée?"

My mom smiles at us. "Go, Ford. You two never get a night alone. We've got Annabelle tonight."

I kiss my mom's cheek and Lena hugs her, saying how nice it was to meet everyone.

We leave the room with my mom bragging about Annabelle and how in love Lena and I are.

“Are you sure we should leave?” Lena asks me as the elevator doors shut. I backstep her into the elevator wall and my fingers graze the side of her tit. “You’re so fucking amazing.”

“Well, thank you. And I haven’t even sucked your dick yet.” She grins and laughs. I like this side of her.

“You’re good at everything else. I’m sure you’ll rock that too.” Our eyes meet and I inch closer.

“Get me to the hotel and you can find out for yourself.” Her voice is breathy.

“Fuck.” I take her hand and bring it down between my legs. “Look what you did. I’ve been walking around with a fucking hard-on since you put on that dress. Since I know what little lingerie is on under it, I’m dying.”

When the elevator doors open, I yank her out of the confined space before I end up taking her up against the wall. Tonight, I’m having Lena Boyd regardless of any repercussions.



CHAPTER 21

"Baby, after I'm finished here, you'll never be satisfied with your own fingers again."

Lena

I SLIDE over to the far side in the SUV, but Ford sits right next to me, his thigh pressed to mine.

"Don't go running on me," he whispers in my ear, his hot breath on my neck and his hand sliding around my waist and up my torso. Again, his knuckles graze down the side of my breast and goose bumps cover my body.

"I was simply leaving you room," I say.

He chuckles softly in my ear. "I don't need that much room."

His mouth covers my earlobe, and he sucks it, his tongue toying with it. My eyes close and I relish his undivided attention. I'm finally going to have him.

His fingers travel down the side of my body, past my waist to my leg, and slide under the slit of my dress. "See why this dress is so much better?" His breath tickles my neck, and he bites my earlobe.

A long exhale expels from my mouth when his hand brushes along my core, over my damp thong.

I put my hand on his. "Ford..."

He draws back and looks into my eyes. The darkness of the interior doesn't hide the fire raging inside me and he sees it. There's a cocky smirk on his face, then he's back to nuzzling my neck. He shifts my panties over, his finger swiping through the wetness at my core. He draws in a deep breath when he finds me soaked.

The SUV pulls along the curb outside the hotel and I lightly push Ford off

me, my cheeks hot. But before we come to a complete stop, Ford brings his finger to his mouth and sucks my essence off of it. I clench my thighs, hoping to stop the impending orgasm he's brought to the surface.

I've never had a partner who was so comfortable with sex. The guys I've been with before have always been more conservative. The same moves over and over—kiss my lips, travel to my neck, hands to my breasts. A man has never been so blatant about how much he wants me. And I can't say I hate it.

"Thank you," he says, his voice groggy.

He slides out the door to the curb, holding his hand out to me. Of course, the hotel is one of the nicest in Manhattan. The doorman opens the door and Ford tips him as we head to our room. Even in the elevator, we have a man who presses the buttons to our floor, but Ford puts his hand on my ass and squeezes, gripping the thin fabric of my dress as though he wants to rip it off my body.

After we step off the elevator and walk down the hall to our room, we're silent, and I wonder if he's second-guessing his decision.

He pulls out the key card and unlocks the door, but he looks at me for a moment before he goes inside. "Remember, this is your decision. What do you want?"

I nod, grab his lapels, and step into the room with my back pushing the door open, pulling him along. "I want you."

"Thank God." He grunts and his mouth slams down on mine. The hotel room door shuts and he quickly turns me around, pushing my back into the door. "All night, I've been thinking of all the things I want to do to you, but one thing specifically kept resurfacing in my mind."

He kisses me, shoving off his tuxedo jacket and tossing it on the floor. Then he falls to his knees, his hands on each one of my legs, pushing my dress out of his way.

"Then I tasted you and all my willpower cracked." He slides over my panties and swings one leg over his shoulder. Without any preamble, he buries his head between my legs.

One swipe of his tongue and I'm done. He owns me. My head falls back to the door with a thud, and I jut my hips out to meet his mouth. The man is talented beyond belief, starting slow, the tip of his tongue circling my clit. His huge hands are on my ass, squeezing and tugging me closer, but keeping me steady. I let out a breathy whimper when he licks me wide and sucks my clit.

My fingers dive into his hair, clutching, needing something to anchor me. He stops and my gaze shoots to his, the devilish glint staring right back at me. Never pulling his gaze away, he pushes a finger inside me, and my back arches from the door. Then he adds another one, never tearing his gaze from mine.

“Tell me,” he murmurs. “Tell me what you want.”

“I want you to fuck me,” I say, and he shakes his head slowly.

“Be specific.”

“Don’t stop,” I say, my eyelids falling from the pure pleasure coursing through my veins. I should’ve known he’d be as talented in the bedroom as he is on the ice.

“You’re so tight.” He groans as if this knowledge is torturous for him. I clench down on his fingers and a groan falls from his lips. “Goddamn, I’m not going to be able to control myself in a minute.”

My hands fall to his face. “Don’t. I don’t want you to control yourself. Show me, Ford. Show me how much you want me.”

He unbuckles his belt, opening his slacks with his free hand. While his fingers manipulate me into ecstasy, he strokes himself. My eyelids flutter from the stretch of him thrusting his fingers in and out.

A strangled moan slips from my lips and my hands splay against the door. His mouth lands on my clit again and his tongue works me into a frenzy before I’m grinding on him. When he curves his fingers in a come-hither motion, my climax hits me like a train, bulldozing me over. I quake around him until finally he pulls away and my back slides down the door until my ass hits the floor.

His hand runs along my cheek. “You’re fucking beautiful when you come.”

It’s then I process that he’s still stroking himself, so I get up on my hands and knees, one arm reaching out and taking the weight of him in my palm. He props himself along the wall and I pump him a few times before taking him in my mouth. I twirl my tongue around his tip and his hands reach to my back, unzipping my dress and allowing the fabric to fall forward and show off my breasts.

He takes my breasts in his hands, his thumbs toying with my nipples and sending signals straight to my center. The more he plays, the more turned on I become as I suck him off.

“Damn, you have a talented mouth.”

His compliment only spurs me to increase my pace and efforts. To make him become as unglued as I just was. But he tears me off of him when I think he's close.

"I have to be inside you." He climbs up, pushing his slacks down, toeing out of his shoes, and taking off his socks.

As he undresses, I sit on the floor and admire his rock-hard abs and chiseled V torso. From head to toe, he's the most magnificent man. When he holds out his hand, I accept, and he pulls me to my feet. My dress pools around my waist. He nudges it down the rest of the way, leaving me in my thong and my heels. He admires me, stepping back as though committing it to memory.

I bite my lip from the nervousness of being under his scrutiny. Not that he's ever given me reason to think I'm not beautiful.

"I can't believe you've been hiding this body under those baggy clothes."

"Baggy clothes?"

"It was a compliment," he says, stepping into me, his hands around my waist and his face in my neck. "You're so goddamn hot and I'm gonna fuck you with only that thong and heels on."

Although I'm caught up on the baggy clothes comment, it's soon forgotten when he licks my neck up to my earlobe and his hot breath once again makes goose bumps shoot up my spine. That spot is surely a new erogenous zone for me.

He sweeps me up and I wrap my legs around his narrow waist. Then I'm falling to the mattress. He wastes no time climbing on top of me, the tip of his dick at my opening.

"Condom," I say and his eyes sparkle.

Reaching over to the nightstand, he grabs the box that's sitting there.

"Aren't you a Boy Scout?" I laugh.

He tears open the foil packet, takes out the condom, and rolls it down his length. My mouth salivates the entire time. He glances at me. "I wrote out a checklist for tonight because I didn't want anything to go wrong."

My heart flips with his confession, but I don't have any time to process that he planned tonight to be perfect because he widens my legs with his thighs, baring me to him. He locks his eyes with mine, slides my thong over, and inches inside me slowly. I accept him inch by inch with our gazes glued to each other's. Ford grabs a hold of my hips, and once he's fully inside me, my eyes close from the feeling of being so full. He's the biggest I've ever had

and whoever said size doesn't matter can go to hell, because it sooo matters.

"You good?" he asks, his voice gruff as though he's holding himself back.

Never in a million years would I have thought Ford would be a caring and considerate lover. I want to ask if this is his usual MO or special just for me, but a small part of me doesn't want to know the answer. I want to believe this is especially for me. That I pull out a different Ford than the other girls before me.

"Perfect," I say.

He smiles, circling his hips inside me. Slowly, he slides out of me before thrusting himself back in. Oh my god, that felt so damn good. He continues the pace, never getting as deep as he did the first time. I thrust, hoping to break him, to make him dig into me, give me everything he has, but of course, Ford has other plans.

"I'm not going to beg," I say in a begging tone.

He laughs, awarding me with a thrust that hits me so deep and hard, I cry out.

"Is that what you want?" he asks.

I reach out, wanting him to lie down on me, but he stays upright, moving in and out of me in a teasing fashion.

"Again," I moan.

"That sounds like begging," he says, and I shake my head.

"I can get out of this bed and get myself off," I tell him.

"Baby, after I'm finished here, you'll never be satisfied with your own fingers again."

And I know he's right because he already feels more incredible than anything I've ever experienced.

Then he falls forward, pushing into me. "This what you want?"

I dig my fingernails into his shoulder blades. "God, yes."

Finally, he fucks me. Hard, fast, and thorough. Sweat beads along our bodies. My legs wrap around his waist, and he drills inside me like I wanted.

"Fuck," he says, smashing his lips to mine.

It becomes a frenzy of touches, caresses, grabs, squeezes. We can't get enough of one another, each of us right at the end of our willpower. He takes my nipple into his mouth and I drown in my orgasm, free-falling into an open pool of water and sinking into its depths.

Another two thrusts and he stills inside me, coming right after.

We hold one another for what seems like a lifetime. I don't want to move and I don't want him to move. Maybe because we're both scared of what will come now that we've quenched our desire for each other.

Ford slowly withdraws from me and I want to pull him back in, but I don't. He slithers down my body, sliding the thong down my legs. I help him get it off and he drops it onto the floor. He unbuckles my heels and slowly removes each one from my feet, allowing them to fall to the floor with a thud.

That's all it takes for me to know I've fallen for Ford Jacobs.



CHAPTER 22

"What are you really afraid of?"

Ford

I NEVER IMAGINED Lena Boyd would be a nympho, but we've barely caught our breath from round one and she's rubbing her pussy along my thigh. This is the first time I've ever cuddled after sex, and I have to say, I'm not hating it. I actually kind of like it.

She props her chin up on my arm. "So?"

"So what?" I ask, looking at her.

"Do you want to run?" She doesn't divert her eyes, waiting for my answer.

"No. I don't."

She straddles me, her bare pussy teasing my half-hard dick. "So once wasn't enough?"

I grip her hips, moving her back and forth, the slickness of her pussy warming my cock. "Not even close."

She bends down, but I urge her up, taking one of her nipples into my mouth. Stilling in place, she groans. I won't admit it to her right now, but I'm not sure I'll ever feel like I've had her enough times.

"Can you even?" she asks through labored breaths.

My mouth pops off her tit. "Are you questioning my ability to fuck you multiple times?"

I feel her chest vibrate with laughter as I cast kisses there. "Did I offend you?"

I grab a condom and have it on in record time, then lower her to my now-

erect cock.

“Oh.” She gasps.

“Oh is right. Don’t doubt me again. You’ll be begging for mercy before I can’t go again.”

“That sounds like a challenge.” She takes me in her hand and slides the tip of my dick along her folds. Fuck, the slickness makes me throb.

“Take it as you will.”

Then she sinks down on me. “How about I take control this time? You can reserve your energy because I bet you I’ll still be like the Energizer Bunny while you’re passed out.”

“You know I don’t back away from a bet.”

Just the word bet reminds me of the one I have with Tweetie. I try to figure out if enough time has passed for me to win, but Lena circling her hips distracts me. Fuck it, even if I end up losing, this was worth it.

“Do your worst.”

She shakes her head, a smile tipping her lips, and for a moment, I think this must be what Aiden and Maksim love so much with their women. Times when you really feel like you know the person. Because I’ve grown to know Lena pretty damn well and the fact that we can communicate with just expressions is awesome as hell.

She rocks along my length and my hands slide up to her tits, taking one in each hand. “I do love these big soft tits.”

Her hands fall back on my thighs when she arches her back. “I love your cock.” I raise my hips up off the mattress and she squeezes in with her knees. “I’m in control. Remember?”

I dramatically put my hands behind my head. “If you say so.”

Her back arches more, her tits begging for my attention while she moves me in and out of her. I fixate on where we’re joined. It’s hot as hell watching my glistening cock sink into her over and over again. I glance up to see she’s watching as well.

“Ford.” She’s breathless already. My name on her lips does something to me. “Touch me.”

“You said you’re in control,” I joke.

Her eyes close and she rocks faster. “Please.”

“Afraid not, baby.”

She pops her eyes open. “Ford!”

I laugh and raise my hips off the mattress.

“Oh god, again.”

I do it again, still keeping my hands entwined behind my head.

She falls forward, her hand on my pecs. “Touch my tits. Please.”

“Can’t.”

Then she lies on me, her hands trying to get under my head to mine, but I’m stronger.

“Stop playing. I’m right there.” She’s needy and greedy and she sits back up, staring at me. “Then I’m going to touch myself.” She holds up her hand in warning.

“I’d love to see you touch yourself.” I give her a shit-eating grin.

“You don’t want to be the one who gets me off?”

She stops moving and I take over thrusting up into her. “You’re in control.”

She slides her hand dramatically down the valley of her breasts, past her naval to the top of her trimmed pussy. My cock flexes inside her when she touches her clit. It’s hot as fuck, but she’s right—I want to be the one to make her come.

“Stop.” I move her hand out from between her legs and take over.

She gives me a satisfied smile. Her hands are on my thighs again, and I lightly massage her clit until she’s rocking so hard she might break my dick. I’m not complaining at all. Then I increase the pace and she whimpers, staring at me with hooded eyes like she can’t take anymore or she’s going to explode.

“Should I let you take over control again?” I ask.

She glares at me. “If you stop, I swear to God I will break your dick.”

I laugh and her pace accelerates, sweat dripping down her body. All I want is to lick the salty sweat off her body. Her hands whip forward onto my hand manipulating her clit and she bolts forward, her orgasm hitting her. She shudders with small aftershocks until she opens her eyes and stares at me. With just-fucked hair and a face slack with satisfaction, she’s fucking perfect.

“Now roll over and get on all fours. It’s time for me to take control.”

She manages to climb off my lap and props her ass up in the air. Without waiting, I grind into her, grabbing her hips and thrusting in and out. There’s no better view than her ass in front of me, her pussy taking my dick again and again.

I run my hand over her ass. What I wouldn’t do to make it pink, but she’s losing steam, her body struggling to stay upright.

The tingling in my spine starts and my balls draw up before my orgasm hits me. I drill into her two more times before I fill the condom. Her body gives out, sprawling on the bed.

I fall down next to her. "How's that energy level now?"

She opens up one eye. "I'm good."

I laugh and get up to take off the condom. When I return, she's in the same spot.

I push the covers open. "Time for you to get some sleep."

"I don't need sleep. I'm ready to go again." She reaches between my legs for my dick that lies limp along my thigh.

"Somehow I doubt that." I kiss her temple. "Get some sleep."

Eventually her breathing evens out and she falls asleep, while I lie awake dissecting everything we just did, the chance we took. All I can think of is Annabelle and how much my actions affect her now. I can no longer act on temptation without thinking it through, even though I just did.

I'll give Lena one thing. She doesn't need a lot of sleep. I was about to fall asleep when she woke and stuck her ass in my direction. What was I supposed to do except take her from behind, raising her leg and pushing into her while I play with her tits? It's my favorite position and I think she's as big a fan as me now.

But that left us lying in bed with the television on but no sound.

"How did you know about the Sandersvilles?" I ask her.

She shrugs. "I did some research. Found out how they got to where they are."

"I know, but why? All you had to do was show up on my arm and convince them you loved me."

She laughs and shakes her head. "It's my job. I'm still the Jacobs family PR rep."

I take her hand, staring at the engagement ring. "Do you really not like it?"

"Like it?" She sits up and I find it hard to concentrate with her tits hanging out. "I love it."

She holds up her left hand and I think about what it means if this isn't just

a “get it out of our systems” thing. I mean, we’re supposed to marry and here we are sleeping together. I’d love for her to stare at that ring like I gave it to her out of love, but I didn’t. What do we do—get married and divorced, only for me to ask her to marry me again at some point when the timing is right?

She nudges me out of my mindfuck. “What are you thinking about?”

I slide up to rest my back along the headboard. “Where do we go from here?”

She sits back on her ankles, looking deflated. “What do you mean?”

I take her hand again, moving the ring back and forth on her finger. It fits her so well, as if it was meant for her—which makes sense, because I was thinking about her when I bought it. I would’ve gotten her a bigger ring if I thought she’d let me, but I knew she isn’t the type who would want to show off a huge diamond. “We’re going to get fake married and we’re embarking on a real relationship.”

She straightens her legs out, sitting cross-legged and giving me a view of her pussy. All the blood rushes to my dick, when I really need my mind working on this one.

“Are we embarking on a relationship?” she asks softly.

I think, not wanting to say something I’d have to take back at some point, but I’ve spent the entire night with her and I don’t want it to end. I find myself excited to see her after games, or when I pull into the garage and the Bronco is there, my stomach stirs knowing she’s inside. Late at night, I wonder what she does in her room and hope that our paths collide at some point. All of this means something. One thing I know for sure is I don’t want it to end. “I think so. You?”

She stares at her hands, twisting them for way too long. Her back straightens and her demeanor changes. “I don’t know.”

She slides off the bed and heads to the bathroom.

I look around the room as if someone will fill me in on what just happened. Getting out of bed myself, I stalk after her and rest my shoulder along the doorframe of the bathroom, watching her stare at herself in the mirror. “What am I missing?”

She slowly turns.

“Wait!” I hold up my hand, grabbing one of the complimentary robes and tossing it to her. “I can’t concentrate while you’re naked.”

She puts it on and I feel slightly offended she can concentrate with my dick hanging out. “I don’t know what to think. I mean you’re Ford Jacobs.

And..."

"And what?" I ask. "I thought we were on the same page here."

"We are. I mean, it's just that I didn't expect to feel..."

Anger percolates under the surface. "Feel what? Speak, Lena!"

"Don't yell at me." She covers her face with her hands. "I have to think."
She looks at me as tears fill her eyes.

All I want to do is take her in my arms, but she's having doubts and I'm really pissed off about it. "What does the fact I'm Ford Jacobs have to do with us giving this a shot?"

She holds out her arms, her hands insinuating like I should know. "Because you're you."

"What the fuck does that mean?" She's talking in damn circles.

"You're not monogamous. You don't do candlelight dinners or Netflix and chill. You live on the edge and I don't. You have all this money and want for nothing. I scrape by. We're total opposites. And I have more to lose than you do if we screw this up for your dad." She walks past me in the doorway.

"What are you really afraid of?" I ask.

She freezes with her back to me. I watch for an excruciating minute as she breathes heavily but doesn't face me.

"That I'm not good enough," she whispers. "That you'll want more."

Then she buries her head in her hands and cries.

I stand, unable to move my feet, not sure what the hell I should do. We just slept together and already there's fucking drama.



CHAPTER 23

"Glad it does for one of us."

Lena

I CAN'T BELIEVE I admitted that to him, as though I want him to convince me I'm worthy. And maybe a part of me does. The feelings that have surfaced for Ford are all-consuming. I'm one hundred percent invested, but how can a man really change so quickly?

I hear him step forward, but I raise my hand. "I'm sorry. I'm sure you're like 'what the fuck?' I'm not being fair to you."

"I'm so fucking confused right now." There's some residual anger in his tone. Probably because he put himself out there and said he wanted this to go somewhere.

I turn, and god, he's so beautiful. Even now, when he looks pissed off, I want to run to him and wrap my arms around him. "I told you about my dad, right?"

He nods.

I go over to the bed and blow out a long breath before I plop myself down on the edge. "He'd always clean up his act for a while after something major happened, like he got picked up by the police for sleeping on the street, or the shelter caught him with alcohol. Or if I got on him about needing money and he needed to sober up and show up for work. For a few short months, he'd try. I have no idea if he was just hiding it or actually stopped drinking, but he'd secure a job and I'd think, *This is it. We're going to be okay.* Then I'd come home to whatever dump we were living in and he'd be passed out. It was a cruel cycle of hope and disappointment. He always promised he'd

change, but it never lasted.”

He sits down next to me. “So you think that’s me?”

I bite my lip and look at him. “I think you had a daughter and it changed you. I think you want the new you to be you, but I don’t know if it actually is you now. It’s all happened so fast. I fear that one day it’s all going to be too much. Becoming a parent when you weren’t planning to is enough on its own, but add on the fact that now you’re a single parent, and then think about if you added on your first ever real girlfriend... don’t you worry that’s a lot of change all at once to deal with?”

He seems to think for a moment. “I’ve been going through the motions. I’m not really thinking about all of it being new. All I know is I’m enjoying it.” He bends forward, leaning his forearms on his thighs. “But I see your point.”

As stupid as it is, since I raised the point, the fact that he understands crushes me. But I’d rather be crushed now than six months from now. “You do?”

He nods. “There’s been a lot of change in my life.”

I can’t be upset that he’s agreeing with me. I can’t, but I am. “I know.”

He turns his head in my direction. “How would we even manage this then? I mean, I really like you.”

I smile. “I really like you too, but... *ugh!* Why do I have to be so sensible?”

“Yes, please tell me why. We could be fucking on this bed again right now.” He stands, and the fact he’s putting on his boxer briefs makes my breath falter.

“So you agree? We shouldn’t pursue anything?” I ask.

He runs his hand through his hair. “I don’t agree, but I understand. If it were up to me, I’d be fucking you five times a day every day, but I get your hesitation. I understand your worry. I know what kind of guy I am.”

Since he’s only thinking about fucking me, I’d say we’re probably making the right decision. He’s not saying he wants to get to know me better and spend more time with me. Wake up to me every day and fall asleep next to me every night. A relationship can’t survive on lust alone.

“So where do we go from here?” I ask.

He moves to the couch area of the suite. “I’m going to get dressed and go back to my parents’ penthouse. You’re going to stay here and enjoy the suite. I’ll swing by with Annabelle on the way to the airport to pick you up. We’ll

go to Florida, where we'll coexist until the arrangement is over."

In just this short time, he has it all figured out. "Can we coexist?"

He shrugs on his tuxedo slacks and buttons them. I commit every moment of him dressing to memory because he's rocking the just fucked half-dressed look and I won't be seeing it again.

"We can try. Who knows? Maybe you'll be the first girl I become friends with after I fucked her." He glances at me, and there's no heartbreak in his eyes. Maybe he truly is okay with this, whereas my heart is cracking.

"Friends would be nice."

"Sure." He pulls on his shirt and buttons it.

My body begs my brain to run to him and stop him from leaving. To take him to bed with me, forget all my doubts. For him to convince me he's different and has changed and there'll be no going back to the womanizing Ford who couldn't ever stay grounded.

He walks back to me and puts his finger on my chin, urging me to look at him. "One more."

He places his lips on mine softly. No tongue, just a press of his mouth to mine. Drawing back, he winks, turns around, swipes my thong off the floor, and shoves it in his pocket before walking out the door.

After it shuts, I sink to the floor and allow myself to cry for what I almost had but lost.

The next morning, a bellhop brings me my suitcase from the Jacobs' penthouse, allowing me to get dressed.

Ford texts me when he arrives and I tell him I'll meet him downstairs so he doesn't have to haul Annabelle out of the vehicle. I have no idea what his family must think. Us staying at a hotel was probably a sign that things were progressing with us. With him showing up in the middle of the night, it's clear we're back to the land of pretend.

I take the elevator down to the first floor, and the bellhop places my bag in the SUV Ford ordered to take us to the airport. Annabelle is in her carrier, smiling at me.

I tickle her belly and her smile only grows. "Good morning, sweet Annabelle."

“I think Morgan spiked her bottle. She’s been this happy all morning.” Ford glances up from his phone. He has dark bags under his eyes and doesn’t look like he slept the entire night.

“If Annabelle’s happy, everyone’s happy,” I say.

He chuckles lightly before burying his head in his phone again.

We ride to the airport in uncomfortable silence as I try to interact with Annabelle, but a five-and-a-half-month-old can only do so much to break the ice.

Ford is the perfect gentleman, as he always is with me. Opening doors and directing me through the people until we’re boarding the Jacobs’ private jet.

The plane ride is more silence, him busy on his phone except for a brief twenty minutes when he fell asleep. I’m embarrassed to admit I watched him the entire time he slept. The way his mouth slowly parted, and his chest expanded when he inhaled. I memorized his chiseled jaw and sharp nose. The way his hair is always perfectly tousled. His broad shoulders straining his T-shirt and strong thighs are prominently on display through his worn jeans.

I can’t believe I told him no. I should’ve lived it up for the moment and when he changed his mind, just moved on. But no, stupid me has to think years down the line. Sometimes I hate my fear of history repeating itself.

At least the sun is out when we land, and it brightens up the dark cloud over us.

We drive to Ford’s house, and since Annabelle slept on the plane, she’s awake.

“I can take care of her. You look like you need to sleep,” I tell Ford, knowing he has a game tomorrow night.

“I’m good. You go.” He nods upstairs, so I take my suitcase to my room and shut the door.

Collapsing on the bed, I stare at the ceiling and wonder if I’m one of those people who can’t be happy. I had a great guy who did everything perfectly, and I ruined it because I’m afraid. Then again, he agreed with me, so he must not have been certain about his feelings for me.

After an hour of lying there doing nothing, I can’t stand staying in this room any longer. Besides, I figure if we keep the friendliness going, we’ll make it to the finish line a lot happier. So I head downstairs and find Annabelle asleep in Ford’s arms. He’s out cold.

I tiptoe over and pick up Annabelle. She transports well, so I take her

upstairs to her crib and place her in it, then turn on the monitor. I go downstairs as quietly as I can and take the monitor with me to the beach.

Five minutes later, a deep voice announces his presence behind me. “Soaking up the rays?”

I glance up from the lawn chair I’m in. “The sunshine makes the day feel a little brighter.”

“Glad it does for one of us.” He picks up the monitor and heads back to the patio door. “Thanks for putting her down.”

He’s cordial, polite but cold. Clearly doesn’t want me around his daughter anymore.

I sit out here for another hour because it’s a lot warmer outside now than it is inside. Maybe that friendship thing is off the table.



CHAPTER 24

"Don't just admit defeat."

Ford

IT'S the last game before our short Christmas break.

"Congratulations," Tweetie says and puts his hand on my shoulder. "You fucking did it."

"Did what?" I ask, looking up from lacing my skates.

"You went two months without getting laid. I'm proud of you."

How did I forget that ridiculous bet? "Nah, I lost."

All movement in the locker room stops and everyone's eyes are on me.

"What?" Tweetie's mouth is hanging open.

"Yeah, couldn't do it." I did the math on the way home from New York after Lena. I knew I was shy of the deal, but I didn't care. I wanted her too badly, and if that meant I lost bragging rights, I didn't give a shit. Knowing what I know now, I should've kept my cock inside my pants. Now I just know what I'm missing and can't have again.

Tweetie laughs while Aiden and Maksim stare at me, questions on both of their faces.

"Damn, I wish I would have bet you, like, your fucking Bronco or house or some shit." Tweetie goes back to his locker and puts on his pads.

"Lena?" Aiden asks quietly.

Lucky for me, the locker room fills with music and voices again. I nod.

"And?"

"And she told me afterward that it was a mistake."

He slides over on the bench closer to me. "Mistake?"

“She worries a leopard doesn’t change his spots. That in the long run, I’ll find an excuse to leave her high and dry after she’s got feelings for me. Pretty much thinks I’m in a funk in my life but one day that prick she used to hate will show back up and want to fuck other women.” I hate the bitterness in my tone, but as the days go on, the more pissed I become with her assessment of me.

“And what did you say?”

“I told her she was right, and maybe we could be friends.” At the time I meant it, since we have to be together for this pretend marriage thing, but I’m finding it really hard to be around her now.

“Why?” Maksim asks. “Why would you agree with her?”

I shrug. “You can’t change someone’s opinion once they’ve made up their mind about you. She thinks I’m a douche and nothing in the last two months has changed that, so nothing ever will.”

“Are you going to marry her?” Aiden asks, looking at Maksim as if he can answer the question.

“I have to. But then we’ll get divorced. It’s fine.” I stand. “It would never work out anyway.” I head out to the hallway to wait for game time.

“Why would it not work out?” Aiden’s right behind me.

No doubt Maksim went to take his superstition piss after he’s geared up.

“Because she’s right. I’m Ford Jacobs. I mean, come on. She’s supposed to trust me after only two months? She’s got a point, and I care about her too much to hurt her.”

He stands next to me. “So basically you agreed with her and now you two are living together and pretending you haven’t had sex?”

I nod.

“Was the sex bad?” he asks.

I shake my head. “The best I’ve ever had.”

I’m not going to go into detail with Aiden, but fuck, Lena gave me her body as though she trusted me with it. And I loved that she likes to joke when we’re messing around. The best part was how insatiable she is. Damn, I’m going to miss all of that. One night wasn’t nearly enough.

He puts his hand on my forehead. “Are you feeling okay?”

I pull away. “I’m fine.”

“You gave up?” Maksim asks when he joins us.

“I didn’t give up. She made her case and I can’t argue it. I mean, I was a douche who couldn’t commit to any woman before Annabelle was born.

Lena has a right to question my intentions.”

Aiden puts his finger on the bridge of his nose. “What the hell happened to the Ford Jacobs I know?”

“What does that mean?” I ask, narrowing my eyes at him.

“You just laid down like roadkill. Fight, motherfucker. If you like her and you think she’s wrong, fight.”

I put my hand on Aiden’s shoulder. “That’s the thing, I don’t think she’s wrong.”

He and Maksim stare at one another as the rest of the team gets hyped to go out on the ice.

“I can’t believe you’re gonna give up,” Maksim says.

“Give up what?” I shrug. “We never even were.”

Both of them glance at one another, sharing a look of confusion.

“You’re fucking with us, right?” Aiden asks.

The rest of the team heads to the ice, the three of us bringing up the rear.

I’m surprised when I spot Lena in the stands—without Annabelle this time. She doesn’t meet my gaze, although from the way she’s purposely dodging it, I’d say she feels my eyes on her. A boulder sinks deep into the pit of my stomach. I remember she was smiling and waving at me the last time she was here.

Aiden skates up to the line, ready to take some warm-up shots. “Ford, you can’t just let it go. You’ve talked us off a lot of ledges, but you can’t roll over and pretend it didn’t happen.”

“Nothing is gonna change. Sometimes a man just is who he is and can’t change no matter how hard he tries.”

We run our warm-up drills, leaving the conversation there. What do they want me to say? That I felt something different for Lena? So what if I did? It doesn’t mean anything other than maybe I’m human. But eventually I probably would’ve gotten bored with her, so she’s smart to have pointed it out.



After the game, I come out of the shower, looking at the fresh bruise on my arm. “Fuck, Maksim,” I say, because it was his doing.

“I had hopes that it would knock some sense into you.”

“I’m your teammate. Did you go color blind?” I strip off my towel and shove on a pair of boxer briefs.

“FYI, the ladies are going to your house to relieve the babysitter and you’re coming out with us.” Aiden holds up his phone.

“I’m going home,” I say, continuing to put on my suit.

“The deal’s done, man. Consider this your sentence.” Tweetie comes over, trying to put me in a headlock.

I maneuver out of it. “Why? You all have women to go home to.”

“And you do too,” Tweetie says.

“It’s all a sham. For my dad,” I confess and Tweetie stops drying himself off.

“No?” He looks at Aiden and Maksim.

They both nod.

“But we’re pretty sure Richie Rich here found his heart.” Aiden pats me where my heart would be and goes to his own locker to get dressed.

“Fuck off,” I shout after him.

“I can’t believe you fuckers left me out of the gossip. There can be four musketeers, you know that, right? We can be original like that.”

I laugh at Tweetie’s attempt to get in our circle. And he is in our circle, but he travels during the off-season when we’re all hanging around here. He’s my roommate on the road, so I consider him a great friend. We just haven’t hung out as much as we used to since he’s been in a relationship.

Tweetie pulls out his phone,—texting Tedi, no doubt. A minute later his phone dings and he looks upset and confused. “She already knew the plan. Said to make sure I have enough dollar bills?”

Aiden and Maksim laugh. “There’s only one way for you to find out what you’re made of.”

Ugh. I know exactly what they’re thinking. “I’m not going.”

“You sure as shit are, so put on your makeup, sweetheart, you’re getting a lap dance.”



Thirty minutes later, we’re filing out of Aiden’s SUV into one of Florida’s well-known higher-end strip clubs. I used to frequent this place when I was much younger. A lot of the guys still head here sometimes.

After we enter, I find out there's a reserved table right by the stage for us. Maksim shoves me in the chair on the outside and they all fill in around the table. He raises his hand and a pretty redhead comes over, asking if we want any drinks. Her tits are barely held up by a skimpy bra and her skirt is so short I'd see her ass if she wasn't wearing panties.

I order a whiskey, Maksim a vodka, and beers for both Aiden and Tweetie.

Aiden holds up a bill. I can't see how much, but he waves it and two girls come over, rubbing themselves on him.

"Oh no, that's our bachelor." He points the bill to me. "Give him everything you got."

I'm not gonna lie, there were days that I fucking loved strip places. And sure, I've taken a few women home from them. But right now, in the mood I'm in, I don't want anything to do with a lap dance.

Still, the music is going and she's grinding her hips in front of me.

"Are you hard yet?" Maksim asks.

I glare at him. "No, asshole."

"Because you're thinking of Lena," he says.

I don't respond.

"You're being a wimp," Aiden says.

"Nice word choice," I sneer as the two blondes kiss in front of me.

"Are you imagining one of them being Lena?" Maksim asks.

"Can we please stop talking about Lena?" I yell over the music.

One girl swings her leg over me, pushing her tits right in front of my face.

"No, because you need to believe you've changed before you try to convince her of it. We could sit you down, but you need to be shown with action, not words. Like a child." Maksim continues to insult me.

"No one needs to convince me of anything." I raise my hand, inches away from grabbing what's in front of me just to prove him wrong.

"Stop it, Ford, you're gonna throw away everything in your life," Aiden says.

"What?" My gaze moves to him and he legit looks pissed off.

"You know you like her. I saw the way you looked at her. The way you respected her. The way she won you over. And now she's scared, which"—he holds up his hand—"I would be too. Let me ask you a question, when she voiced her concerns, what was your first reaction?"

Rather than grabbing the woman straddled around me, I finish my

whiskey and hold my hand up for the redhead to bring me another one. “I said fine and went back to my parents.”

But that’s a lie. My initial reaction was the squeezing of my chest and disappointment.

Aiden shakes his head.

“Listen.” I turn away from the woman grinding on me. She’s not even mildly titillating, and if I didn’t think it would give credence to everything my friends are saying, I’d tell her to get off. “I’m not the noble guy like you, okay? I like to have fun. And I’ve fucked up enough already in my life. Hell, my daughter doesn’t even have a mother. If Lena doesn’t believe in me, then she’s not fucking worth it.”

The table goes silent for a moment. I grin, proud of myself and the point I made. It shut them up.

“Did you ever prove to her that you had?” Aiden asks. “The first sign of a problem and you shut down and ran.”

Fuck Aiden. I fucking hate Aiden. Even if he is one of my best friends. I think about that night and the moment she ran out of bed and into the bathroom—my heart locked up tight and I turned stone cold to any emotion. Sure, I have feelings for Lena, I told her as much, but she’s doubting me just like my dad always has.

“Words are words, man, actions are actions,” Aiden says. “We could all sit here and be like we’re gonna win the Cup this year and I’m gonna be lead scorer, but no one is gonna believe it unless we’re training every fucking day and showing up out there on the ice. You want her to have faith, but let’s remember, she’s the one who got you out of most of the jams you put yourself in. She saw you with the women, saw your anger on all the videos from your brawls. She’s already had to deal firsthand with the person you were.”

I sulk back in my chair, feeling as though Aiden fucking scolded me like my father. Except he has a point.

“You’ve never had to fight for one damn thing except to play hockey,” Maksim says. “And look, you’re here. You did it. You proved your dad wrong.”

I sip the new whiskey the redhead placed on the table and motion for the blonde to get up off of me.

“If you want Lena and a future, prove her wrong. Don’t just admit defeat. Fight for her,” Aiden says. “Show her you’ve changed with actions, not

words.”

Tweetie brushes his finger under his eyes as if tears were shed. “Man, you guys are awesome. I’m inserting myself as the fourth whether you agree or not. Now, can I be next?” He raises his hand.

“Next for what?” I ask.

“Next to be told what the hell is wrong with me. Why am I afraid to propose to Tedi?”

We all crack up, but my friends’ words have gotten me thinking. I proved my dad wrong once. Now I have to prove Lena wrong.



CHAPTER 25

"The truth."

Lena

I'VE ALWAYS DREADED CHRISTMAS. As soon as the songs hit the department stores after Halloween, my gut twists. The bells ringing, the families walking hand in hand downtown, people with arms overflowing with packages. It's great if you have family and money and security. Not so much when you're at a soup kitchen getting a coloring book and crayons. Once you're ten, that's about enough of that. You've figured out your lot in life.

On years my dad was sober, he'd always get me something. A shirt or sweater maybe. Always secondhand and usually not my taste, but it was fine. That's what I told him. And it was. The fact he spent any money on me made me feel guilty.

Now, I'm at the Jacobs' because we're one big happy family and stupid me planned the photo shoot before everything went down with Ford and me.

Their penthouse is overflowing with red and green. Gold and silver. Two trees. One in the family room and another on the terrace. I stare at the one in the family room in all its perfection. There are no family ornaments that have been handed down over the years. Mrs. Jacobs clearly had a design in mind with matching ornaments of a specific color scheme. It's beautiful, but I've always loved the trees filled with homemade ornaments that I saw in the movies. Probably because I never dreamed that anyone decorated trees like the department stores until I first came here.

"What happened to all the ornaments you made in school?" I ask Ford.

He's relaxed on the couch, dressed in the ivory cable-knit sweater I picked out and a pair of slacks. I'm in a simple green dress, and we put Annabelle in a red dress. The photographs will be taken here in the Jacobs' home.

"I don't know. Probably in the garbage." He sips his drink.

He's been odd this trip. Not too talkative, but not as cold as he was before.

"I guess both of ours are together somewhere." Mine would hang on the fridge or on the window until I eventually tore it down and threw it away myself. Or it got left behind when we got kicked out because my dad hadn't paid the rent.

"When is this guy coming and please tell me it's not that Gavin jackass again?" He tugs his collar. "I can't believe you convinced me to wear this."

"It is Gavin, and he's a friend who lets me spin things. And please, you've worn worse." I pick up the apple cider Bennie made. The man might love Hawaii, but he prepares the best cider and hot chocolate.

"You do know he likes you?"

I sit in the chair across from him as Morgan comes in with Annabelle. Her smiles are addictive nowadays. For a little girl growing up with two adults at odds, she's darn happy about it.

"She's getting mean with the hair pulling," Morgan says and hands her off to Ford.

"That's my girl." He gives Annabelle a high five, although he has to actually lift her hand to do it. Still learning.

"I swear she got a chunk." Morgan scowls. "And she does not like the dress. Keeps pulling at it, just like her dad."

"The other day, one of my strands was wrapped around her finger and turning it purple. I check her every time I put her down for naps now."

Ford turns to me. "You didn't tell me that." He sounds offended.

"We're not usually together. And your hair is too short to wrap around her finger so..."

Morgan looks at us for a moment and I realize my misstep. "What do you mean you're not together? Like, physically you don't see one another?"

I look at Ford for him to answer. This is his family.

"Lena's giving me the cold shoulder," Ford says only to Annabelle.

I scoff. "Try the other way around."

"What do you expect?" Ford asks. "You made your point."

I head into the kitchen, not in the mood for his dramatics. But I'm only four footsteps away before two hands land on my hips and usher me out onto the side terrace. He shuts the door behind us.

I wheel around. "It's freezing."

"Your next job could be as a weather girl."

I narrow my eyes, wishing I could transport him to another planet. "Seriously, what is your problem? I thought we were on the same page."

"Well, we're not."

"What?" I wrap my arms around myself to warm up.

"We're not, okay?" He walks toward me, running a hand through his hair. "I think you underestimate me, and it pisses me off. My father did it my entire life and the fact that the woman I... like is doing it now... it makes me mad, but..."

My heart lurches, wanting to jump out of my chest and rest in his hands. I wish I could trust what he's telling me. "But?"

"But I get it. I get you've seen me at my worst and to take me at my word wouldn't be wise." He puts his hands on my shoulders, stepping forward before dropping them. Then he pushes my chin up to look at him. "But I'm going to fight for you. I'm going to show you that I am a man worthy of you."

My breath catches in my throat. "Ford..."

"No, Lena. You're who I want."

"I want you too. It's not that I don't. At the same time, I'm so scared."

"Exactly. I'm going to prove to you that you don't have to be scared."

I shake my head. "You don't have to do that. I'm sure you'll find some other woman who won't have so many issues."

He laughs and bends forward. "Get ready, Lena Boyd, because I'm about to woo you."

Then he presses his lips to mine. I want to wrap my arms around his neck. Plaster my body to his and beg him to take me to his room. Or hell, take me right here on this snowy terrace. But he backs up.

"Don't start coming on to me." He smiles. "Trying to seduce me."

I open my mouth, but there's a knock. I glance over Ford's shoulders and see Gavin and Morgan, Annabelle in her arms, standing at the glass door.

"Showtime," I murmur.

"For you maybe. It's easy for me to show how much I want you."

We walk toward the door and he reaches around me to open it.

“Gavin, I’m so sorry. We were just discussing—” I start.

“You were kissing, and please tell me you don’t have rules to not kiss in front of Annabelle. That’s lame,” Gavin says.

I laugh. “No, not at all. We just needed a moment.”

Gavin doesn’t smile as his eyes linger on our joined hands. Seriously, if this is about his crush again, he needs to stop.

“So I was thinking by the tree or the fireplace. Maybe one of us on the floor playing with Annabelle? I brought her a new toy. Maybe Morgan could bring it out and Annabelle’s beautiful blue eyes will light up.” I turn to Gavin to see what he thinks.

“Man, you think of everything,” Morgan says.

“I’m back!” Imogen yells from the foyer. “Where’s my niece?”

She rounds the corner, still taking off her gloves and coat before tossing them on the back of the couch. Then she snatches Annabelle out of Morgan’s hold. Annabelle starts crying.

Morgan laughs. “She doesn’t like you.”

“She does. I’m her aunt.”

“That doesn’t mean she has to like you.”

Morgan and Imogen continue to bicker, so Ford pulls Annabelle away, holding her so she stops crying. But she grabs at her shoes, crying some more.

“You’re going to mess with the pictures, you two, and I want this goddamn Connecticut-style ivory cable knit sweater off before my skin catches fire.” He tugs again on the collar.

“It’s not a straitjacket,” I mumble.

“Might as well be. This isn’t me.” Ford scratches his stomach, lifting the sweater up. Sure enough, his stomach is completely red.

I gasp. “Ford!” I lift it back up. “You’re completely red and angry.”

“Isn’t he always red and angry?” Imogen says dryly.

“His skin. Look.”

Gavin is busy setting up the lights and preparing for the photo shoot. Besides being a freelance journalist, he’s also a great photographer, so he agreed to take these pictures himself to keep things low-key and so fewer people traipse through the Jacobs’ home.

“You need to go change.” I take Annabelle from Ford, holding her to my hip. “Just put on something nice.”

“No, it’s fine. I can wear it.” He scratches again.

“Are you allergic to something?”

“Not that I know of. Let’s just take the damn pictures.” He looks at Gavin. “Where do you want us?”

“By the tree is good, but—”

“Just snap a few. She’s happy right now. We don’t have all day,” Ford demands, coming off arrogant and better than.

We go over and stand by the tree.

“Oh, what a beautiful family,” Morgan coos, but I think she’s making fun of us.

“You look like one of those families from Connecticut. The straitlaced, no-fun couples.” Imogen laughs.

I turn to Ford mid-snap.

“Try to face the camera, Lena,” Gavin says.

Ford turns to me. “What?”

I look at Gavin and back at Ford. “This isn’t us. Let’s change. We don’t have to be perfect. We’re not perfect and I don’t want us to be perfect.” I set Annabelle down and unbutton her dress from the back. “Morgan, can you change her into Ford’s jersey he had made for her? She loves wearing that like she knows it’s his number. And just those leggings and socks. No shoes.” I look at Gavin. “Sorry, we’ll be back.”

“Lena, it’s fine. I’ll wear it and so will Annabelle.” Ford chases after me as I head for the staircase to go up to my room.

“No. It’s not us. I think I was trying to make us who I thought the world should see, but that’s not us.” I take the hem of his sweater and pull it up and over his body. “Oh, Ford. Why didn’t you say anything?”

“A little pain for you to get what you want isn’t a big deal.”

My shoulders fall and I stare at him long and hard. “Thank you. But go change into something comfortable.”

We all reconvene ten minutes later. I change into jeans and a fitted red sweater. This is how we would hang around the house.

“It would be so cute if you were all wearing Ford’s jersey,” Imogen says.

“Oh yeah, I don’t have one,” I say.

Ford enters the room in a button-down with the sleeves rolled up and the top two buttons undone. His hair isn’t as gelled as before and he’s barefoot, wearing a pair of jeans.

“You never bought your fiancée your jersey?” Imogen smacks Ford on the back of the head as he passes her.

“You want one?” He looks at me as if surprised that I would.

While all the wives wear their husbands’ numbers at the game, I felt foolish buying one myself at the gift shop. “No. I’m fine.”

“I can get you one.”

“Can we take the pictures now?” Gavin interrupts.

“Sorry. Yes,” I say.

We pose at the bottom of the tree. I purposely keep my ring front and center. Then we take pictures where we’re playing with Annabelle, and others of Ford and me staring at one another. Those are the hardest. By the end, I actually felt as though we’re a little family.

While Gavin packs up, Ford takes Annabelle into the kitchen with Morgan and Imogen, Bennie demanding Annabelle be the first to taste his new applesauce recipe.

“Thanks so much for doing this,” I say.

Gavin organizes all his equipment and the doorman comes up to fetch it and bring it down for him. I chat with Gavin for a bit while all this is happening and then walk him out.

“There are rumors,” he says. “I think you should know.”

“What do you mean?” My forehead creases.

“Rumors that this is all fake. That Ford is using you. That maybe you’re part of it too. There’s word that Otis Sandersville might have some interest in Jacobs Enterprises and this is all very convenient.”

I haven’t heard any rumors—at least nothing has come up from my searches and Google alerts—but I guess when *you’re* the story, no one tells you. “They’re wrong. We’re very happy.” I hold up my left hand and smile.

His eyebrows scrunch. “You’ve been seen without that ring more than you have with it.”

“I don’t know what to tell you. We’re a couple and we’re very happy.” I feel sweat form on my temples.

He nods and rocks back on his heels. “Then answer me this... why haven’t you two been seen together since the party where you were introduced to Otis Sandersville and his wife, Penny?”

Ugh. It’s only a matter of time before these rumors make it from Manhattan’s upper crust into the press. “I’ve been to his games, and besides that, we’ve just been busy. I am planning a wedding after all.” Note to self, make some wedding plans publicly.

He puts his hand on my arm. “If you ever want to talk—coffee, dinner,

whatever—I'm here for you.”

“That’s real big of you, Gavin.” Ford enters the room and makes his presence known. He stalks over and kisses my cheek. “Baby, Annabelle wants you.”

“I should go. Thank you again, Gavin.” I hug him briefly, feeling uncomfortable now. I walk to the edge of the foyer and hide just around the corner so I can still hear them.

“Let me call the elevator for you,” Ford says.

“Thank you again for the opportunity to have the exclusive,” Gavin says.

“You’re welcome. A friend of Lena’s is a friend of mine until they sneak around trying to dig up shit that isn’t true. I’m head over heels in love with Lena Boyd, and if you want to print that go ahead. Otherwise, I suggest you don’t go throwing accusations around. I know you’re desperate to be in my fiancée’s panties, but sorry, they’re all mine.”

I gasp and cover my mouth. The elevator arrives, and I wait to hear the doors close and Ford’s steps walking back my way before I step out in front of him.

“What did you say?” I ask, although I already know.

“The truth.” He sidesteps me and walks back to the kitchen.

Head over heels in love with me? Nice line, Ford.



CHAPTER 26

"I've kept many secrets in my life, believe me. Yours is safe with me."

Lena

I'M STILL THINKING about Ford's words to Gavin and him saying he's going to woo me when I arrive at the facility my father lives in. No one knows me here, mostly because I don't come very often. Which is horrible, I know. But every time I come, Dad and I sit in silence while he stares out the window of the community room they wheel him out to. Or I end up talking to other visitors more than Dad. Then again, maybe I'm still bitter about the fact that he didn't much care for my well-being growing up and now I'm responsible to care for his.

I sign in and show my ID to the staff member before heading down the hall. I still remember the way to his room, and I stop just before I reach it, gripping the small plant in my hands.

Then I smack on a smile and round the corner, knocking on his door. "Dad?"

He's lying in bed with his helmet on. His head turns in my direction, and if I didn't know better, I'd think he recognized me. For a fleeting second, I saw his lips tip before they didn't. Then again, right after the accident, I saw a lot of things the doctors said weren't there. They said it was in my head because I hoped so desperately that he'd get better.

I sit on a chair close to the bed. "Merry Christmas." I put the plant on the window ledge that overlooks the garden where other families visit their loved ones during the warmer months.

"Knock, knock. I heard Gregg had a guest." A male nurse with olive skin

and dark hair comes in wearing scrubs with little Santas all over them. “Looks like Santa delivered your gift.” He takes a cloth and wipes my dad’s mouth. “If I’d known, I would’ve gotten you all dressed up and ready.”

Is there judgment in his tone?

“I’m sorry. I moved out of state recently.” I feel like an idiot for voicing my lame excuse.

He smiles at me. “I know.”

“You know?” My forehead wrinkles.

The nurse checks Dad’s vitals and situates my dad just so. Dad doesn’t fight him, nor does he acknowledge we’re in the room.

“I do read magazines. Congratulations.” Then he turns to my dad. “I told Gregg about it and shared some pictures with him.” He nods at the nightstand where there’s the *People* magazine with our Christmas pictures in it that came out a few days ago.

“Oh.” Guilt weighs heavy in my stomach.

“Relax. You look all pale and like you’re gonna throw up. And I clean up enough messes a day. I don’t need to clean up after healthy people too.”

“You probably think I’m a horrible daughter,” I blurt.

“I think you have a life, and I think it’s hard to see a loved one in this state. Then you come here and you’re left feeling unfulfilled because he doesn’t interact with you.”

“He was an alcoholic.” I want to take back the words as soon as they leave my mouth. This man doesn’t care about my issues.

The nurse stops fussing with my dad and sits in the chair next to me. He holds out his hand for mine and I place it in his.

“Listen. I’m not judging you. I’m sorry, I get a little protective of my patients. I’ve only been with your dad for about nine months. But I do understand that things happen in people’s lives. Things people can do to others that cause them pain. And just because his brain no longer functions like it did once doesn’t mean those things are any less painful for you or that you have to forgive him. In fact, it probably makes it harder because now you know you can’t get what you need from him—his acknowledgment of whatever he put you through and his apology for doing so.”

“How much do you know?”

“We have case files, Lena. You’re his only living relative. Your mom died young and... I don’t need all the specifics. I can put two and two together. Most relatives either come daily or not at all. Rarely do I see the in-

between.” He pats my hand. “But talk to him and have a nice visit. I know you think he doesn’t remember, doesn’t know who you are, but do any of us really know for certain?”

He stands and pats my dad’s leg. “Now be nice, Gregg, so that maybe she’ll come back again.” He stops just shy of the door. “I’m Bruno, if you need me.”

“Thank you, Bruno.”

After he leaves, the room is silent and I glance at the magazine. Sliding my chair over closer, I lean in and whisper, “It’s fake. The engagement. I’m getting married but only for a short time, then I’ll be getting a divorce.”

There’s no emotion on his face and his eyes continue to stare at the television.

“But it’s complicated. Twisted really, because I fell for him. I fell for a man who breaks hearts and carries on his way. He says I’m different, but why would I be so special to be the one to lock down a man like him? Why me?”

Still nothing.

I sit in the chair, staring at a man I don’t really know anymore. Picking up the magazine, I scroll through the pictures.

“We sure sell the happily ever after,” I say, running my hand down the page with Ford, Annabelle, and me. Shutting the magazine, not wanting to torment myself any longer, I toss it on the table.

Everything from my childhood swirls around in my head. All the shit Dad put me through, and here I am taking time out of my day to make sure he has a visitor. He didn’t care when he left me in that car parked in the back of a factory lot. He didn’t care when I wouldn’t hear from him for an entire week. When I had to make excuses to the landlord about the rent, had to find a way of feeding myself. Where was he for me then?

“I always thought I had good confidence. Especially given my childhood. Hell, I’ve fought for every damn thing I’ve accomplished. I’m an incredible woman and I know that. Deep down, I know. So why am I doubting that I can be enough for him to remain this new version of himself?”

“Oh, Bruno said Gregg had a visitor?” A man walks in dressed in jeans and a Christmas sweater that could win first place in an ugly Christmas sweater contest.

“Hi,” I say tentatively.

“You probably don’t remember me. I’m Ivan.” He stops by my dad. “What’s up, Gregg?” He sits in the chair next to me. “Looks like you were in

a confessional or something.”

“Should I know you?” I ask.

“Back when you were younger, I was your dad’s sponsor... for AA.”

I rock my head back, not really remembering him.

“I think we only met once. He was protective of you.”

“You come and visit him?” I ask, surprised.

“Try to once a month. It’s a good reminder for me, which I know sounds bad.”

I shake my head. “If it stops one person from drinking and driving, then it’s worth it.” And I mean that wholeheartedly.

“He used to talk about you at the meetings.”

“For those split seconds he was clean?” This is why I never come. All seeing my dad does is remind me how horrible my childhood was and the fact that I couldn’t get him to clean up his act.

“How about we take a walk outside?” Ivan stands from his chair.

“I should get going,” I say, standing and grabbing my purse.

“I think there are some things you need to know. Humor me for a few minutes.”

Since I never took off my jacket, I nod, and he leads me out of my dad’s room and out a side door.

The wind whips my face. “I think we could’ve talked in there. He doesn’t know what we’re saying.”

He’s quiet and I regret my comment. “I was the child of an alcoholic mother. And I swore to myself I’d never drink, but obviously you’ve guessed that I’m a recovering alcoholic, so that didn’t work out so well for me. But growing up, I always wondered why she couldn’t stop. I assume you’ve had similar thoughts?”

I shrug and stuff my hands into my pockets.

“You’ve done amazing things in your life. Your dad was so proud when you graduated high school and got that scholarship to college. He said he had nothing to do with it. That it was all you.”

It was all me. Everything was always left up to me. All my success—me.

“He’d brag about you, but after you left for college, I think he got lonely.”

“I was lonely my entire childhood,” I snip, feeling defensive.

He glances my way. “The road you were on was a hard one. I’m not here to say how great of a father you had. Having a similar path to adulthood as

you, I understand your bitterness. You're pissed off. Why weren't you good enough for him to stop?"

I stop walking, repeating the words over in my head. "Why wasn't I?"

"Lena, it took me decades to figure out what I'm about to tell you. And now that you're engaged, I'm hoping to spare you the heartache I caused myself."

"What are you talking about?"

He stops at the now empty fountain that has a sculpture of a koi fish at the top. In the warmer months, that fish would spray water out of its mouth. I wait for him to give me his other piece of advice.

"Your dad failed you."

I wrap my arms around myself. That's not news. "I know."

"But him failing you has no bearing on you. Do you understand what I mean?" Ivan turns toward me, his breath coming out in white puffs. "Failing you was his decision, not yours."

"I know that."

"Do you? If so, then you're a lot smarter than I was. I always felt like I wasn't good enough. Why would anyone waste their time on me? My own mother couldn't clean up her act to give me a half-decent childhood, so why would a stranger who has no obligation do right by me?" His bushy eyebrows rise. "Took me two divorces and a long stint in rehab before a therapist got that through to me. I'm a product of my mother's failure, but I was worthy. Her failure as a mother had nothing to do with me."

I go back over his words in my head.

"Not to mention the fear of being rejected."

I hold up my hand. "I get it. I know what you're saying."

He bends down, lowering his voice. I'm not sure if he's worried the concrete koi fish might hear him or what because there's no one else in this garden. "I'm sorry for eavesdropping outside Gregg's door, but when I heard what you told him, I couldn't let another one of us drown in self-doubt."

My gaze flies to his. He overheard what I told my dad.

I open my mouth, but he shakes his head. "I've kept many secrets in my life, believe me. Yours is safe with me."

I release a breath, hoping he doesn't run to the press. They'd pay a lot of money for this intel, and I barely know this man.

We walk back inside while I sort through everything Ivan said and the feelings that go along with our conversation. I didn't realize I had so many

issues from my childhood until someone else I cared about wanted to be a part of my life. Here I've been blaming Ford, accusing him of being the problem, but really, it's on me. I'm the one who messed this whole thing up.



CHAPTER 27

"Worthy?"

Ford

I'M GOING to be honest, I've never "wooded" a woman before. I've never bought flowers or chocolates for someone I'm sleeping with. But then Lena doesn't strike me as the kind of person who would like the cliché and I'm sure anything cliché wouldn't change her opinion of me. I have to go outside the box, something to really show her I've changed.

I know we need to be seen in public but I don't want her to think I'm doing this for the press and I sure as shit don't want to spend my night signing autographs.

So, while Morgan once again watches Annabelle, I go into my parents' media room, setting it up for a movie night—and not the Netflix and chill kind. I've picked all the classic romance movies like *Casablanca*, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, *Sleepless in Seattle*, and *When Harry Met Sally*. I make some popcorn and arrange every candy imaginable since I don't know what she likes. Then I arranged some blankets and pillows on the couch.

I knock on her bedroom door, hoping the element of surprise works in my favor.

"Come in," she says and disappointment floods me as I creak the door open.

In my head, she was going to be lounging on the bed in lingerie. No such luck. She's sitting cross-legged on the four-poster bed in her usual matching pajama pants and tank top with a sweater over it.

"Hey," she says, looking up to see me. "Everything good?" She glances

over her shoulder to the clock. It's later than I would usually bother her, but I didn't want my family interrupting. Since I pocketed Morgan some money, we should be good.

I break the distance, holding on to one of the poster bed rails to inspect what she's doing. She has a magazine spread out in front of her.

"It amazes me the shitty job some PR reps do for their clients. They could control some of the crap that ends up in here." She flips the page. "You're lucky to have me." Then she chuckles.

"I am. We are."

She raises her eyes to meet mine. "Thanks."

"Will you come with me somewhere tonight?" I ask, my patience wearing thin and wanting to get this date started.

"I'm in my pajamas. Where did you want to go?"

I love the way she doesn't give me a straight-up no, but rather an "is it worth it" question.

"You don't have to get dressed. We're not leaving the penthouse."

She tilts her head and does the whole chewing her lip thing that drives me crazy. "What is it?"

I nod to the door. "Come and find out."

"Ford," she says with a hint of unsteadiness in her tone. "What are you doing?"

I walk to the side of the bed and hold out my hand. "I already warned you, I'm wooing you."

She stares at my hand for what feels like a lifetime before sliding her palm into mine and allowing me to help her rise off the bed. "You're really doing this?"

I stop her once she's off the bed and before she can walk away. Her sweater is slightly open and gives me a glimpse of her hardened nipples poking through the thin fabric of her tank top. Pulling my gaze so she doesn't think I only want sex from her, I focus on her eyes. "I warned you I was. Did you not believe me?"

A breath releases from her. "I do now, but I..."

I press my finger to her lips. "No Lena. I don't want to hear any of the bullshit. At least allow me to prove you wrong."

"Okay, but..." she starts.

I give her a stern look, resulting in her concerned expression turning into a smile. She nods.

“Good. We’re on the same page now.”

I take her hand in mine, leading her out of her room. “Wait, my phone.” She turns back, but I grip her hand harder.

“You do not need your phone tonight.”

“Okay,” she says way more freely than I thought she would.

I walk us out of her bedroom. As quietly as I can, I guide her down the hallway so as not to wake anyone because I don’t want to answer any questions or have Imogen thinking she can join us.

Heading downstairs and past my dad’s office, I open the door to the theater room. A room my parents converted from a library because they were sick of hearing loud televisions blaring in the middle of the condo.

“We’re watching a movie?” she asks, walking in and her hand running along the edge of the gray couch. In front of the couch, I placed a few big LoveSac bean bag chairs and blankets. The tray of candy and popcorn is behind us.

“Movie night.” I hold my hand out. “Pick your seat.”

“This is fun. What are we watching?” She sits down on the LoveSac for two.

It’s the first time I’ve ever second-guessed where I should sit with a woman, but I’m in this to win it, so I sit next to her. She doesn’t look upset so I take it as a good sign.

“I have a few classic romance movies ready to go.”

“Oh...” Her tone doesn’t have one hint of excitement.

“I thought...”

She shakes her head to stop me. “It’s great.”

I pick up the remote and turn back to her. “Clearly, it’s not.”

She smiles and nibbles her bottom lip. “I just...”

“Spit it out, Lena.”

She shrugs. “I know you don’t want to watch that kind of movie and I’d rather we both enjoy tonight.”

“I’ll enjoy just being next to you.”

She chuckles. “What did you just say, Ford Jacobs? That’s some swoon-worthy lingo.”

I grin at her. “What can I say, you pull the romantic out of me.”

She shakes her head and peeks up at me through her hooded eyelids. Damn, she’s beautiful and if I don’t win her over, I’m clearly a pathetic loser. “And they keep coming.” I watch her for a moment, waiting for her to

continue. “I appreciate the sentiment and the gesture, but let’s watch *Yellowstone*.”

I’m not complaining at all. Hell, lately with Annabelle and games, I’ve had no time to catch up on the show. “You sure?”

She wiggles her butt into the cushion and grabs the popcorn. “Definitely.”

I press a few buttons on the remote to bring up *Yellowstone*, then stop for a moment. “Wait. Is this because you want to see Rip?”

Her head falls back in laughter. “He does make the show more appealing, but don’t worry, you’re a lot like him.”

My forehead creases. “I’m nothing like Rip.” The man is alpha times ten. I like to think I’m a catch, but damn, Rip is a man’s man.

“Sure, you are.” She leans forward, her hand on my chest and her lips millimeters from mine. “The exterior might be hard to break through but once you get inside, you see how soft and mushy you really are. Beth is his soft spot.”

I inch forward and kiss her lips briefly. “And you’re my soft spot.”

She says nothing and I can still see doubt in her features, but there’s also hope there now, too. That’s a good sign. “All right, let’s watch.”

She turns away to face the television and snuggles under a blanket. I click the remote to start the episode. She opens the blanket and pulls it over me, positioning the popcorn between us. A man could get used to a life like this.

My stomach is crazy with butterflies when our hands brush in the popcorn and I internally tell myself to calm the fuck down. I’m not thirteen years old. I’m Ford fucking Jacobs, right wing for the Florida Fury. I’ve got game.

So, I slide my hand under the blanket, landing on the soft fabric of her pajama pants. I don’t think it’s my imagination that she opens her legs, welcoming my touch. I run my hand up a little higher and through the light of the television, I glance over to her, but her eyes are solely focused on the television.

As though someone up there is on my side, Rip and Beth start going at it on screen. My hand slides farther north on Lena’s legs and she pretends to be watching the episode, not paying any attention to me. I’m starved for her touch and I want her again. This wasn’t my plan, but it feels impossible to keep myself in check when she’s this near. I want her all the time. Which I never thought would happen to me. To want the same woman repeatedly, never getting enough? Of course, she doesn’t believe me, I barely believe it

myself.

I continue my venture, a soft breath falling from her lips and this time when I look at her, her eyes are poised right in my direction. I'm sure there's an invitation there, so I don't stop until she clamps her legs shut, locking my hand between her thighs.

"We should go for a walk. Have you ever gone for a walk in Central Park?"

"Lena," I say her name with the clear indication I know what she's doing.

"What?"

"My hand is locked between your delicious thighs, and I'd bet my inheritance you want me, do you not want this to happen? You can tell me."

She shakes her head. "No, I want this, it's just..." She flings off the blanket and rolls off the LoveSac. My hand is in just as much disbelief as I am that it didn't keep her interested. "I went to see my dad and I think I'm all messed in the head. But I want this." She waves a finger between us. "I know I'm worthy."

I laugh and her eyes narrow at me. "Worthy?"

Her shoulders sink and she's giving me that same look she did before this fake engagement. Like I'm the scum on the bottom of her shoe.

"Sorry," I say, standing, knowing that we need to move this somewhere else. Clearly, we're not at the making out while watching TV shows stage just yet. We have a lot of shit to talk about.

"Let's go for that walk." I hold out my hand and turn off *Yellowstone*.

She accepts my hand with a smile and we head out of the theater room.

I guess this is what people do when they're trying to build a relationship.



CHAPTER 28

"I'm a fucking adult, and you're my fiancée."

Lena

THE MINUTE we walk out of the Jacobs' condo building, a whoosh of wind whips us right in the face.

"You sure about this?" Ford asks, putting on a Florida Fury hat and his gloves.

The street is mostly absent of people since it's eleven o'clock, but the light snow sprinkling down from the sky makes the city look magical. I wind my arm through Ford's. "I haven't experienced snow yet this year."

"There was snow on the ground when we flew in," he says, leading us across the street to Central Park.

"It's not the same as when it's falling from the sky. Even when I didn't have a home and the snow should have scared me since it meant winter was approaching, I always loved watching it come down. Especially the first snowfall."

He stops right before we walk into the park and looks down at me. "You missed it this year."

I nod. "I know. My first time ever."

An expression of gratitude crosses his face because I wouldn't have missed it if I wasn't pretending to be his fiancée. "Thank you."

"You don't have to thank me, I'm getting something out of the deal. I'm a big girl."

"Next year you won't miss it. I promise."

It's the insinuation that we'd be together next year that lights up my

insides. “Are you the weatherman?”

“I know how you feel about money, Lena, but money can get us anywhere we want to go at a moment’s notice. The first sign of snowfall in New York and we’ll be on a plane back here.”

I rest my head on his shoulder. “I’m sorry,” I murmur, not always great at apologies. “I never should’ve underestimated you. I never should’ve put the brakes on us.”

His feet slow to a stop once again. At this rate, we’ll never get through the park before it closes. Although I sense Ford won’t care to follow the rules anyway. “You don’t have to apologize. I understand.”

I shake my head and turn to him, staring up at his big blue eyes. All I used to see was arrogance and humor, but now they’re soft and loving. “I fell for you and because of that I should’ve given you a chance to prove me wrong, not just cut it off.”

“You were scared.” His hands mold to my hips, pulling me to him.

I nod. “I was.” Not wanting to look him straight in the eye, I turn and continue walking. “I went to see my dad today.”

“Lena,” he says my name with sympathy. “I would’ve gone with you if you told me that’s where you were going.”

I shake my head. “It was a good visit. Another guy he knew came to see him at the same time I was there and for the first time I understood why I felt the way I did. My dad’s failure at being a father was hurting my future. Hurting my future with you. He promised so many times to change, Ford. So many and I was constantly disappointed. But that doesn’t mean that every man will disappoint me. And it doesn’t mean I’m not worthy of finding a man who loves me completely.”

He tugs me back with our adjoined hands, but I shake my head, refusing to let him see the tears in my eyes, not quite ready to show him my vulnerability. But as always, he doesn’t take no for an answer and yanks harder until I fall into his chest. His hand comes down and cradles my cheek. “I think I need to explain some things to you. I think you need my side of this story.”

“Nope.”

He swipes a tear away. “Yes. I haven’t explained a lot to you and just expected you to believe me and that was wrong because the man you dealt with in the past isn’t someone made to be a boyfriend. The stubborn side of me thought you should just go along with what I said but I understand the

walls. Hell, I've put up walls my entire life to not be used because of my last name."

"Don't you ever think I could be using you?"

He laughs. "You're much too sweet to ever use anyone. When I found out I was going to be a dad, I wanted to run. Typical, right?"

I say nothing because the truth is I was surprised when he wanted to be a part of his daughter's life.

"Even before I took the paternity test, I think I knew. It was this gut feeling inside of me and I thought to myself, how on earth will I raise a little human and not screw them up. Even after I knew Britney was carrying my child, I didn't really engage. I didn't go to the ultrasounds, I didn't even really visit her. I threw money at her because that's what Jacobs' do."

"It's a lot of change."

"I'm ashamed to admit, there were nights I thought about giving her a large sum of money to just go away, find someone else to be a father to my child. Out of sight, out of mind." He hangs his head low.

"But?" I ask.

His face lights up. "I realized I had to deal with the consequences of my actions. Once the shock of the situation wore off, I knew I'd never forgive myself if I wasn't a father to my child. The first time I saw Annabelle, I was hooked. You've asked me before what's changed. How I adapted so fast to having Annabelle in my life and honestly, I just wanted the best for her. I was scared out of my mind, but I pushed forward because she's my daughter and deserved the best. It's sad that I needed to see her in order to find that drive inside of me but I'm proud of the way I've stepped up. One day she'll find out the person her dad was before she was born, but hopefully I'll have proved to her that I'm not that guy by then."

I sigh. "Ford, just because you liked to party and sleep with women doesn't make you a bad person."

"Come on Lena, you know as well as I do, I didn't have a lot of respect for those women."

I exhale a breath. "Most only wanted you because of who you are. You used one another."

He shrugs. "Still. I want Annabelle to be proud that I'm her dad. As crazy as it is, she changed me. She's the one who put me on the straight and narrow. I'd rather spend a night in with her than do anything else. Well, that's not entirely true."

I wait for him to finish, unsure where he's going.

"I'd rather us spend the night with Annabelle doing nothing but playing with her."

A smile tilts up my lips because that's a nice night to me too.

I stop us once again and link my hands around his neck, pressing my chest to his. "I think I'm ready now."

"Are you sure?" he asks, winding his arms around my waist and pulling me in the rest of the distance.

My neck cranes to look up to him. "Positive. I want to be with you."

He bends down and when his lips are millimeters from mine, he whispers, "About fucking time, Lena Boyd." And then he places his lips on mine and his tongue slides into my mouth, gliding along mine. I moan into his kiss, having missed it. He steps back way too fast. "Have you seen enough of the snow?"

I laugh because I feel like we're barely in Central Park. "Yep. But where will we go?"

"Looks like we're going for high school vibes. I'm taking you to my childhood bedroom."

I giggle, but he grabs my hand and escorts me out of Central Park back into his parents' condo building all while my stomach stirs with butterflies.



We tiptoe into the penthouse, taking off our shoes and coats quietly. Neither one of us looks at one another, like we're seventeen and about to both lose our virginity. Then Ford links his fingers around mine and slowly walks me to the staircase and up to the top floor.

Ford's bedroom is the farthest down the hall, but I'm aware that I'll have to be quiet tonight because the rest of his family is right down the hall. That's going to be hard since I already want to moan with desire at the mere thought of what we're about to do.

His bedroom door creaks, but he continues in and shuts and locks the door behind us. I make my way over to his bed, sitting down and looking around. As my eyes soak in the room, they land on him standing by the door, watching me. "God, you're beautiful," he says, his breath labored like we've already made out for an hour.

“You have me in your room, you don’t need to sweet-talk me.”

He strips off his sweater and walks over to me with his T-shirt on but grabs the hem and shrugs that off too when he reaches me. “I’m not sweet-talking you. It’s the truth.”

“Isn’t it my job to strip you?”

He makes me widen my legs and steps between them before he takes my face in his hands, tilting my neck so I look up at him. “I really wish I had you alone.”

“We are alone,” I say.

He stares blankly and shakes his head. “You know what I mean.” He licks the pad of his thumb and runs it along my bottom lip, his eyes solely fixed on mine. “I want to hear you cry out.”

I open my mouth slightly, and my tongue comes out, sliding along my bottom lip.

“I love your lips.”

The tips of my mouth rises into a smile, but then he falls to his knees, his thumb slipping from my mouth. His hands slide up my torso to my shoulders, peeling away the sweater over my tank top. I know my nipples are poking through the thin fabric of my shirt and the fact that he keeps glancing at my chest confirms it.

“Please Ford, I’m aching to have you,” I say, my core pulsing with the need to have his hands all over me, in me, but he’s continuing to undress me at a torturous pace.

“I do love when you beg.” He winks and again I’m thrown that this man is all mine. What was I thinking pushing him away?

I bring my legs around his waist and link my ankles, locking him in and then I take the hem of my tank top and raise it up off over my chest. “Whoa. Whoa. Whoa. That’s my job.”

But I do it too fast and instead of being disappointed, he stares at my breasts, his hands gliding up my torso and taking each one in his hands. “You have no idea the dirty thoughts I’ve had about these tits.” His thumbs run over my nipples and I clench below.

“What thoughts?” My breath comes out sounding wanton, which is exactly what I am right now.

“I want to fuck them. I want to come all over them and I want to motorboat them.” He inches forward and flicks his tongue along my nipple.

“I think that can be arranged.” My fingers push through the hair at the

back of his head.

He chuckles into my chest, burying his face between them. Before I realize it, he's inching up off the floor and I'm unlinking my legs. He gets me on my back and crawls on top of me. His mattress is plush and soft and smells just like him.

There's something about being in his childhood room that turns me on even more. He pulls down his sweatpants and just as I am, he's bare of any undergarments. "I really need you right now." He buries his head into my neck and one hand slides down the front of my pajama pants, stroking me. "God, you're soaked."

"I have an IUD," I say because waiting for him to put a condom on right now might just kill me.

He freezes and holds himself up by his forearms, staring down at me. Shit. This would take some serious trust for him to believe me after Britney. Then he sits back on his ankles and tugs down my pajama pants. "I'm clean. Tested after I found out Britney was pregnant and haven't been with anyone since."

My face heats having to be honest with him. "I haven't been with anyone in over a year."

He quirks his eyebrow.

"What can I say? Your dad keeps me busy."

"Fuck Lena, don't mention my dad when you're naked, okay?" Then he lies on top of me and the tip of his dick breaches my opening. "Never again."

I laugh and my head falls to the side. "Okay."

He smiles as he inches inside of me slowly, our eyes locked. This time it feels different than the hotel. This time it's like promises are being made between us.

Once he's completely filled me, my core aches for him to move. He does a small circle with his hips and then draws out of me and back in. All at a painfully slow pace.

"God, Ford," I whisper and he smashes his lips to mine.

"You're so damn wet and soft and fuck, this is killing me," he pants in my ear. I'm only getting more and more turned on.

His thrusts become faster and deeper and I cling to him to make sure he doesn't stop. Not like he would. Our bodies are slick with sweat as we slide together. Whispering of curse words and praises exchange between us. I slide my hand down between us, finding my clit and between me fingering my clit

and his pelvis bone drilling in, my orgasm floods me until I can no longer hold on and my back arches off the bed. A strangled cry erupting up my throat, which Ford swallows with a kiss.

He grinds into me once, twice, and the final time he's deeper than he's been and he stills, his body trembling as he comes. His body falls and I hold the weight of him in my arms, never wanting to move from this position.

"You're spending the night here," he softly says into my ear.

"Your parents."

"I'm a fucking adult, and you're my fiancée. What are they going to say?"

He inches up off me and stares down with his crystal blue eyes. Yeah, like I could ever say no.



CHAPTER 29

"Either you're in or you're out of her life."

Ford

CHRISTMAS MORNING STARTED way too early.

Although Annabelle couldn't open any gifts herself, she's happily playing with her toys. Lena is on the couch, snug under a blanket and drinking her coffee, and I'm admiring her from across the room. I keep thinking of ways to show her I'm not going to have second thoughts, but it's a hard thing to prove.

My mom's cell phone rings and she mindlessly answers it because she's so enthralled with Annabelle. "Yes, Anessa, Merry Christmas to you."

Then there's silence. I'm the only one really paying attention because I'd like to know who's showing up here on Christmas.

"Okay. Let me discuss it with Mr. Jacobs and one of us will be down." My mom's face is pale when she hangs up the phone and motions to my dad to go to another room.

"What is it?" I ask.

She stops in front of me. "You might as well come too."

Lena sits up, but I wave her back down. Surely there isn't anything PR-related that needs handling on Christmas.

We go to my dad's office and my mom shuts the door. I notice her hands shaking as she clenches them.

"What's wrong, Gabi?" my dad asks in his usual gruff way.

"We have a guest downstairs."

"A guest? It's nine o'clock in the morning on Christmas." My dad, along

with the rest of the family, is still in his pajamas.

My mom looks at me, and immediately my gut clenches and nausea hits me in the back of the throat. Before she says it, I know. “Britney.”

Everything as I know it turns black. How could she come back now?

I storm out of my dad’s office and hammer the elevator button until it arrives. When I step in, Lena walks into view, but the doors shut before she can reach me. How dare Britney show up now, on Christmas morning, after leaving me high and dry with our daughter?

When I reach the ground floor, Anessa gives me an apologetic look. Because my life is all over the fucking magazines and newspapers and internet everyone knows who Britney is. The baby mama. My one-night stand. The woman who left her baby.

“Britney,” I say through gritted teeth.

She looks okay. Her blonde hair is now brunette, and her makeup is less overdone than before. She’s dressed in a big puffy jacket and jeans with boots. I have no idea where she’s even from.

“Hi, Ford.” She raises her hand in a weak wave.

“What do you want?” I’m seething but trying to keep it together.

“I want to see her,” she says.

“No.”

The elevator dings and out files my mom, dad, and Lena. Britney looks over. I’m relieved they didn’t bring Annabelle down with them.

“Please. I know what I wrote, what I did, but—”

“Ford.” Lena comes alongside of me, her hand on my arm.

I look down at her and see the sympathy in her eyes. She’s wrong. I’m not letting this woman see Annabelle right now. We’re her family.

“Let’s take this upstairs,” my dad says.

I raise my hand. “Absolutely not.”

“Well, we’re not going to stand in the lobby and air all our family business.” My dad’s tone brooks no argument.

I stare at Britney, anger for the way she’s treated her daughter consuming me. “I’m going to get dressed and I’ll meet you outside the building in fifteen minutes.”

“Okay,” she says.

I storm back to the elevators.

“Thank you, Anessa,” my mom says and we all get in.

After the doors shut, I yell, “How could she come back?”

“It’s only been a few months. Maybe she had a change of heart?” Lena tugs on my arm, her way of cooling me down. For a moment, it works.

Annabelle’s mother has returned, and that terrifies me as much as it eases me. I don’t want her to grow up without a mother, but now that I’ve had her to myself, I don’t want to share her. Even so, I would never keep her from Britney if I thought Britney had her shit together. But I can’t allow her mother to come in and out of Annabelle’s life as she pleases. How will that make Annabelle feel as she grows up?

We arrive at the penthouse and I’m surprised that my parents have said nothing.

“Annabelle can stay here. I’m going out by myself. Britney needs to answer some questions before she sees her.” I walk upstairs to my childhood room.

Lena slides in right behind me, sitting on the bed. “I think you need to remember Annabelle does need a mother in her life. I know you’re angry but —”

I take off my pajama pants and Lena lowers her head, covering her eyes. “You’ve seen my dick already.”

“I know, but we’re not like—”

“We’re engaged. Technically my dick is still yours.”

She keeps covering her eyes. “Don’t be so vulgar.”

“You liked it when I was vulgar,” I remind her, and her cheeks flush.

“Well, now we’re just friends.”

“I’d rather be a real couple who were still fucking.”

“Let’s just stay on task.”

I pull on a pair of jeans and take off my shirt. She’s back to looking at me and I don’t miss the way her eyes flare when she looks at my chest. Hell, at least I know she’s still physically attracted to me.

“You can do more than just look.”

Her shoulders fall and she whines, “Ford, you have more important things to deal with right now than getting your dick inside me.”

“Keep talking dirty to me,” I egg her on, because it’s easier than dealing with what is going on downstairs. I have to address this situation that could change my daughter’s outlook on life. I can’t screw this up. I have to make sure I look out for her and do what’s best for her.

“She’s Annabelle’s mother.”

“Doesn’t deserve to be,” I say, throwing on a long-sleeve tee and

reaching for a sweatshirt.

“Regardless,” her voice softens, “she is. She’s her one and only mother.”

And I know she has a point. Nothing will change that fact.

“You’re more of a mother to Annabelle than she is.” I sit on the bed next to Lena, desperate to pull her into my lap.

“Maybe, but in the end, she only has one true biological mother. And regardless of who you marry and who comes into her daily life, Annabelle’s going to want a relationship with her. At the very least she’ll want to know.” She places her hand on my shoulder.

“What do you expect me to do? Open my door after she just left her? And didn’t even give her to me, but to a friend while I had to play a hockey game?”

“Maybe it was all too much for her. Maybe she couldn’t handle the stress one more minute. I know it’s crazy, but you handled the transition so smoothly. Most new parents don’t adapt to change like you did.”

“I had no choice. She’s my daughter. My responsibility.”

Her eyes illuminate with a soft gaze. “You truly are remarkable.”

“Yet we’re not a couple,” I say dryly.

“Let’s table that conversation for right now. Go to Britney and straighten this out. If you want me to bring Annabelle down to meet you, let me know. I’m happy to.” She stands and I follow suit.

My hand cradles her head and my thumb brushes her cheekbone. “You’re the amazing one. You should be wishing she’d go away. The three of us could be a family.”

She shakes her head. “We can make a bigger circle for our family if need be.”

“Are you admitting that there’s a chance of us being a family?”

“I never said I didn’t want it. I simply voiced my concern.”

I step closer. “Then give me a shot. Give me a shot to convince you.”

“You shouldn’t need to do that. I should believe you.”

She continues to blame herself while I know I’m the cause of her doubt. Aiden’s right. She saw way too much shit about me.

She adds, “I’m going to see my dad again today.”

“Oh?” I’ve yet to remove my hand from her face and I don’t want to.

“I didn’t say that because I expect you to come. I just wanted you to know. In case the Britney thing runs late.”

“I want to go with you,” I say.

She shakes her head. “No, he doesn’t even remember me.”

“I’m going.”

“Go take care of your business first.”

I groan and kiss her on the forehead. “Thanks for talking sense into me.”

She laughs. “A few months ago, you would have kicked me out and said how wrong I was.”

“What can I say? I didn’t realize how much I loved a bossy, uptight woman back then.”

She shakes her head and steps away, my hand dropping between us. I watch her leave the room before I grab my wallet and head out.

Britney’s at the corner by the entrance to Central Park, her arms wrapped around herself. She doesn’t have any luggage or bags with her. It’s hard to believe it was only a few months ago that I agreed to the fake engagement and walked Annabelle through here to see the vibrant colors of fall. Now the trees are bare and there’s a soft dusting of snow on the ground.

I jog across the street to join Britney.

“I’m sorry for showing up like that. I just had to see her. It’s Christmas,” she says by way of explanation.

“You could’ve called me.” I nod to start walking through the park, and I have no idea if it’s to get her away from Annabelle or just because I need to walk.

We end up by the pond and sit on the bench.

“How is she?” Britney asks.

“She’s good.”

“Your fiancée? When I heard it was Lena, I was surprised, to say the least. Does Annabelle think she’s...” Her voice becomes choked up.

Britney met Lena a few times to handle the PR when it first hit the press that I was going to be a father.

“She’s six months old, she doesn’t think anything. But she does like Lena.”

“That’s good. I mean—”

“What do you want?” I ask, needing to get to the point.

She shifts to face me more. “I want to see her. I think I made a mistake.

I'm her mother."

"You are her mother, but what's changed from when you walked out on her?"

"I saw the pictures. All three of you in the magazine."

I stand, annoyed that my suspicions were correct. This is a jealousy thing. Gavin's pictures of Lena, Annabelle, and me came out yesterday.

I take a few steps away then circle back. "Is that why you're here? Jealousy? If you can't have her, no one should?" My voice is like venom, and I hate hearing it, but I have to protect Annabelle right now.

"I'm not jealous. Not of the family. But seeing the picture of your fiancée giving Annabelle a gift and her eyes are all lit up like she's giving her the fucking moon... it stung. I won't deny it." She takes out her gloves and puts them on before holding her hands together in her lap.

"She's not a toy you can pick up and play with when you feel like it. Either you're in or you're out of her life."

She nods. "I'm in."

I sit on the bench, remembering what Lena said. Britney is Annabelle's mother whether I like it or not. No one can replace her in Annabelle's life. "Are you one hundred percent sure?"

She stares at the pond that's yet to freeze over because it's too early in the season. "Yes."

"Then I think we should have papers drawn up. A custody agreement."

"With lawyers?"

"Yeah." I run a hand through my hair. "Where are you living right now?"

"Pittsburgh. Back with my parents. I don't have the money to live in Florida."

"You had a place, remember? I was paying for it."

She nods a couple times. "I know, but when people figured out I was the mother of your baby, I didn't like the attention. Some people were really mean."

I shrug. "People can be assholes."

We're both silent for a beat.

"Can I see her?" she asks.

No is on the tip of my tongue, but it's not going to make a difference to Annabelle right now.

"Yes, but after that, I want you to really think about this, Britney. Do you want to be in her life? If you do, then let's figure something out, but if you

can't commit to being a constant presence, then please think about her needs and her well-being. I won't allow her to be hurt."

She nods eagerly.

I pull out my phone and message Lena that we're coming up to the penthouse.

"Let's go." I stand and nod in the direction of the building.

"Do you think she'll even remember me?" she asks, and I can tell she's nervous now.

I want to answer honestly and say probably not, but I shrug. "I don't know. I guess we'll find out."

Each step closer to the building, I want to put my hand across her chest to stop her from moving forward, to spare my daughter the pain of a mother who might abandon her. How do I allow Britney into Annabelle's life if she's only going to destroy her? Britney left her once. Who's to say she won't do it again? It's then I realize that I now understand what Lena's been concerned about with me this whole time.



CHAPTER 30

"Trust yourself."

Lena

THE ELEVATOR DINGS and we all stare at one another, Imogen looking as if she might blow her gasket. Annabelle is oblivious, sitting in Mrs. Jacobs' lap while Morgan shows her how to play with one of the toys she got for Christmas.

The deep inhale behind me a second later tells me they've arrived. I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to stand up and demand Britney leave, but I meant what I said to Ford. She's Annabelle's mother and nothing will change that. Sure, someone can step into the role of mother for her and heal the wound Britney might leave, but she's still the woman who gave Annabelle life.

"Annabelle," Britney whispers, coming across the room.

"Gutsy," Imogen says a little too loudly, but if Britney heard her, she doesn't show it.

Britney stops in front of Mrs. Jacobs. I've never known Ford's mom to be mean, but she has a murderous expression right now. Britney picks up Annabelle off Mrs. Jacobs' lap and holds Annabelle, singing a song I don't know, twirling her around the room.

At first Annabelle is looking around, unsure, and her gaze stops on her dad.

Imogen huffs next to me. "Sure, she doesn't cry with her."

I watch Ford intently. His jaw is tense, his teeth clenched, but he's not stopping Britney.

"She's gotten so big," Britney says, more to herself than anyone else, I

think.

“That’s what happens when you vanish,” Imogen says, bitterness in her tone.

Mrs. Jacobs stands. “I’ll get more coffee.”

Mr. Jacobs follows her. I’m surprised that a man who wants to be so involved in everything has no say about what is transpiring right now.

I pat Imogen’s leg. “I think I’m going to go get dressed.”

She grabs my hand, stopping me, and leans in. “You need to protect your spot in this family.”

I shake my head. “I’m not fearful of my spot.” The words ring true to me. I don’t have one ounce of fear that Ford would want Britney. And I do believe she should have a role in Annabelle’s life as long as it can be consistent.

Imogen looks at me as though I’m crazy. “Why?”

I look across the room at Ford and he’s staring back at me, clearly unsure what he should be doing. Like watching his daughter with Britney is a car accident he can’t strip his eyes away from. A small part of me somehow knows that I need to go to him and tell him this will all work out. Give him the reassurance he’s lacking. He’s not used to facing things outside of his control.

I smile at Imogen and go to leave the room, squeezing Ford’s shoulder on my way past.

He follows me out of the room then stops me with his hand on my wrist, tugging me back to him.

“You’re leaving?” he asks in a hushed voice.

“I think it’s better if I’m not around. I’m going to head out. Should be beautiful on Christmas morning.”

He frowns. “But I want you here.”

I place my hand on his chest. “You don’t need me here, Ford. Let Britney spend some time with her daughter. See what she’s really here for. Having me here will only complicate matters.”

He stares at me for a beat, not saying anything. Then he slides my hair behind my ear, leans in and whispers, “Thank you.”

I shake my head. “I didn’t do anything.”

“You make me a better person.”

“Ford, you are a good person.” I place my hand over his heart. “Trust yourself.”

We stare at one another for a moment, but Britney screeches, stripping our attention away.

“She spit up on her,” I hear Imogen say then laughs. “I guess we should’ve told you she just ate.”

Ford places a chaste kiss on my lips then returns to the room to help and I decide this is my opportunity to sneak out.



CHAPTER 31

"I don't want space."

Ford

I SIT on the couch and watch Britney play with Annabelle, but all I can think about is Lena. I hate that she felt she needed to leave. Britney's appearance must be hard for her too and instead of assuring her things are okay between the two of us and it doesn't matter that Britney is here, I'm making sure this woman doesn't kidnap our daughter.

"Her smile is like yours," Britney says, looking at me. "What do you think she got from me?"

My entire family has left the room by now, none of them wanting to deal with this. Hell, back in the day, I would've hightailed it too.

I shrug. "I don't know."

"Come on. She has your eyes." She raises Annabelle in the air.

I've noticed that since it's been just the two of us, Britney seems to be much more her old self and less the heartbroken mother.

"You're so lucky, your daddy gets a lot of women because of those eyes," she coos at Annabelle. Britney smiles at me, setting Annabelle in her lap. "So you're engaged? I never thought I'd see the day."

I nod.

"What, can't you talk to me about her?"

I shrug. "Don't want to is more like it."

She huffs. "If we're going to co-parent, you have to be civil to me."

I glance at my watch. "I am. I had a pressing appointment I missed in order to allow you to visit with Annabelle. That's pretty damn civil, if you

ask me.”

She strips her gaze from me. “Do you think this is easy?”

“Did you think it was easy for me when I had to play an entire hockey game knowing my child’s mother had left her and I was now solely responsible?”

She shakes her head. “I wasn’t in a good space. I missed my old life.”

I remain silent, collecting my thoughts. Lena’s words ring in my ear once again, reminding me that regardless of the fact that I loathe what Britney did to our daughter, she is still her mother. “And now?”

“I want to be a mother to her.” I hear the but in her tone, so I wait for her to finish. “But will you let me?”

“It’s not up to me.”

She sets Annabelle in her bouncy chair, securing her in. Then Britney crawls toward me. “Are you happy, Ford? I heard that the marriage thing might be a sham?”

I watch her come toward me, wondering what the fuck she thinks she’s doing. “They don’t know what they’re talking about. I’m very happy.”

My gaze falls to Annabelle. She’s enthralled with the spinning bunny on the bar across from her. She keeps hitting it to make it twirl and she watches it before doing it again.

“We could be a family. Raise her together.” Britney sits back on her ankles in front of me, sliding her hands up my thighs. “I hate the idea of moving her from house to house. Not being able to spend holidays with her.”

I wiggle out of her hold, but she’s got me caged in. Her one hand slowly inches up my thigh.

I put a hand over hers to stop her. “There is no us.” My voice is ice cold.

She raises up on her feet. “We were good together. Remember the night we were together?”

Sadly, I was half in the bag. More than half, if I’m being honest.

She sits in my lap and wraps her arms around my neck.

“Get off me,” I bite out.

“You haven’t stopped me yet. There must be a reason for that?” Her voice is low and breathy.

“The reason is that I don’t want my daughter to think I’m aggressive with women.” I take her arms and unwind them from around my neck, but she puts them right back and tightens her grip. “I’m not interested. That option isn’t on the table.”

I stand to get her off, but she hangs on me like a monkey. “She’s not your type.”

“And let me guess, you are?” I try to get her hands from around my neck, but seriously what does she do, vise grip exercises? I lose my footing and stumble, ending up on top of her on the couch.

“I can give you the kind of thrills she can’t.” She locks one leg around mine, then another. I feel as though I’m stuck in an octopus with no hope of escaping.

“You have no idea what you’re talking about. Let go of me now.”

Then the elevator doors ding. I push off the couch using every bit of my strength to free myself right as Lena turns the corner to take in the scene.

Of course, it couldn’t be Imogen or Morgan. It had to be Lena. Fuck my life.

Lena splashes on a fake-as-shit smile. “Looks like you two are getting along great. I’ll leave you alone.” Then she heads up the stairs—assuming I was just what? Fucking around with Britney in front of Annabelle? Is that how low she actually thinks of me?

“You need to leave,” I say, picking up Annabelle from the bouncy chair.

“No,” Britney whines. “You can’t be serious? You’re going to run after her? Since when do you do that?” Her voice is full of anger.

I pause with my hands under Annabelle. That’s why Britney ran, left Annabelle with me. She’d tried seducing me a few nights before she left. Except she was much pushier, had lingerie on and the whole bit. Wanted to strip me down and give me a lap dance. All of which I denied and left.

“You wanted me to chase you,” I say more to myself than her. How could I be so stupid? This didn’t have anything to do with her being overwhelmed about being a new mother—or at least not entirely.

“Well, I am the mother of your child.” She sits up on the couch, straightening her shirt.

“What the hell were you thinking?”

She stands, her face contorted in anger now. “I thought it would be too much for you to take care of her on your own. That you’d beg me to come back, change your mind and give us a shot. But now.” She points upstairs. “She stepped into the role that’s mine.”

I shake my head, trying to make sense of this whole thing. “Role? We had a one-night stand.” Annabelle puts her head on my shoulder, and I run my hand down her back.

“Exactly! Do you have any idea how much work I put into you that night? How long it took me to get you to notice me?”

I barely remember the night we had sex. I always used a condom, but... “Please tell me you didn’t...”

She smiles and looks away.

“What the hell!”

Annabelle startles in my arms. She doesn’t need to be here for this conversation.

“Morgan!” I yell, hoping she hears me.

She peeks down the round staircase because she’s probably been eavesdropping this whole time.

“Can you take Annabelle upstairs?”

She rushes down, still in her pajamas, and takes Annabelle out of my arms.

“Wait! She’s my daughter too,” Britney says.

“You left her. You want to see her, get a lawyer.”

Morgan smiles and leaves, her footsteps faster when she gets to the stairs.

Once I know she’s out of earshot, I step closer to Britney. “Are you suggesting you got pregnant on purpose?”

“You can’t blame me, Ford. It takes two.” She raises her hands, but her cocky demeanor tells me her goal that night was to get pregnant and I was the fool who fell for it. Because I like to party and have fun, I was an easy mark.

My head falls forward and I shake it. Britney’s right, she’s not entirely to blame. I was right there with her even if I was drunk. I lift my gaze to hers. “We will never be anything more than co-parents to Annabelle because I love the woman upstairs. Do you understand that? If you want to be a part of Annabelle’s life, the door is open, but the role of my wife is taken.”

“Until you get bored, and from the looks of her, that’s gonna be pretty fast.”

“Out!” I yell, pointing at the elevator, my anger bursting out of me. “Get the fuck out of here.”

“Come on, Ford.” Britney saunters up to me. This girl won’t quit. “Give me a chance. I like to play and have fun. We could bring other women in if you want.” Her hands raise to my chest, and I grip her wrists.

“I only want one woman and it’s not you.” I stare coldly at her and I see the point when she finally gets it—there is not and never will be an us.

She steps away from me and collects her things. “I’m going to sue you for

custody. I'm her mother and everyone knows the moms win."

"Go ahead and try. I'm sure your track record will speak well for you."

I follow her to the elevator and press the down button for her.

"I'm serious, Ford, I'll keep her in Pittsburgh. Away from you."

"Again, try it." A calmness falls over me. "But before you do that, think of what's best for your daughter and whether that's you. I want you to be a part of Annabelle's life, but from this point forward, we'll talk through lawyers. You want to see her again, get a lawyer, Britney."

The elevator arrives and she steps in. "You just made the worst mistake of your life. You think you've changed?" She guffaws. "Men like you never do."

The doors slide closed and my head drops forward. I'm thankful that's finally over. A part of me wants to disappear with Annabelle so Britney can never get her hands on her.

I jog up the stairs and knock on the guest room door.

"Come in," Lena says.

When I open the door, I find her packing. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going to go back to Florida."

"What about the party on New Year's Eve?"

"I'll come back that day. If anyone asks, you can just say I'm not feeling well. Have the week to do as you wish."

I stand idly by the door. "You don't believe what you saw, do you?"

She glances over with a soft smile. I can tell she doesn't know what to believe. "I think you need to get some things straight in your life."

I break the distance between us and place my hands over hers, stopping her from packing. "I only want you. You and Annabelle."

"But whether you like it or not, Britney's in the mix too. And I just can't..."

"Can't what?" I ask, sitting on the couch, taking out every item she puts in the suitcase.

Eventually she huffs and glares at me. "I can't be here, stuck in the middle, swaying how you feel one way or another. Finding you in compromising positions."

"That wasn't me. She wouldn't let me go. She just admitted she coerced me into getting her pregnant." I raise my hands. "And yeah, I know I played my part."

She situates herself between my legs. My eyes close as Lena runs her

fingers through my hair. Impulsively, my hands land on her hips to keep her steady.

“I know you’ve changed, Ford. And I have no doubt you’d make a wonderful husband and father. Don’t ever think you wouldn’t.” She places a kiss on my forehead.

I tug her into me. “Why are you doing this?”

“I’m not doing anything. You just need to figure out things with Britney. I’m giving you the space you need to do that.”

“I don’t want space,” I tell her, speaking into her stomach.

She lays her head on mine. “I’m sorry for screwing this entire thing up before. It’s all on me.” She steps back. “But while I’m gone really think about what you want for you *and* Annabelle. We’ll figure out the stuff between us after you know that.”

I can’t even make sense of what is happening in this moment.

She repacks her suitcase, zips it, and heads toward the door. “The arrangement remains. I’ll be at the party and any other engagement we need to attend. In the meantime, figure out this thing with Britney for Annabelle’s sake.”

My heart cracks as she opens the door and walks out on me.



CHAPTER 32

"It's nice to have you back."

Lena

FLYING commercial sucks after flying private, but I'm at Ford's place now, alone. He hasn't tried to call me or text me, which I'm thankful for. I barely had it in me to walk away from him in New York. Seeing him on top of Britney broke me. I know it shouldn't have. I know it wasn't how it appeared. I believe all of that, but he does need to figure out how she fits into his life and I think that's best done without me around.

The week has gone by slowly. I've spent most of it recollecting my childhood. I never realized how messed up I am from it. I met Paisley for coffee, and she's referred me to a colleague I'll start seeing next week after the party.

The Jacobs are sending their private plane to take us back to New York City. Aiden, Saige, Maksim, Paisley, Tweetie, and Tedi are all invited to the huge New Year's Eve party that the Jacobs are having.

I've just finished packing my bag and am ready to head to the airport when my phone rings. I see Gavin's name on it, and I roll my eyes. "Hey, Gavin, can I call you back? I was just about to leave the house for the airport."

"Lena, I just want to warn you that a story is running that your engagement is fake. It's also talking about how you inserted yourself between Ford and his baby mama and stole him away. I got word of it when a colleague of mine who works for some low-rent online gossip mag called to see if I had a comment. He knew I'd done a couple interviews with you

guys.”

“How?” I shake my head, knowing those who dig hard enough can find anything. And sometimes they run with a story even if they don’t have all the proof they need. And if I’m honest, Britney’s name flashes through my head too.

“I just wanted to give you a heads-up.”

“It’s not fake,” I say.

He chuckles. “It was though, wasn’t it?”

I say nothing.

“It was all so sudden, then Eli Jacobs was looking around for companies to buy him out. It’s a journalistic dream to uncover all this. You hid it well, but I know it was fake until I came for the holiday pictures.”

“What are you talking about?”

“When Ford approached me in the foyer of the penthouse... I saw it in him. The jealousy in his eyes. It shouldn’t be a surprise that once he was around you more, he’d fall for you. You’re an amazing woman, Lena. Any man would be lucky to have you.”

I sit on the couch to collect my thoughts. “Thank you.”

“That’s my one stand-up male moment, because I would’ve fought him for you if I thought I stood half a chance.”

“Gavin—”

“No, I’m just telling you this so you can do damage control. I want this to work for you.”

“Thanks.” And I mean that. Although I never felt that way for Gavin, I’m thankful he’s giving me a heads-up so I can spin this story.

“Go do what you do best.” He hangs up.

I hold my phone for a second before I search all the internet sites that usually report hockey news. None of the stories are there yet, which means the rumors aren’t being fueled by hockey fans. They’re being spread by people interested in the other side—Jacobs Enterprises.

So I head over to the gossip sites that usually report when businesses are failing, stock tips, and who’s sleeping with who. Sure enough, there it is. Eli Jacobs forces son to marry to pretend he’s an upstanding family man. The article tears apart the entire family, but primarily Ford, referring to him as a playboy and spoiled silver-spooned jackass. It says he’ll never grow up and it’s hard to swallow that he’s a father.

The more I read, the madder I get. I dial Mr. Jacobs on my way out the

door and talk to him from the back seat of the car taking me to the airport.

“We have a problem.” I send him the link to the story, not wanting to involve Ford unless I have to. I hate myself for treating him the same way that article spoke about him because he has changed. I was just too scared to admit it.

I wait for Mr. Jacobs to read the article and hear him groan a few times. “Who is this and how do they know so much?”

“I don’t know. I think it’s speculation honestly. There’s no one who knows for certain who would talk.”

“We have the party tonight. You’ll have to sell it to Otis Sandersville.”

I glance out the window at the palm trees whipping past. “I’ll be in the city by early afternoon. We can figure out a game plan.”

He’s silent for a while. “Okay, we’ll talk then. Are you filling in Ford?”

“You can since I’ll be on the plane.”

“Right,” he says, then he’s quiet again. “Lena, he’s been miserable...”

“With all due respect, Mr. Jacobs, let’s just put out this fire.”

“I’m just saying that I’ve never seen him so upset.” He huffs. “That’s all.”

“I’ll get on this article and see if I can figure out who their source was. There’s a good chance we might never know. Talk to you soon.” I ignore his comments about Ford. I cannot deal with that right now. I need to focus on my job.

I end up at the airport around the same time as everyone else, and this time it feels natural for me to navigate flying in a private jet. Oh, how things have changed.

“You sure have become accustomed to flying private,” Tweetie says. “Ouch.”

I turn to see him buckled over and staring at Tedi, who must’ve just smacked him.

“I didn’t say anything offensive. I just meant she knows the ins and outs. Hell, she should be happy because she’s special.”

“Special?” I ask.

Tedi waves him off. “Don’t pay any attention to Tweetie. He’s just overzealous because he got asked to come with you all.”

Tweetie scoffs. “Ford lost the bet. That’s huge considering how competitive he is.”

I stop what I’m doing and catch Maksim glaring at Tweetie.

“This is why you don’t get invited,” Aiden says.

“What are you talking about, Tweetie?” I hold up my hand to the other two guys so they don’t speak.

“I made a bet with Ford that he’d be celibate for two months. But he told me that he lost because he slept with you.”

I glance at Aiden and Maksim, who are pretending they’re not paying attention.

“And what did he lose for this bet?”

“Bragging rights. Which we realized a long time ago is enough for Ford. He doesn’t need to gain anything material. Hell, he can buy anything he wants. But he just gave in when it came to you. That’s huge in Ford’s book.” Tweetie smiles. I have to say, it does make my stomach flutter that Ford was willing to lose because he couldn’t stop himself from sleeping with me. “The man has it bad.”

“We should go. We’re going to miss our plane.” I turn and they all follow.

I hear Tweetie sticking up for himself as to why he said anything and how it’s a good thing, not a bad thing. I can’t say I disagree.



We land, and while the others go to the hotel, I take a cab to the Jacobs’ residence. The stories have spread from the original website to more mainstream outlets and we have no choice but to send out a press release at this point.

The elevator doors ding and Ford’s standing in the foyer waiting for me. His back is leaned against the wall, one hand stuffed in the pocket of his jeans and the other holding his phone, his thumb scrolling.

His eyes take me in and it sucks the last breath out of me. A smile forms on his lips. “Hey.”

“Hi. Where’s Annabelle?” God, I’ve missed her so much.

“She’s sleeping. Should be up soon though.”

I nod. “Your dad?”

“Expecting you.” He pushes off the wall and holds out his arm for me to go first.

I lead the way to Mr. Jacobs’ office. He’s at his desk, teetering a pen back

and forth on his desk and staring at his view of Central Park.

“Mr. Jacobs,” I say, stepping in and sitting across from him.

“I have my plan ready.” He leans back in his chair. “At the party tonight, Ford will give a speech. One that you’ll write.” He looks at me from under his eyebrows.

“I can write my own speech,” Ford says.

“I know you can, but we have to do damage control. It has to be perfect. It needs to detail the rush of events, the fact that he fell hard and fast, and he’s heard the rumors but...” He waves to me. “You understand, right?”

I raise my hand as though to ask a question, and he nods. “I think we need to put out a press release and go with no comment at this point. Ford and I will play up our engagement. Maybe get caught in a kiss on the balcony on purpose. We can be convincing without a speech. A speech looks like a cover-up and there’s too much room for error.”

I hate disagreeing with Mr. Jacobs, but there’s only one way to turn this around and spin it back our way and that’s with our actions. We can’t give any credence to the rumors by defending ourselves against them.

“People are enamored by grand gestures. If Ford stops the party and gives a speech about how much he loves you, that will endear them to you both. As long as you cry and meet him halfway in the room, sealing it with a kiss. Convince them you two are the real deal.”

I nod because this is my job. The one part I’ve never really cared for while working for the Jacobses is that Mr. Jacobs didn’t always trust my decisions. That’s what you get with a powerful man who isn’t used to his ideas being questioned though.

“Okay, I’ll get to work on it.” I stand.

“Lena?” Mr. Jacobs catches me right before I leave, and I turn back around. “It’s nice to have you back.”

“Thank you,” I say and nod, not meeting Ford’s gaze as I sneak out of the room to go write the speech.

Before I get too far, I hear Mr. Jacobs say, “Ford, you stay here and shut the door.”

I blow out a breath. I had hoped to catch him for a moment. To do what, I don’t know. I just miss being around him. I feel as though we’ve fallen so far down, I don’t know how to claw my way back up to him. So much has happened in such a short time, it feels daunting to think we could ever put this all behind us. That I could ever put my past where it belongs—in the

rearview mirror.



CHAPTER 33

"I'll catch you."

Ford

I SIT at the desk across from my father, leaning back and resting my ankle on my knee. I really wanted to talk to Lena, but at the same time, I don't know what to say. When she stepped off the elevator, I wanted to rush to her, take her head in my hands, and kiss the living crap out of her.

"You've been moping this entire week." He leans back in his chair.

"I've been handling Annabelle. And I've done plenty."

"You love Lena," he says, no question in his tone.

I say nothing.

"It's okay, she loves you too."

A rush of air leaves me. "I think maybe there's just too much shit between us."

Britney called me two days ago to say she's not ready to be a mother. I think once she realized there really would be no *us*, she must've thought about what that would mean for her life and raising our daughter without me by her side. My heart broke for Annabelle, but I'll be the best mom and dad she needs.

"That's ridiculous. I'm giving up my entire company for your mother." Dad stares at the park again. "Life is too short." He turns to me. "Do you know why I allowed you to continue playing hockey through college?"

I shake my head. "Why?"

"I wanted you to have that because you had to come on board, learn the ropes so you could take the reins at Jacobs Enterprises. I never thought you'd

fight me on taking your rightful place, nor did I ever think you'd go pro." I open my mouth to speak, but he holds up his hand. "Let's face it, Ford, it takes dedication to play any sport in a professional capacity. People don't give a shit what family you come from, and it wasn't as though you came out of the womb with a puck and stick. You weren't a natural."

"Well, this is a great pep talk. Thanks, Dad."

He blows out a breath. "Do I have to tell you that I don't want you to marry that girl in order for you to go fight for her?"

I scowl. "What does that mean?"

"You've worked yourself to the bone for your hockey career. That's why I never understood why you constantly did shit off the ice that would threaten your spot on the team. Of course, the selfish side of me wants you to come on board here and take over, but I knew a long time ago that you inherited your mother's stubborn side. You weren't going to bow down to me. And I admire and respect that because I couldn't do the same to my dad."

"You're being awfully complimentary today."

"Call it nostalgia. I want you, Imogen, and Morgan to be happy. We have all this, and for what? To feel trapped every day? I shouldn't have pressured you as much as I did. And honestly, I should've never put you and Lena in the position I did. Forcing you two to pretend you're in love?" He shakes his head. "I'm ashamed of myself, because you both look miserable."

"It's fine."

"No, it's not."

I slide to the edge of my chair. "I'll manage with Annabelle. We'll be fine."

"Sometimes life doesn't give you a redo."

I look at my hands. "I know." Standing, I head to the door. "See you tonight, Dad."

I open the door and shut it behind me. Coming through the family room, I already hear Lena in the kitchen with Annabelle. I lean my shoulder along the kitchen doorjamb, watching her with my daughter.

"I swear she's grown. Is she sitting up on her own yet?" Lena asks Morgan.

"It's only been a week," my sister says with a smile.

Lena has Annabelle in her arms, dancing them around. "Oh, how I missed you, little girl." She nuzzles Annabelle's neck and continues moving around the kitchen as though it's their own dance floor.

Morgan looks at me for a moment, questions as to why I'm not coming in filling her eyes.

But I walk up to my room and shut the door. Lena's already made it clear what she wants from me—nothing. Don't count your boy out yet though. I have a plan.

I'm getting ready in my room, and my mind won't stop whirling about what I have planned tonight. I probably should've filled my dad in earlier, but I didn't want to give him time to talk me out of it.

Unable to wait any longer before I see her, I head across the hall and knock on Lena's door.

"Come in." She's opening the box I sent for her earlier. "Ford, you don't have to do this anymore."

I shut her door and lock it. "Tell me."

"What?" She turns around, forehead creased in confusion.

"Tell me you don't love me."

She huffs. She's dressed in a robe, naked under it I bet, but I force myself not to focus on that.

"Why are you doing this?" She picks up the box of lingerie. "And please take this back."

I wrap my hand around her waist and tug her toward me. The box falls to the floor and the panties and bra spill out onto the floor, along with my note. God, she feels so good in my arms.

"Tell me I'm wrong. Tell me, and I'll walk away and we can see each other when we need to for the sake of this plan. Make me think I'm crazy for knowing there's something here between us."

She shakes her head. "Ford... I don't..."

I smash my lips to hers, unable to hold myself back. She's all I've been thinking about for the past week, and I call bullshit on the fact that she doesn't feel for me the way I feel for her.

I lick the seam of her lips and she opens for me on a breathy moan. I take full advantage. Her fingers grip my shoulders and I slide my hand down between her legs, pushing the robe out of the way.

"I'm going to give you that blush tonight, and all night, every time I look

at you, I'm gonna remember the way you came on my hand."

I slide my finger through her folds and she arches her back. Holding her up, I step us toward the wall, using it to leverage her so I can untie her robe and reveal her beautiful naked body. She releases a long exhale when I push a finger inside her.

"Tell me you can live without this," I say, pushing another finger in. "That you don't want me just as much as I want you."

"I do," she cries out, grinding along my palm.

"We're supposed to be together. You're mine. All fucking mine." I bury my head in her neck, nipping and sucking and licking, tracing my way up to her mouth before I take her lips again.

"Yours," she pants. "Always yours."

"Finally," I say and thrust a third finger in, grinding my palm along her clit.

She rides my hand, my fingers coated in her wetness. She smells of lavender and vanilla.

"I fucking love you, Lena," I admit, overcome with emotion and needing her to know.

She moans, her head falling to the wall. She's there, right at the brink, trying to drag out her orgasm. I increase my pace and her hands move to my wrist, clamping down.

"Go, I'll catch you."

She releases my hand and stills, crying out and falling forward until her head hits my shoulder. Her pussy spasms around my fingers as I slow my movements and slide them out of her, bringing them to my mouth, loving her fucking taste.

"Ford," she sighs, pulling back and staring at me, her cheeks the perfect shade of pink.

"You're beautiful."

"But what does this mean?"

I kiss her forehead and step back. "Be ready in twenty."

I walk out, knowing that she does love me. She can't deny it anymore. Now I just have to get her to see that we can handle anything that comes our way.



CHAPTER 34

"That's an awfully big smile."

Lena

I'M STILL wet as we're sliding out of the limo at the event. The more I think about Ford coming into my room and the way I rode his hand, the more turned on and confused I am.

"You have the speech, right?" I whisper to Ford as we approach the doors.

He smiles at me and pats his jacket. With his hand on the small of my back, he ushers us into the warmth of the venue. We check our coats and head into the party.

I've wanted to talk to him about what happened earlier in my room, but he keeps dodging the topic. I'm taking it as a bad sign for our future.

Aiden comes up to us as soon as we enter. "Did you hear about the trades?"

"No. I've been kinda busy." Ford puts his arm around my waist and tugs me next to him, his thumb slowly moving along my hip bone. A girl could go delirious from that move. "Who did we take?"

"Cory Freeman. A rookie." Aiden looks at Maksim, who's just joined us. Ford stiffens next to me. "And?"

"Warner Langley," Aiden says and steps back.

"What? Why would they take that prick?" Ford's mad, but then he glances at me and I see something switch in his brain. "That asshole isn't ruining my night. Just don't tell Imogen."

"Why would Imogen care?" Aiden asks.

“We’ll talk about it another time. We have to handle something more pressing right now.” Ford leads me over to the bar.

“Why don’t you like Warner Langley?” I ask.

“He’s just a jerk. That’s all.” He orders us two drinks. A whiskey for him and an Aperol spritz for me. “Let’s just enjoy our night.”

“Okay.”

I try to bring up the topic of us again, but then we’re told to sit down for dinner. Since we’re at the table with the rest of the hockey players, there’s no time to talk about us.

As we’re finishing our meals, I lean forward to ask if maybe we can go out into the hallway to be alone, but Ford beats me to it, kissing me on the cheek.

“I’ll be right back,” he says.

I watch him head over to his dad. They talk for a moment, then his dad ushers him outside. He doesn’t look angry, but Mr. Jacobs is an expert at masking his face in front of others. He should take up high stakes poker.

For the next hour, I talk to everyone at the party. I can’t help but feel as though there are whispers going on behind my back. People speculating that our relationship is fake. And here I am making the rounds without him.

I glance at my phone and see that it’s almost midnight. Thank goodness this New Year’s Eve party is almost over, but Ford has yet to give his speech. Maybe he’s having second thoughts?

The music slows to a lull before stopping, and all eyes fall to the stage where Ford now has the microphone in his hand. “Excuse me, everyone.”

Nervousness fires up in my belly because I know what’s coming. I know every word written on that paper and I need to be prepared to sell this on my end.

Ford’s gaze finds mine with that cocky smirk that I shouldn’t love, but I do. “Sorry for interrupting your night, but it’s almost midnight and I’ve been dodging my girl all night while waiting for the clock to run out.”

I tense, not understanding what he’s saying. This isn’t part of the speech I gave him.

He pulls the piece of paper from his pocket and I relax a bit. “I was supposed to come up here and give this speech. A speech that Lena wrote to convince you all that we’re in love and ready to get married. To make sure you don’t believe the articles going around questioning our engagement, when in fact, they’re true.”

I gasp then glance at Otis and Penny Sandersville before closing my eyes. They were looking at one another, their mouths hanging open.

“The truth is, when I proposed to Lena Boyd, I kind of loathed her.”

Tweetie laughs and Tedi elbows him in the gut.

“I did it because I was irresponsible and got a woman I barely knew pregnant. That woman left me with our daughter, and my dad needed us to look like a wholesome family, like we had it all together, so he could sell the company. I wanted him to sell so he wouldn’t harp on me to stop playing hockey and take over the family business. But almost instantly, as soon as our sham had started, this weird feeling came over me whenever Lena was around.

“I didn’t know it then, but I now know it as love.” He rips up the paper. “I’m not going to read this prepared speech about how much we love each other and how happy we are because the truth is that we’ve found ourselves in this hole that neither one of us knows how to get out of.”

I breathe deeply, unshed tears burning my eyes.

“Lena Boyd, I fucking love you. I love the way you challenge me and don’t take my shit. I love the way you love my daughter and treat her as your own. I love the way you helped me without me ever having to ask. And I love the fact that you put one hundred percent of yourself in anything worth doing. There’s a lot more I love about you, but those are just between us.” He winks, and the crowd laughs.

“I know we lost our way during this fake engagement, but I’m here. All I know is that I love you and that has to be enough. Enough for us to get through a lot of these problems we’re facing. The insecurities we might have.”

He steps down from the stage.

“One year ago, I kissed you at midnight on New Year’s Eve, and this year I want to be the man you kiss again. But this time, I want you to kiss me because you love me and because I’m the man you want in your life.”

He reaches me and drops the microphone to his side.

“Ford,” I say, barely able to speak.

He cradles my face in his hand as he always does.

“Ten... nine...” the band leader starts the countdown.

Our eyes remain locked.

“Eight... five... three...”

Ford waits patiently, but he knows. He’s always known.

“One. Happy—”

I rise up on my tiptoes and smash my lips to Ford’s. He picks me up, my feet floating off the floor.

Everyone screams, “Happy New Year!” There are a few claps, but I hope everyone else is kissing the one they love.

We draw back and I rest my forehead on his.

“I love you,” I say.

“I know.” He kisses me again.

Who said you can’t have it all? I might’ve gone through hell to get here, but maybe I wouldn’t have appreciated it like I do now.

“That’s an awfully big smile,” he says.

“Well, I just locked down Ford Jacobs. I’m a lucky girl.”

He laughs. “I’m the lucky one.”

“True.” I smile. “You are lucky.”

“You could fight me on it just a little.”

“Nope.” I inch forward. “Take me to the hotel.”

“How did you know?” he asks, lowering my feet to the floor.

“It’s my job to know what you’re going to do before you do it.” I turn to walk out, waving goodbye to our friends.

“Not anymore, and you’re insinuating that I can’t surprise you.”

I turn around to walk backward. “I hate to break it to you, but I don’t think you can.”

“Are you challenging me?” He raises an eyebrow.

I stop short of the doors. “Hey, you have the rest of our lives to surprise me.”

Then he drops to one knee, pulling a box out of his pocket. He slides off the ring I was wearing and pockets it. “Will you marry me, Lena? For real this time?”

Inside the box is a modest but elegant ring. Something way more me.

“Damn it, Ford. You were supposed to wait to surprise me.” Tears sting my eyes.

Murmurs start behind him when a few bystanders notice what’s going on.

“Answer, Lena,” he says.

“Yes. Yes.” I chuckle as he slides the ring on my finger.

I’m about to kiss him, but he ushers me out, signaling for the limo. “If we don’t get out now, we never will.”

He gets me into the limo, then his lips are on mine right away.

I finally have it all, and what do you know? I've never felt as secure as I do right now.



* HOCKEY HOTTIES *

EPILOGUE

"She's literally my world."

Ford

ANNABELLE TURNS ONE TODAY. I can't believe it. I also can't believe Lena invited Warner fucking Langley to the party. But she said the entire team needed to be included. She didn't like my argument that we're not in kindergarten and don't have to invite the entire team.

Since the trade, I've dodged Langley in the locker room and only talk to him when I have to on the ice. So far, we've been able to steer clear of one another. So explain to me why he accepted the invitation and is sitting out on the patio by my pool?

"Just relax. Whatever your beef was, you have to let it go." Lena pats me on the ass, getting more dip to put out. She wouldn't let me cater the party.

The paperwork has all been handled terminating Britney's parental rights. The day my lawyer received the paperwork back from Britney, signed, was a hard one. I'm sad for Annabelle that her biological mother couldn't step up and be what she needed. But I feel strongly that this is better than having a parent who pops in and out of her life whenever she feels like it.

Still, I hate that a part of me is always waiting for her to knock on the door and change her mind again. Will I feel this way our entire lives? Even if she no longer has any legal right to Annabelle, there's nothing stopping her from showing up and causing problems.

"You have no idea what he did," I say.

Just thinking about it makes me homicidal. I've yet to tell Lena, mostly because I'm loving our life right now. We fuck nonstop and we do all this

shit like go to the zoo and other crap kids like. Annabelle is walking, so lately I've been baby-proofing. Plus, it's not really my story to tell. It's Imogen's, and although Lena will be my wife in a few short weeks, I need to clear it with my sister first.

"Because you won't tell me."

"I'll tell you tonight, and then you'll be pissed you invited him."

"Fine. Anyway, the new guy Cory seems nice," she says.

"He's cool. I think Aiden's a little worried. The kid is fast." I take her in my arms. "When are all these people leaving?" I nuzzle my head into her neck. "I want you alone."

Right now, we're in this dream sleep schedule with Annabelle. She sleeps, like, twelve hours a night plus two naps. The alone time we've gotten as a result has been great for our sex life.

"Soon. It's a one-year-old's party. She'll fall asleep and then you can give me a massage." She wiggles out of my hold and takes the dip outside where most of the food is.

I follow Lena because yeah, I'm whipped and proud of it.

Annabelle cries and toddles up to me, plastering herself to my leg. I reach down and get her, holding her in my arms.

"Tweetie scared her," Tedi says and shrugs.

"Beautiful family you got here," Warner says from next to me.

I tense, my jaw clenched. "Thanks." I refrain from saying anything else.

Lena comes over and Annabelle reaches for her. It was a sad day when that started, but my teammates who already have kids promise that my time will come again. Lena takes Annabelle and grabs a few Goldfish crackers. Annabelle devours them. How we're ever going to get her to cake time without her crashing is anyone's guess. Her head falls on Lena's shoulder and Lena rocks her while talking to someone else.

I sit down with my friends but can't stop admiring the scene in front of me. My entire family is here, and my dad actually has a tan because he and my mom just got back from a Mediterranean cruise. Otis still wanted to buy controlling interest in the company after I came clean on New Year's Eve. Said he appreciated that I did what was right and put my heart on the line. I have my dad to thank for that. When I cornered Dad at his table that night and we went outside to talk, he didn't put up a fight about me telling the truth during my speech. That's the closest I've ever felt to my father—when he put my happiness above what was best for the company. We've gotten along

much better ever since.

I watch as Lena blows some bubbles for Annabelle to chase. I want to experience it all over again with Lena, except I want to see her belly swollen, hold her hand during the birth. See Annabelle as a big sister.

“You’ve got it bad,” Tweetie says next to me, clasping me on the shoulder.

“What?”

“You can’t stop staring at her and you’ve had her in your bed for almost a year.”

“And I hope I never stop staring. I can’t imagine I ever would. She’s literally my world.”

He just chuckles and ventures off somewhere.

Eventually I’m dragged up to get the cake, and we engage Annabelle, who isn’t having any of it. She doesn’t want to be in the high chair, which results in Lena giving me an “I told you so” look because I tend to feed Annabelle while we’re sitting on the floor. I sit at the coffee table and Annabelle walks around and grazes off the plate. It works for us.

Lena started her own PR firm down here. She only has a few clients so far, but I know it will be successful. After all, I’m her biggest client, how could it not be? Even if I don’t give her problems to deal with like I used to.

The cake gets smashed, the presents are opened, and my daughter is out cold by the time darkness falls. Everyone slowly wanders out, saying good night. Most overstay a one-year-old’s birthday in the first place. I’m not sure if the party is really for Annabelle or us honestly.

“Where’s Imogen?” Morgan asks, collecting her purse and my mom’s.

We all look around. She’s nowhere to be found.

Mom passes Annabelle to Lena so she can get ready to leave, kissing her granddaughter on her forehead.

Imogen comes down the stairs and stops when she notices all of us staring at her. She looks just fucked with her hair messy and her clothing askew.

Anger strikes me like the crack of a whip. Tell me she didn’t... “Where were you?”

“I fell asleep in the guest room,” she says.

But another set of footsteps barrel down after her. “Gen, we gotta talk.”

My entire body goes rigid when Warner Langley comes down still buttoning his shorts.

“I fucking warned you what would happen.” I cock my fist back and

punch him in the face.

He stumbles against the wall before sinking down to his ass.

“Ford!” my dad yells from behind me.

I guess the demon hasn’t been exorcised out of me just yet. Good thing I know a good PR person.

Need a little more Lena and Ford? We thought so. [Click here](#) to see some time at home with them, and another fun locker room scene!



*Please note by downloading the bonus scene you are agreeing to join our newsletter if you’re not already a subscribed member.

Be sure to check out the rest of our Hockey Hotties series, starting with [My Lucky #13!](#)



Cockmamie Unicorn Ramblings

Ford, oh Ford. He's the type of character we love to write. The banter between him and Lena came onto the page so easily. We both love an arrogant guy who says and does whatever he wants. They're always the most fun to see fall. ;)

We had a lot of ideas for this book and one big one for the end didn't pan out how we hoped. We loved the idea for the scene, but who knows... maybe it'll work for a different book down the road. Sometimes the stories go in a different direction once we start writing.

We haven't written a single dad since Confessions from a Naughty Nanny and we missed it so much. There's something about having kids in the picture that makes these stories especially swoony. We can't wait to tackle this trope again. *cough-Jed's book*

Without our team you wouldn't have any of our books! Seriously, they take on a lot of the work off our hands so that we can write!

Danielle Sanchez and the entire Wildfire Marketing Solutions team.

Cassie from Joy Editing for line edits.

Ellie from My Brother's Editor for line edits.

My Brother's Editor for proofreading.

Hang Le for the cover and branding for the entire series. Those colors!

Wander Aguiar for our muse, Ford.

Bloggers who consistently carve out time to read, review and/or promote our work.

Piper Rayne Unicorns who love our characters like as much as we do!
Thank you!

Readers who took the time to read our story when there's so many choices out there.

Yes, Warner Langley, Ford's archenemy is up next, but first you'll get to travel down to the tropics with the hockey hotties to celebrate Ford and

Lena's wedding in, Tropical Hat Trick (Hockey Hotties #3.5). If you read Cory and Ande's story in The Color Theory anthology, just know that we're expanding the story to include all POV's for the next three Florida Fury players!

xo,

Piper & Rayne

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

PIPER RAYNE

A romantic couple embracing in a mountain landscape at sunset. The woman has long, dark, wavy hair and is wearing a white tank top and blue jeans. The man is shirtless, has a beard, and is wearing blue jeans. They are looking at each other and smiling. The background shows a sunset over a mountain range with a forest in the foreground.

My Twist of
FORTUNE

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

© 2021 by Piper Rayne

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever.

Cover Design: By Hang Le

1st Line Editor: Joy Editing

2nd Line Editor: My Brother's Editor

Proofreader: Behind the Writer

My Twist of Fortune

Two aching hearts. One meddling small town. A second chance.

It's not a new story. Wife finds out husband's been cheating on her and she packs up her four kids and heads back to her hometown, Sunrise Bay, Alaska.

Yeah, not a fresh start, but thousands of miles away from my ex will do just fine.

I'm prepared for the cold weather, the early snowfalls, and dark days and nights. What I'm not prepared for is coming face to face with my ex's cousin and for the same feelings from twenty years ago to ignite like the flame never went out.

It doesn't take long before people are whispering about the widowed Hank Greene and me. But we both have children to think of this time around. Then again, Hank knows what it's like to be a single parent and sometimes those damn dimples of his make it hard to remember why we can't be together.

My Twist of
FORTUNE



Chapter One

"Something's Comin' Up?"
-Barry Manilow

Marla

I LAY BACK on the warm sand with the sun beating down on my body. "More of that," I mumble as his dark stubbled cheek runs across my flat belly and he nestles between my legs. "I think I love you."

With a devilish smirk, he pushes my skimpy bikini bottom to the side and his sparkling blue gaze coasts up my body to meet mine. Oh, he's a bad boy all right. One swipe of his tongue and I writhe under him, my thighs opening wider. My hands fall to my sides, searching for something to clamp on to, but only sand slips through my fingers.

This man knows his way around a woman's body. I wish my ex-husband could see me now. See this gorgeous hunk of a man willingly pleasing me without the disclaimer of "I'll do you if you do me." He hooks his fingers into the sides of my bikini bottoms, staring up at me with half-lidded eyes as he lowers them down my legs and flings them behind him.

"Now where was I?" His shoulders nudge my thighs farther open.

I sigh, falling back down while the warm sun soaks my skin and the sand

cocoons my body. This man is an expert. He should start a YouTube channel on how to give oral sex on a beach to a woman you don't know. He flicks his tongue and all thoughts of YouTube leave my brain because this man deserves to have every one of my nerve endings' attention. My back arches, my thighs quake, my moans deafening to my own ears.

"That's it. I'm right there. Keep going."

He presses his arm over my taut stomach. I clench to prolong the impending orgasm, but the urge to let go intensifies with every swipe of his tongue. He pushes a finger into me, quickly adding another one. I free-fall as if I'm in one of those extreme swing rides, but my harness doesn't jolt me back when the bungee cord stretches to its full capability. Instead, I fly out and soar through the sunny sky.

"Mommy?"

"Mom!"

"Is she sick?"

"She's groaning like she's gonna throw up."

"She's not groaning, she's... oh God, I'm out."

A nudge on my side jolts me, and as if a witch cast a spell, the man disappears, then the beach. The ocean is the last to fade away as I open my eyes and blink to find three pairs of curious eyes hovering over me.

I look at the ancient alarm clock with flip numbers. You know, like in the movie *Groundhog Day*? It's programmed to my dad's favorite seventies radio station so "Something's Comin' Up" by Barry Manilow sounds throughout the room as I blindly fumble to find the small button to make it stop.

I slowly rise from the bed, peeking at three of my four children. My fourteen-year-old Nikki has one arm of a shirt while my twelve-year-old Mandi has the other. The middle is so stretched out, it's a wonder the fabric hasn't ripped in half.

"Tell her she can't keep borrowing my clothes!" Nikki screeches, yanking on the fabric.

"Are you okay, Mom?" My sweet little eight-year-old, Posey, climbs over the edge of the bed and cuddles up next to me. She's my worrier and my spiritual leader, as she's decided it's her mission to find remedies to cheer me up every day.

"I'm leaving!" Jed screams from downstairs.

Nikki huffs and glares at Mandi, yanking again. "I gotta go. Give me the

shirt.”

I sigh and look at Posey, whose head is on my shoulder and staring up at me with her sweet smile. She runs her small hand down my arm until our hands are joined, then she squeezes because she’s worried. I could kill my ex-husband, Jeff, for this. Our once-carefree seven-year-old now feels as though she has to take care of me because he decided to implode our family unit.

“Go get ready, Posey. We have to leave soon.” I kiss the top of her head.

She’s reluctant to let me go, but when her sisters’ screams become louder and I sigh, she sees it’s her best option. This room is about to shake from the volume of my yelling.

I close my eyes and swing the covers off the bed, sliding my legs over the edge to get up.

“Mom!” Nikki points.

I look down to find a giant stain on my sweatshirt from the mint chocolate chip ice cream I spilled all over myself last night while I ate it out of the carton. I stand and head into the bathroom. “Leave me alone. You two have plenty of clothes. Find something.”

“No! Mom, it’s mine. Tell Mandi to let go.”

Jed honks the horn of the truck from the driveway. The truck that Jeff just had to buy Jed because why not buy your seventeen-year-old son’s happiness with a truck instead of actually, oh, I don’t know... keeping your dick out of other women’s vaginas.

“Mandi, give Nikki the shirt so she can go to school. You can find something else.”

“Seriously?” Mandi’s shoulders sink as though I told her she has a giant zit on the tip of her nose and there’s a boy at the door.

I shut the bathroom door. With my hands on the sink, my chin falls to my chest and I inhale and exhale a deep breath to find some serenity and calm. Maybe I should download one of those meditation apps or try yoga or something. All the other moms raved about it back in Arizona.

Turning on the shower, I grab the hem of my sweatshirt to strip it off, but I catch my reflection in the mirror. Oh my God. What happened to me? I’m wearing an oversized pair of flannel pants and my dad’s overly large “Just the Tip” sweatshirt with a bullet and American flag on it.

“Today is a new day,” I murmur.

Wheels squeal outside as Jed punches the gas pedal. I picture the back of the truck fishtailing. I’m the mother of a hoodlum. Tears prick my eyes, but I

refuse to let them fall.

I strip off my sweatshirt and my pants and step into the avocado-colored porcelain tub with the valance of fabric, complete with ties and tassels. My mom does nothing that doesn't involve tassels. A rush of cold water shoots down on my back.

“SHIT!” I scream and bolt out of the bathtub, one lonely tassel tie falling to the floor.

I dry myself off before putting my sweatshirt and pants back on for warmth then head downstairs to the kitchen, finding Mandi and Posey. Posey is dressed, backpack zipped up and a Pop-Tart and glass of milk in front of her on the table. Jesus. One day she'll be in a therapist's office, saying it all started when she was seven and her parents divorced.

“Mandi, was the water hot this morning?”

“Lukewarm.” She bites a piece of toast.

“Were you the last one in?” I ask.

She eats her toast, staring at her phone. Another one of Jeff's gifts. “First.”

“That doesn't make sense. Did Jed or Nikki say anything?”

She shrugs and sips her juice.

I turn on the lights at the top of the basement stairs before rushing down. At the bottom step, the sight of water on the cement floor alarms me.

“You've got to be kidding me.” I tiptoe through the water and find the source—the water heater. Since it's only been two retired people living in this house for the past twenty-plus years, I'm sure it's in shock from my teenage boy, who takes three showers a day.

After running back up the stairs, I grab the home phone and dial my mom in Florida. I'd love to volunteer to pay for this since they're letting my kids and me stay in their home rent-free while they travel in their RV. Although they've offered to let us stay when they return in two months, if I want to preserve what little sanity I have left, I need to find a place of my own. Which means I need to save all the money I can.

“Hey, honey, shouldn't you be on your way to school?”

“Good morning, Mom.” I ignore her question. “I think the hot water heater is done.”

“Hold on.” She must only move the phone a millimeter away from her mouth before she screams, “Frank!”

Posey slides off the stool and points at the clock, eyeing me to make sure

I see it.

I cover the receiver. "Go wait in the car."

They actually listen, and I tap my fingers on the counter, waiting for my dad.

"I'll call Hank Greene," my mom suggests.

"No, don't do that."

Just the thought of my ex-husband's cousin coming here and seeing me makes me want to dig a hole for myself. My gaze scatters across the messy house. The carton of ice cream I finished off last night sits by the trash can. The takeout pizza boxes are precariously balanced on the counter. Jed's socks and sweatshirts litter every surface, and cups clutter the end tables. I've lost all control of my children.

I hear the phone exchange hands. "What's up, buttercup?"

"Hey, Dad, I told Mom I'm guessing the water heater is done. There's water in the basement and all I got was cold water this morning."

"Yeah, that thing has been on its last legs."

I wave my hand to get this conversation going even though he can't see me. "So who do I call? Who do you use?"

"I'm calling Hank right now," Mom yells in the background.

"Dad! Tell her no."

But I hear Mom on Dad's speakerphone. The line is ringing.

"Hank's a good guy," Dad says. "He does all the work for us ever since his dad retired. He's the "it guy" in Sunrise Bay now."

I stop myself from saying he was the "it guy" when I was in high school too. Another reason I do not want him to bear witness to what has happened to me.

"Hey, Hank!" Mom singsongs, then her voice fades away. I strain to hear anything, but she must have left the RV with the cell phone.

"Don't you think it's a little awkward to have Jeff's cousin come and fix the water heater?"

Dad doesn't say anything for a moment. "True. Point made. Okay, well, we'll have to call someone from another town. Helen!" he yells.

I move the phone away from my ear.

Posey comes back in the door, her eyes pleading. "I can't be late again, Mom. Please."

She's right.

"Hey, Dad, I have to take the girls to school. I'll call you when I get back

and we can figure it out. Give me about a half hour.”

“Sure thing, buttercup.”

I stuff my phone into my purse and run out the front door to my minivan.

“Sorry, girls.”

My tires squeal and slide as I punch the gas with the hopes my kids don’t get another tardy on their record.

Little did I know my day was about to get worse.



Chapter Two

"Find a new word, Marla."

—Marla Greene

Marla

POSEY ALREADY HAS the door open before I have a chance to fully stop the van in the elementary school drop-off.

"Pos!" I slam on my brakes and Mandi and I fall forward.

"Seriously?" Mandi says.

I roll my eyes, but it's the tapping of something on the hood of my van that causes me to look up.

"You've got to be shittin' me," I mumble, but from Mandi's huff, she heard me.

"Oh my God! Is that really you?" The blonde woman acting as traffic director beelines it from the front of the van over to my window.

"I'm going. Love you, Mom!" Posey says.

I look back to say goodbye, but the van door shuts. I watch as Posey's backpack swings right and left as she runs to the doors of the school. I move to put the van into drive, but a pearly white smile plastered to my window reminds me of the hell I'm in right now.

I press the button to lower the window.

“Mom!” Mandi screeches. “I can’t be late.”

Her reason for not wanting to be late isn’t the same as her younger sister’s, but I get it. I was a tween once too. She doesn’t want all eyes on her when she walks in after the bell.

“It’ll only be a minute.”

She throws herself back in her seat and lets out a long annoyed sigh. “Whatever.”

“I heard you were back in town, but Bill and I took a vacation together in celebration of the kids starting school, so I haven’t bumped into you.” Donna Demonte in the flesh. The girl who should’ve been voted biggest flirt senior year.

I force a smile.

Her hand reaches in and she pets my shoulder like I’m a cat. “I heard about what happened with Jeff. I’m sorry.”

I nod and glance at Mandi, who’s lost in her phone—or pretending to be at least. “Thanks. We’re good though. Happy to be back.”

She laughs. “Sunrise Bay has always been your home. I think I speak for the town when I say how happy we are to have you all here. I hear there’s a football player in the family. He’s going to have a challenge on his hands.”

I nod before my mind actually processes what she’s saying. “What?”

“Jeff was always sharing all those videos of your oldest on social media. He’s a quarterback, right?”

“Um... yeah.”

Jeff did always post things about Jed. But that’s Jeff. He’s a bragger and into one-upmanship.

“Do you know Hank’s son, Cade Greene?”

She pronounces Greene as if I’m not aware of the other half of the Greene family in this town. As if Hank and I weren’t in the same grade. As if we never... I shake my head from going down that particular memory lane. Then it all clicks—I forgot that Donna was Hank Greene’s high school girlfriend until our senior year.

“He plays quarterback,” Donna adds.

“Well, if Jed wants to play, he’ll have to hope they have a position for him to fill.”

She laughs. “And Jeff would be okay with that?”

“Mom!” Mandi whines.

“I really need to go, Donna. We’ll have to catch up another time.” I shift the van into drive.

“Definitely. Maybe we can go shopping or something.” Her eyes zero in on my sweatshirt.

I finger-comb my hair as though she won’t notice me doing it. “Sure.” I ease off the brake. “Bye, Donna.”

I drive off without waiting for her to say goodbye.

“She’s a bitch,” Mandi says.

“Mandi!” I scold—but how can I reprimand her when I’m thinking the same thing? The woman had it out for me in high school and I know for a fact she couldn’t be happier that my marriage fell apart.

“Come on, Mom, talking about Jed and Dad?”

We drive out to Main Street and into the middle school parking lot, since the schools are minutes away from one another. The lack of cars in the drop-off lane says Mandi’s going to be late. Her hand is already on the handle of the door before we come to a complete stop. Must be genetics.

“I’m sorry, Mandi. Last tardy, I promise.”

Surprisingly, she nods and nothing smart comes out of her mouth. When the door shuts, I close my eyes and relish the silence. Until a honk behind me startles me and I put the van in gear, driving back to my parents’ house.

The thought of Hank Greene makes my stomach flip. Although he and Jeff are cousins, they might as well have been strangers. After Jeff’s side of the family moved to Arizona with us, there were no more shared holidays or occasions for all of us to get together. Jeff’s dad never had a close relationship with Hank’s dad. When Hank’s father died, we discussed moving our side of the family back up to Sunrise Bay, but it never happened. Jeff paid for my parents to visit us so we wouldn’t have to come up here, which suited them fine since it was a mini vacation of sorts with a big house, pool, and warm weather.

I’ve always felt as though there was unfinished business between Hank and me, although we never truly dated. After his wife, Laurie, died tragically—only a year after his dad—I wanted to reach out on the phone, but I was a chickenshit and resorted to a plant and a sympathy card from our family. For months, my mom told me how sad the town was. How everyone was on the meal exchange for the Greenses and she had arranged a babysitting routine so Hank could work.

I drive down my parents’ street. They live way too remote for my liking. I

love Alaska, but I'd rather live in a subdivision than on the land my parents own, without a neighbor in sight. I don't need to have a moose wish me good morning on my way to the van.

Driving up their long driveway through the forest of trees, I realize the worst part about my parents' remote location is that if someone stops by to see me, I can't just keep driving until they leave. I'm stuck.

So as my van pulls up to the house and a dark gray truck comes into view, I curse to myself. I already know who it is and my stomach sinks. I calculate my chances of pulling down the driveway and acting as though I didn't see him, but that's shot to hell when the driver's side door opens.

I say one last prayer that Hank has apprentices working under him and it's one of them in the truck. He must have employees. I'm sure he wouldn't be too keen on seeing me either.

But just like every other facet of my life lately, this situation doesn't go my way either. Two long legs attached to work boots hit the pavement as Hank unfolds himself from the truck. He's bigger than I remember. Taller, broader. There's scruff along his face that's darker than his honey-blond hair, which is longer than I've ever seen it, as if it's weeks past a haircut but not so unruly he looks unkempt.

Just like all my friends in Arizona thought all men in Alaska looked like, he's wearing a flannel shirt, jeans, and brown work boots. He pushes his sunglasses up to rest on top of his head and offers me a wave.

I can only smile. Nausea hits my stomach as I turn off the ignition and slide out of my minivan.

"You didn't have to come," I say immediately.

He side-glances me, getting something out of his truck. "Your mom called me this morning."

"I'm sorry. I told my dad I would get someone else. I'm not even sure..."

He pulls a toolbox out of the back and looks at me. His gaze slithers across my body side to side, up and down, and when his gaze meets mine, the hazel eyes that would pierce me from across the room in high school make me want to sigh. Hank Greene.

"Hey," he says in an easy way. As if it hasn't been twenty years since we saw one another face to face.

"Hi."

He nods. "Welcome back."

I fidget with my hands and balk when I look down at my feet. I have on

my mom's flowery rain boots, my dad's too-big flannel pants, and oh my God. I cross my arms over my chest. His chuckle says he wondered when I would figure out how I look.

"So the water heater... I have a key to your parents' place, but I didn't want to barge in." He changed the subject. At least I can be thankful for something right now.

"Oh, thanks. I have to warn you." I walk up the steps to the house. "We're still getting settled, so it's a little mess—"

"Marla?" his deep voice says behind me. "I have teenagers. I understand."

I whip around, guilt weighing heavily on my shoulders. "I wanted to reach out and say how sorry I was to hear about Laurie."

He nods. "Thank you."

Okay, just open the door and let him go look at the water heater. If he really wanted to have a conversation with me, he would've reached out when I first arrived in town. Not that I blame him that he didn't. If I would've had anywhere else to go after Jeff decided his side piece was the love of his life, I would've gone there. But I have no money of my own since I quit my job almost twenty years ago to raise the kids. So pathetic me now lives in my parents' house. I'm a billboard ad for why women should be independent.

"It's right in here." I open the door.

"You didn't lock the door?" he asks once we're inside.

I scramble to pick up all the dirty clothes and dishes that make it look as if we live in a frat house. "I was in a rush. I don't make it a habit to wear my dad's clothes either."

He laughs and his gaze falls over my body once again. Shivers follow the path of his vision, raising the hairs behind my neck.

He slides by me, heading to the basement. "I'll let you know what I figure out."

Then all I hear are his pounding footsteps down the basement stairs. I fall onto the couch and wish there was some magic way it could suck me in and swallow me whole.

After a few minutes, I see that wish isn't going to be fulfilled either, so I do the best thing I can think of—get dressed in anything but what I'm wearing.

I take off the rain boots, leaving them by the door, and shed the sweatshirt on my way to the stairs, leaving me in my cami and flannel pants. As I'm

passing the basement door, the footsteps grow louder and I freeze, searching for a place to hide. But unlike my eight-year-old self, I'm too big to go under a cabinet, and before I know it, Hank is standing at the top of the stairs. He stares at me, focused on my breasts straining the white fabric.

"I was just about to go change."

He nods, and his gaze bounces back up to meet mine. The smoldering look on his face is foreign to me and my body says, "Just take what you can and suffer the consequences later." I'm so desperate to have an orgasm that isn't self-induced, I'm dreaming about men. But I remind my unquenched libido that I know nothing about Hank. For all I know, he's seeing someone.

I step forward and he steps to the side, thumbing toward the front door. "You'll need a new one. I'm just going to run to Handyman Haven and pick one up."

"Oh, okay."

"I'll call your dad first."


"Okay."

We stand in awkward silence for a moment, his eyes dipping once more to my breasts. "I'll be right back."

"Okay." *Find a new word, Marla.*

He's the first one to walk away. My libido screams about what a wimp I am, but what was I going to do? Jump in his arms and kiss him?

His truck starts and I wait to hear the crunch of the gravel under his tires before I knock my head against the wall in complete and utter embarrassment. Returning home is going great so far.



Chapter Three

"Women like that."
—Dori Bailey

Hank

IT TAKES all the strength I have to pull out of the McAlisters' driveway knowing Marla is in there—alone—wearing a tight white tank that made it clear she isn't wearing a bra. Her hard nipples were practically begging me to tear the thin material off her body and suck on them.

When Mrs. McAlister called this morning with the news about the hot water heater, I assumed that the sexual tension that had always lingered between us in high school had faded. We'd moved in two different directions. She married my cousin and me Laurie. We have families of our own, kids who are almost grown.

Rumors have run rampant in Sunrise Bay about why Marla McAlister-Greene is back in town with four kids. According to our small town gossip brigade, Jeff couldn't keep it in his pants, cheating with any woman who showed interest. They said Marla was crushed she wasn't enough for him, but she stayed for the money and security. I always assumed she stayed for the kids though. Marla was never the type who cared about money. But maybe

once you have it, it changes things.

Jeff's a real estate developer, from what I know. Our dads didn't always see eye to eye, and when Jeff took Marla down to Arizona for a business opportunity he got from a college buddy, my aunt and uncle followed them. They've never returned, not even to bury my father. That's the day I lost all respect for them. I no longer consider Jeff or his parents' family, even if we share a last name. There are people here in Sunrise Bay who picked my mom up, who took care of my kids and me after Laurie passed. Those people are my family even if we don't share blood.

I park along the curb of Handyman Haven. I'll try to be in and out because downtown is like a game of gossip telephone from one store to the next. If they're not trying to fix me up, they're trying to set up my kids.

I pull my phone out of my pocket and dial Mr. McAlister.

"Hank," Mrs. McAlister answers the phone.

"Hi, Mrs. McAlister, is Mr. McAlister around?"

"How was my daughter? Did she look okay? I'm so worried. I told Frank we should head home, but he swears she's fine and a little alone time would do her good, but I'm not so sure. I mean—"

"She looks good." I refrain from telling her how Marla might have looked a little unhinged when she came out of the minivan. I've been where she is. Not exactly—my wife died—but there were days I didn't want to get out of bed. And I'm sure the kids are navigating new terrain with their dad still back in Arizona.

A long breath falls out over the phone. "Oh good. Maybe you could take her out."

"Helen, stop trying to set them up," Mr. McAlister says in the background.

"I'm not trying to set them up, but she needs friends." Her voice grows farther away until it's Frank on the phone.

"What's up, Hank? Tank is blown, I guess?"

"Yeah. Sorry, completely rusted out. I'm at Handyman Haven to grab a new one. Wanted to talk to you about how you want to handle this."

"Let me know what I owe you. I almost replaced it last year, but I figured we might as well get the last bit out of it. I guess my grandkids finished it off for me." He chuckles.

"Speaking as someone with teenagers, you're probably right."

"Helen's on my tail every day to get back up there, but this is our

vacation. I feel bad for Marla, but it's not like we didn't see this all coming. Jeff's a weasel. He never deserved her in the first place."

I say nothing. As weird as it is, Mr. and Mrs. McAlister always feel open to talk to me about how horrible my cousin and his family are because of the very public feud between the two Greene brothers.

"And his dad is a whole other story. Your mother picked the right Greene there."

I nod although he can't see me. Not sure what he wants me to say. This town acts as if I don't know the story of how Ethel Mann fell in love with two brothers once upon a time.

"I'll get this new tank in and I'll clean up the mess too," I say.

"Are you sure? My grandson can help as soon as he gets home from school."

"It's a slow day for me."

"Thanks, Hank, we feel so much better knowing you're taking care of this." He pauses before he whispers, "How is she really?"

"She's good."

"Come on. It's me. She sounds horrible on the phone." His voice is so low I struggle to hear him.

"I only saw her for about five minutes, but she's holding up." Which isn't a lie. She's standing, her kids got to school, and based on the stain on her sweatshirt, she's eating.

"Okay. Good. That's good." I can almost see his gray hair falling onto his forehead as he nods. I'm not sure my words are doing much to make him feel better.

"Well, I'm gonna head in and grab this."

"Yeah, I don't wanna take up any more of your time."

"Have fun. We'll see you in about two months, right?"

"Yeah, we're heading into the Midwest tomorrow."

"Great. Safe travels, Mr. McAlister."

"Bye, Hank."

We hang up and I climb out of my truck, rounding the back and stepping up to the sidewalk. My mind is consumed by Marla returning to town, and all those unrequited feelings swarm inside me like bees in a hive.

The bell chimes above the door. As usual, the owner, George, is behind the counter on a stool while three of his fellow members of the gossip brigade are in front of him, whispering.

“Hank!” George waves.

All three of them turn to me, waving and smiling. From the surprise in his voice, my guess is that I was the topic of conversation.

“Hey, George. Fellas.” I nod in greeting. “I need a water heater.”

Walking down the aisle, I locate the water heaters in the back. I know where everything is since I’ve been shopping here since I was in my mom’s stomach. I grab a dolly and wheel it up to the front.

“Water heater, huh? I sure do hope someone’s house isn’t flooded?” George says.

That question is bait on the end of his line.

“Yeah, that’d really be a shame,” one of the other men says.

They think they’re going to trick me into saying it’s for the McAlisters, then I’ll be interrogated about Marla’s return. Because every member of the gossip brigade are military vets, they all act as if they can pull information out of people. Sometimes I assuage them. Not today though.

“Luckily, no.” I’m not lying. There isn’t a ton of damage at the McAlisters’, and as though Frank knew it was coming, he moved all the storage boxes up onto shelves.

“Oh, that’s good,” George says.

“Yeah, good,” the three other men say in unison.

I pay George. “Bye, guys, don’t waste too much of your day inside. It’s beautiful out.”

I wave and wheel out the dolly. Thankfully they didn’t pressure me too hard for information. But as I load the water heater into the bed of my truck, I realize I counted my thanks way too soon—my mom and her blue-haired best friend are at my truck, their hands clasped in front of them like church ladies. Mom met Dori a couple of years ago and they’ve been inseparable ever since. These two are so much worse than the gossip brigade. These two make you feel like a POW.

“Mom,” I say with a nod.

“Hey, Hank.” She steps up to me and wraps her small arms around my stomach.

“Dori.” I lean forward and kiss her on the cheek before I get the heater into the bed of my truck.

“You’re so strong. I threw my back out, otherwise I could’ve helped you with that.”

I wave off Mom’s friend. “It’s all good.”

“Who’s the water heater for? Jeez, I hope there’s no water damage. I remember when ours went out.” Mom looks at Dori. “And it almost ruined all of Hank’s baby pictures. I was so upset, and Jim snapped at me to calm down. Let’s just say I didn’t talk to him for an entire week. Disrespecting me by snapping at me when it was our baby’s pictures...”

Dori shakes her head in agreement. If my mom’s friend wasn’t here, I’d probably interrupt and say let the man rest in peace.

“Oh, but you can imagine after a week of no talking, the make-up sex,” Dori says.

“It is the best.” My mom laughs.

My mom looks at me. “Who’s the water heater for?”

I stare blankly at them. I know my mom’s game. She’s going to continue this until I fess up and fill her in. But I’m going to tolerate this even if I throw up my entire breakfast on the way back to the McAlisters’.

“Let’s just say Jim was all over me.”

I choke on the bile rising up my throat.

“Philip used to... you know.” Dori eyes me, and I’m not sure if it’s because I’m positive I must be green or if she’s judging if I’ve reached my limit yet.

Mom touches Dori’s arm. “I wore this lingerie and tried to do a striptease once, but he grabbed me and tore the lace—”

“The McAlisters!” I say a little too loudly.

Hey, at least I didn’t cover my ears and yell, “No, no, no make it stop.”

“Oh,” Mom says in that tone that speaks more than if she just said what she’s thinking.

“Definitely, oh. Second-chance romance is the best.” Dori smiles.

“We were never a first. She just divorced my cousin. You two better keep this between you two.”

“Sure. Who would we tell?” Mom looks at Dori.

I’ve seen them work their magic. They think they’re modern-day matchmakers.

“I’m serious. She has enough on her plate with returning to this town. She doesn’t need everyone in town making up stories.”

Mom stares at me in disbelief that I would think she’d spread news. “I understand.”

“Do you? Because I vaguely remember you being the one to tell me about her divorce. How your voice was dripping with ‘I told you so’s.’ She has a

life and kids. Leave her be.”

“You’ve got it bad. All protective of her. Women like that.”

Dori’s tone is so enthusiastic, I want to yell at her to back off. I’m confident in my skills. If I wanted to ask a woman out, I would. Well, that’s a slight exaggeration. I haven’t really dated since Laurie. Mostly because raising five kids hasn’t left me with a ton of spare time. Chevelle’s issues from losing her mom have been so ever-present, I can barely step away from her to take a piss, let alone bring another woman home.

“Listen, I’m leaving. You two need a ride somewhere?”

They both shake their heads.

“I’ve got my Cadi. We’re heading into Lake Starlight,” Dori says, making their almost identical town—minus our spectacular bay—sound glamorous.

“Yes, Dori is going to show me where she lives now. Northern Lights Retirement.”

I stop walking and turn to face them. “Are you thinking about moving there?”

Mom shrugs. “The house is big, and your dad is gone. I don’t know. We’ll see.”

Huh. I always imagined she’d live there forever.

“Have fun at the McAlisters’,” Mom says, her and Dori walking down the street.

“It’s not fun putting in a water heater.”

“It is if you get all wet doing it,” Dori yells back.

They both bend forward in a fit of laughter as if they’re thirteen. It is nice to see mom laugh again though.

Maybe she should move to a retirement community, but what would she do with the house? I can’t afford to buy it from her, and I know she doesn’t have the cash to pay for the rent at a place like Northern Lights Retirement Center. I mean, Dori’s family owns Bailey Timber Company. My dad was the best contractor in the county, but it’s like comparing peas and carrots.

I glance at my watch. Shit. I better go. Just as I climb into my truck, my phone rings and I curse.

“Hello. Hank Greene speaking.”

“Hi, Mr. Greene. This is Nurse Mindy. I have Chevelle in the office.”

I throw the truck into drive and head to the elementary school instead of the McAlisters’. This day just keeps giving and giving.



Chapter Four

"He's supposedly our cousin."
-Posey Greene

Hank

MY DAY WENT FROM "MEH" (the usual grind of getting five kids out the door), to fantastic (got to see Marla in a tight see-through cami), to annoying (picking up Chevelle from the nurse for the tenth time this month).

As I stir the chili I prepared this morning and cover up the Crock-pot, Cade pulls up in my old beat-up truck. He drops his book bag on the table, grabs a Gatorade out of the fridge, and heads toward the pantry for a snack. It's his usual routine, except instead of telling me what happened at football practice, he's quiet.

"How was practice?" I ask, breaking the layer of ice that's fallen over the kitchen.

He plops down in a chair and opens a container of Pringles. "At least they won't have to change the lineup." He puts a stack of chips in his mouth, chewing and downing them with a gulp of Gatorade.

"What are you talking about?"

“Jed Greene. His arm, Dad.” He shakes his head. “It’s good. I mean... I look mediocre compared to him.”

“I doubt that.”

He stops drinking and slams his drink down so hard, orange Gatorade spills onto the table. “I’m serious. By the end of practice, I was on the bench and Jed was throwing the passes. When Coach finally called me in, he put me at receiver.”

“Well, receiver is a good position too. Remember when you said you wanted to play different positions? Maybe this is your chance.”

“Not my senior year! I’m the captain of the team. I’m the one who brought this team up in the ranks since freshmen year.” He jabs his finger into his chest. “The position isn’t supposed to be stripped away from me my last year of play.”

I run my hand over my forehead and drag it down my face. Laurie would handle this so much better than I’m about to. “Well, he is your cousin.”

“Technically, second cousin.” Chevelle comes in with my phone in her hand. She places it next to me. “Aunt Marla says tonight is fine.”

“Tonight for what?” Cade screeches and tosses his empty Gatorade container into the trash.

Chevelle ignores her brother’s outrage and leaves the room.

“Maybe basketball is more your sport,” I joke, but from the look on Cade’s face, he doesn’t find it funny. “I have to fix her water heater and Chevelle isn’t feeling well. Do you mind watching her?”

“Again? You need to take her to see someone.” He stands.

I’m thankful Chevelle left the room.

“Everyone deals differently.” I open the fridge and take out the cheese and sour cream, then I spoon some chili into a bowl for him.

“It’s been five years. She needs to talk to someone.” He grabs the cheese and dumps more than two handfuls into the bowl before sitting back down. “You do know my life is over, right? Maybe I should be the one in therapy.” He stirs his chili.

I watch for a moment, wishing I could take away his adolescent problems. “We went over this when we found out they were coming. There’s more than enough room for two quarterbacks on the team.”

He shakes his head and I wait for him to swallow his chili. “You know that’s not true. I mean, Jeff was a quarterback, you were a quarterback, and now Jed is coming in as a senior to take the spot. It’s not fair, Dad.”

I slide out my chair and sit down in the one closer to him. When your kids lose a parent, especially as suddenly as they did, it's hard not to want to put them in a bubble and promise that's the worst thing that could happen in this life. And in comparison to losing your mom, not being the high school quarterback means nothing, but telling a seventeen-year-old that isn't going to get my point across.

"How about this weekend, we run some plays with you as receiver? I think you might like being the one who scores. And if Jed has the arm, maybe there's more possibility for you guys to be an even better team this year."

He nods and leans back, his hands resting at the back of his head. Sometimes I look at Cade and think I'm looking at myself at his age. He's been a mini-me since he was born. Unlike Fisher, who is all dark features like Laurie.

"I'll be back," I say. "They have no hot water heater, and from the way you smell, I can't imagine if Jed can't shower."

"Let him stink. You should see all the girls fawning over him too." Cade rolls his eyes.

I smile at his jealous tone. "Every girl? I doubt Reese was."

"I caught her staring at lunch. She said she was looking for resemblances to me, but I know better. I broke up with her."

"Cade!"

He shrugs. "She can date Jed if she thinks he's so fucking hot."

"I doubt that was it. I'm sorry you think your world is ending because of Jed, but he is your cousin. You two share the same last name. You've got to get used to this."

"No." He stands then pushes in his chair before grabbing his chili and walking into the family room.

I hear Chevelle beg him to play a game with her. To my surprise, he agrees, and she squeals in delight. Standing, I push in my own chair. Laurie picked out this table, but it's falling apart the bigger the boys get.

I call upstairs, "Hey, Adam, do you want to go with me to install a hot water heater?"

He runs down the stairs, always my eager helper. "Sure."

"Cade, you're in charge."

I walk out the back door with my eleven-year-old son and start up my new truck, staring at my old truck with Cade's football bag in the back. I understand how he feels. Hell, Jeff and I went round and round in high school

too, but he was two years older than me. At least by the time I was a senior, I was the only Greene in Sunrise Bay High School.

I knock on the door of the McAlisters'. It's quiet, but there's a brand new truck in the driveway that wasn't here this morning. I'm not sure whose it is. Maybe Marla isn't alone. Not that I should care.

"So I heard Xavier talking to Clara and I guess her mom said they can't have any more sleepovers," Adam says next to me.

"Why?" I peek through the windows and don't see anyone headed toward the door. I knock again.

"You know, because they're teenagers now. He's a boy and she's a girl, even if they are just friends. I think Clara's mom is worried about... you know."

"Do you know?" I look down at him with wide eyes. One super thin silver lining that came from Laurie's death is that I know my kids way better than I ever did before.

"We had the talk last year, Dad."

Now, I can be out of it sometimes, but I know for sure I never had the talk with Adam. And if his brothers beat me to it... Lord help him. "No, we didn't."

"Not you and me." He signals with his finger between us. "Me and the school. You know, where they split up the boys and the girls and talk about the girl stuff and the boners."

The front door opens, and a little girl stands there looking up at us. "Who are you?"

"I'm Hank and this is your second cousin, Adam." I thumb toward him. "What's your name?"

"Wouldn't you know that if we were related?" She slams the door and the lock clicks in place.

I glance at Adam, who's laughing. "She's sort of right. Don't you think it's weird you don't know her name? I mean, we do share blood, right?"

"You don't share blood, but you are related by blood."

"That's what I meant," he says.

I knock again and Adam presses on the doorbell. I shoot him a glare and

he shrugs.

“The little girl isn’t gonna let you in, so we need to wait for an adult.”

A shadow comes from the house and I hear some murmurs behind the door. As it flies open, all I hear is the little girl saying, “Stranger danger.”

Marla looks from her daughter on the couch back at us. “I’m so sorry. Posey is really protective.”

“It’s okay,” I say. “Sorry about the delay earlier.”

She’s dressed in jeans and a long-sleeved shirt. Her hair is done and she’s wearing makeup now. She’s more put-together and just as beautiful. “Believe me, I understand delays.”

A set of headlights pulls up the driveway and she glances around us and sighs. Could she have a date? Or someone from high school visiting her?

“Come on in,” she says, stepping back and waving us in.

“Pizza!” A boy as tall as Cade, who I suspect must be Jed, slides down the stair rail. “I’m starving.”

“Jed!” Marla scolds.

He stops, but I’m not sure if it’s because he’s listening to his mom or if he sees us. “Who are you?”

“He’s supposedly our cousin or something,” Posey says, crossing her legs on the couch, clicking the remote.

“Cade’s dad?”

I nod.

“And your first cousin once removed, actually,” Marla adds. “And you are... Adam?” She guesses correctly, which makes me the asshole who doesn’t know her kids.

“I am.” Adam sounds as surprised as I am.

“I’m Marla.”

“Hey,” Adam says.

“You’ll call her Mrs. Greene,” I correct.

The room falls silent.

“Like Grandma?” Adam says.

I shake my head. Damn, this is weird. Especially when I already know late tonight when I’m all alone, I’m going to be thinking of Marla and not as my cousin’s ex-wife.

“Fine. You can call her Marla,” I say and the tension in the room eases.

“Excuse me,” the pizza guy says.

Marla’s head snaps up as she grabs her wallet next to the door. “Yeah

sorry.”

We step farther into the house.

“I didn’t want to interrupt the family reunion,” the guy says.

Adam sits down next to Posey, watching whatever game show she is. Jed and I stand there awkwardly.

“I heard about practice today,” I say. “Cade said you’re quite the quarterback.”

His smug face says he knows how good he is and he’s already positive he’s beat Cade out of the starting quarterback spot. I’m not usually a ra-ra guy when it comes to boosting my kid’s ego. I teach my kids that you earn what you get and if Jed is better, then he deserves it, but the cockiness oozing out of this kid reminds me of his father. Unfortunately, that makes me go into “protect Cade” mode.

“Cade’s been the quarterback for three years. The boys all play well together. Must be rough getting used to a new team?”

Marla shuts the door, and Jed takes the two pizza boxes from her hands. A thank you never leaves his lips.

“I guess that’s the good thing about quarterback. As long as I throw the ball to them and they score, it keeps everyone happy.”

I nod. “The boys are tight. Maybe Cade could take you under his wing, show you around?”

“That’d be wonderful.” Marla’s hand touches my arm.

Something like a bolt of electricity zings up my forearm straight to my heart, making it beat a little faster. It’s been way too long since I’ve had a woman’s touch if a hand on the forearm gets me going.

“Nah, I’m good. But thanks.” Jed walks off toward the kitchen.

Marla’s shoulders sink. “I’m sorry. This has been a tough transition.”

I’ve been where she’s at, when your teenage kid embarrasses you in front of another parent. “I understand.” I thumb toward the truck. “I’m going to go get the water heater. Adam?”

“Coming.” Adam gets up and follows me to the truck. As we’re sliding the water heater out of the bed, Adam whispers, “That Jed is kind of a dick.”

I want to correct my son’s language, but he’s got a point. The apple didn’t fall too far from Jeff’s tree, that’s for sure.



Chapter Five

"One day he'll realize how stupid he was."

-Hank Greene

Marla

"THAT EGO of yours needs to get checked, Jed. You're new to this school, and stealing your cousin's spot on the football team isn't something to gloat about."

"Second," he mumbles with a mouth full of pizza.

"Excuse me?"

He swallows. "Second cousin."

I go through the stacks of paperwork all the kids brought home today, annoyed, frustrated, and embarrassed by my own son.

"Can I go down and watch them work?" Posey asks, already sliding away from the table.

"Can we not have takeout tomorrow?" Nikki asks.

"Can I?" Posey asks for the second time, standing at the top of the basement stairs.

"Let me go through your stack first, then you need to ask Hank if it's okay for you to watch. But you have to stay out of the way."

She steps down one stair.

“Posey, I said wait until I go through your schoolwork.”

“It’s all done, with star stickers and excellent written on top. My teacher loves me.” She heads down the stairs.

“Teacher’s pet,” Jed coughs into his hand.

I put down Posey’s stack because I’m sure she’s telling the truth. She’s not my problem child at the moment. I pick up Jed’s pile, which is mostly football stuff. Fundraiser information, the spirit wear sheet, game schedules, practices, permission slips to take the school bus, and lastly the dreaded concession stand volunteer form. I hate the concession stand, and now I don’t have any of my old friends to commiserate with.

“Hey, there isn’t a kid with the last name Demonte on the team, is there?” I ask Jed.

He looks at the ceiling and shakes his head. “Not that I know of, but there are some guys whose names I don’t know.”

Knowing my luck, Donna Demonte will be the go-to person in charge of everything to do with the football team and I’ll have to interact with her on a daily basis.

I sign his bus permission slip, put the schedule on the fridge, and place the volunteer paper on top so I can pick a few dates and be done with it. In Mandi’s stack, there isn’t much to deal with, and I breeze right through Nikki’s.

“Anyone want to talk about their day?” I take a slice of pizza.

“No.”

“No.”

“No.”

I nod and take a bite of my pizza, thinking I’d rather go downstairs and strike up a conversation with Hank than sit here. But that would be awkward, so I sit tight.

Posey comes up the stairs. “He wants to see you,” she says.

I place the piece of pizza down, wipe my hands, and head downstairs, Posey following. The first thing I see is Adam using a broom to sweep all the water toward the drain. Posey picks up another one and helps him.

“Thanks, guys.” I run my hand over Posey’s hair, and she moves her head out of the way as though she’s too old for me to do that.

“Your parents are lucky they never finished the basement,” Hank says, plugging in a light and handing it to me. “Do you mind? I was going to ask

the kids but thought if it drops in the water, we might all be electrocuted.”

“You don’t want to leave your fate in the hands of a responsible eight-year-old?”

He laughs. I forgot how much my body responded to that sound.

“She locked me out. So she’s smart too.” He opens his toolbox.

I glance at the kids. Posey is asking Adam who he had for a teacher in the third grade.

“Yeah, unfortunately with all her responsibility and intelligence, she’s turned into my own little mommy, worrying about me like I’m her newborn.”

He glances back my way. “I am sorry to hear about you and Jeff.” I raise my eyebrows, and he laughs. “He hurt you. For that, I’m sorry.”

He focuses on the wrench and the nut while my throat closes up. I can tell that he’s sincere.

“I bet coming back here brings up the good and the bad,” he says, looking over his shoulder at me.

I glance at the kids again. Posey and Adam are each resting their weight on the brooms. Posey probably has one ear on our conversation and one ear on the conversation she’s in.

I call to them, “Why don’t you two go have some pizza?”

“Oh, I made chili at home. Adam will be fine.”

“I have plenty.”

Hank lets the topic go and the kids rush upstairs. “Seems you just signed up to be my helper.”

“Is that my punishment? If so, I’ll take it. Adult conversation in the quiet of my basement? All I need now is wine.”

“I could have smuggled some in,” he says, standing and lifting the old water heater up and out of the way.

“I could help.”

“Keeps me young.”

We both laugh. When you’re in your early forties like us, you become very aware of how *not* young you are. I never felt as old as I did until Jeff told me he was leaving me—for a younger woman. He’s so cliché.

It’s impossible not to look back at my life and what I’ve accomplished. Or haven’t. I told myself I was raising my kids and once Posey went to kindergarten, I’d enter the workforce again. But Jeff wasn’t big on me working, and I hate to admit it, I was scared. Scared I wasn’t qualified to do anything other than pack lunches, cut shapes out of construction paper, and

drive my kids everywhere. I'm a smart woman, but I don't have anything to put on a resume to prove it.

Hank brings over a stool and swipes off any dirt on it. "Sit down. You deserve it."

"Thanks." I sit, still holding his light, and he goes back to work on the water heater. "I'm sorry about Jed. Up there. Unfortunately he has his dad's ego."

Hank doesn't say anything for a moment. "I think all seventeen-year-old boys should be cocky right before the real world drags them down a level or two." Another chuckle leaks out of him.

I sigh in relief. "True. Although I'm not sure Jeff ever got dragged down."

He stops working and looks over. "He lost you, right?"

Something flutters in my stomach. "Technically he gave me up."

"One day he'll realize how stupid he was."

"You're still as sweet as ever."

"And you're still easy to be sweet to."

All I can do is smile and hope he doesn't see the flush I feel heat up my cheeks.

I watch him work for a while, the quiet of the room a nice change from my everyday life with a house full of kids.

"Ever wake up and think how did I get here?" I ask in a soft voice. I've envisioned what my life could've been without Jeff in the picture. I'd never take away the four blessings upstairs, but what would've happened if I'd never agreed to move to Arizona? If we would've raised our kids in the same small town where we grew up?

"After Laurie's death, I'd be up late after the kids went to bed and think 'How did I become a widower in my thirties?' But usually a kid would wake up with a nightmare. I really just got Chevelle to sleep in her own bed this past year since the incident." He doesn't look as though he's on the verge of tears.

"Where did you meet her?" I never really knew Laurie since she wasn't from Sunrise Bay.

A smile comes to his lips. "She was from up north. Came here for school. We met in Psych 101."

"And that was it, huh? You two were inseparable?"

He closes his toolbox, locks it, and faces me, crouching. "No. I wasn't

ready for a long time. We were study partners, turned friends, turned more. It was a slow process.”

I wonder what might have caused him to go so slow.

He shrugs and answers my thoughts. “I was kind of hung up on someone.”

“Oh.”

He raises his eyebrows at me, and I nod, remembering how close we became our senior year. Jeff was at college and had asked Hank to look after me. He did, but neither of us expected that feelings could develop between us. I denied them, but Hank wore them out in the open. In the end, I broke his heart by leaving for Arizona shortly after graduation.

I say nothing because sorry seems stupid. It’s been over twenty years and he’s had a happy marriage and a family in the time since then.

“When I found out you were returning, Laurie’s reaction flickered through my mind. What would she think if she was still alive? In a small way, I think she was jealous of you.”

I scoff. “As you clearly saw this morning, there’s nothing to be jealous of.”

He nods and stands to his full height, taking the light from my hands. The dim light coming from the bottom of the stairs becomes our only light source after he turns off the construction light.

“I should go,” he says. Something in his voice makes me think it’s like torture for him to be here with me.

“Okay.” I struggle for breath. Having him so near feels overwhelming in this moment.

Then he steps closer. Visions of his heated gaze this morning flicker to mind and I meet him halfway. His hand touches my hip and I turn into him, my face tilting up to meet his.

He bends down and my tongue slides out to wet my lips, preparing for him to kiss me. Just as my eyes are about to fall closed, he presses his lips to my cheek.

“I’m glad you’re back, Marla,” he whispers before stepping back and bending to retrieve his toolbox and light.

Then he’s waiting at the bottom of the stairs for me to go up first, and embarrassment floods my body that I actually thought he was going to kiss me. How stupid can I be? More than twenty years, a deceased wife, a divorce, and nine kids between us does not make for a romance.

We reach the top of the stairs and find Adam, Posey, and Mandi at the kitchen table playing Uno while Jed and Nikki are nowhere to be found.

“Would you like some pizza?” I ask.

“No, thank you. I have my chili waiting at home.” He lifts his toolbox. “I’m going to put this in the truck and then grab the old water heater. Do you think Jed could help me?”

“Oh, definitely. Yeah.” I walk away from him to the bottom of the stairs. “Jed!”

“What?” he calls down.

“Mist... Hank needs your help.” I look back. “Is that okay if he calls you by your first name?”

He chuckles, glancing up from the table. “Yeah. I guess we’re in uncharted territory here. I’ll be right back.”

Jed comes down the stairs and, surprisingly, helps Hank get the old rusty water heater out from the basement without offending anyone. Maybe because football wasn’t part of the conversation. Jed really is a good kid, but his arrogance at his athletic ability is grating, even to me. It’s all thanks to his father putting his only son up on a pedestal his entire life.

“Thanks, Jed,” Hank says after they come back in.

“Sure thing.” Jed runs up the stairs.

Since the kids are almost done with their current hand, Hank and I stand uncomfortably in the kitchen, waiting, cloaked in awkwardness.

“I see you got the concession stand volunteer form.” Hank points at the papers on the fridge.

“Yeah. I’m dreading it.”

He nods. “How do you think I feel? I’m the only dad who does it, and I always get stuck with Donna Sullivan.”

“At least it’s not Donna Demonte. I ran into her today at the drop-off.”

He laughs. “She does love her whistle. But Donna Sullivan is Donna Demonte. She married—”

“Bill Sullivan?” I ask with a laugh. His smirk and nod saying we’re on the same wavelength. “She married the pothead who almost didn’t graduate?”

He returns my smile. “They fell in love after they returned from college. You won’t even recognize him now.” He taps his fingers on the paper. “I think I’m going to sign up for the first game so that I don’t have to worry about the later games in the season in case they make it far this year.”

I think he gives me a look like “maybe you want to as well,” but I must

be reading his body language wrong after downstairs. “That makes sense.”

“Plus Donna never does the first home game because she’s too busy with introducing the team and making banners for them to run through. She puts stakes with players names along the grass and decorates the fence. It’s a whole ordeal. So if you sign up, it would save both of us from having to do it with Donna.”

“That sounds like a good idea.”

“Out!” Posey yells and puts her last card down on the stack in the middle.

“You’re good.” Adam stands and walks over to his dad’s side. “I’m ready.”

Hank puts his hands on Adam’s shoulders, the affection between father and son obvious. “We’ll leave you to your night then.”

Hank turns and heads toward the front door. I rush past them and open the door. I watch them get in the truck and pull out of the driveway until his lights fade away.

“I’m taking a shower,” Posey says, and she and Mandi go upstairs.

I take out my pen and look at the volunteer form. Am I asking for trouble? The pen hovers over the first home game spot. That tension is clearly still present with us and we’re both single, which means there’s nothing to really keep us apart. But he’s technically my cousin by marriage.

Arguing starts upstairs between Posey and Nikki, Jed slams his door, then Mandi yells at him. Without second-guessing myself, I scribble my name on the first home game night. It’s just so I’m not stuck with Donna. At least that’s what I’m choosing to believe.



Chapter Six

"You sure know how to win a girl over."

-Posey Greene

Hank

THE FIRST FOOTBALL home game is fucking freezing. Adam, Chevelle, and Xavier sit on the bleachers to watch their brothers play. Although Fisher was called up from JV to varsity for this game, he most likely won't play. They just wanted extra players since Greywall is known for playing rough.

Donna is arranging candy bars and chip stacks beside me in the concession stand.

"I got this, Donna. You go and do whatever else you need to." *Please.*

Her hand falls to my forearm. "I don't know where Marla is, and I hate to leave you by yourself."

"I'm sure she'll be here soon. Plus, I've been doing this for three years. I can handle it."

"If you're sure?" She squeezes my forearm, or more my jacket and sweatshirt underneath.

"Promise." I slide my arm out of her hand. Sometimes I wonder if she

forgets she's married.

"Okay then."

Just as Donna goes to the back door, Marla appears in the front. She's wearing spirit wear that I assume is her dad or mom's, or maybe back from when we attended Sunrise Bay High. She has on a black hat with a gold ball on top and bears embroidered along the front. She even has the mittens with bears on top.

"Where did you find all that?" I laugh, signaling for her to go to the back door.

When she walks in wearing tight jeans that show off her amazing curves and boots with a furry lining up to her calves. She looks adorable, and I want to shut the door on the concession stand and warm this place up with some body heat.

"My mom's closet. She throws away nothing." She holds up her mittens and shows me how they flip open to be fingerless gloves. "So I can handle the money."

"Awesome. I'll have to grab a pair of those."

"Don't be jealous. I'll share." She looks around, reads the labels for coffee, hot chocolate, and apple cider. "So the prices are all here?"

I nod. I can tell this isn't her first time running a concession stand. "Where are your kids?"

"They're in the bleachers, but I worry they're going to end up in here. They're still getting used to the cold."

"They can sit in here if they want."

She gives me an appreciative smile that makes her dimples deepen. "Thanks, but Posey wants to see the action."

As she says that, Donna Demonte-Sullivan's voice rings out over the speaker. "And now we welcome our Grizzly Bears. First up..."

She introduces the lineup, Cade and Jed both being referred to as quarterback. Marla grows quiet. I'm sure she's aware that in a small town like ours, there's no need for two quarterbacks. One of them will play the majority of the games with the other only playing when we're already winning or if the other is hurt.

Cade hasn't been himself since Jed arrived. Jed's been used more in practice, and I tried to explain to Cade that Jed needs to learn the plays, the passes, what the other players excel and don't excel at. Those are all things Cade already knows from playing with this team for three years. But all he

sees when he looks at Jed is his replacement.

Reese comes to the front window, all bundled up. “Hi, Mr. Greene.”

“Hi, Reese. Can I get you something?”

She looks at the candy, but it’s clear—since she’s here without her friends—that she might not be here just for a refreshment before the game starts. Her vision strays to Marla, who is clapping for each boy being introduced, even though no one will hear her.

“This is Mrs. Greene, Jed’s mom,” I introduce them.

Marla sets her attention on Reese with a small wave. “Nice to meet you, Reese.”

“You too, Mrs. Greene,” she says and grabs a Snickers bar, leaving a dollar on the counter. “Thanks.”

Marla watches Reese walk away. “Is she okay?”

“She was Cade’s girlfriend until two weeks ago.”

Marla’s shoulders sink. “Jed?”

I shake my head. “No. Not that I know of. She was looking at Jed the first day and Cade took it as interest and broke up with her. He can be impulsive at times.”

She sits on one of the stools. “Do you think it’s their age?”

“I hope so. I mean, Cade’s a good kid, but until Jed came here, Cade never had to deal with feeling threatened.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. It’s a life lesson for him. Cade... hell, after Laurie passed, all my kids sort of became this entire town’s kids. They baby them like I don’t have enough love to give them. And how can I blame them?”

“Maybe they feel like a mother’s love is irreplaceable.”

I nod. She’s right about that. Although I think I’ve done a pretty damn good job, they still lost their mother. “I suppose so, but I prefer the tough love approach. This is good for Cade.”

“It’s good for Jed too. As unmotherly as it sounds, I wouldn’t mind him being dropped down a peg or two, so he understands that he won’t always stand on top.”

“So we won’t let this thing with our kids interfere with our friendship?” I ask.

Another winning smile creases her lips. All the memories of our senior year, when I hoped she’d pick me and not go back to Jeff, resurface. How much I didn’t want to cross that line, but at the same time, I did more than

anything. Is it a coincidence that we're here now, both single and able to cross that line without repercussions, or is it fate?

But maybe I'm naïve to think there would be no repercussions. Would the kids understand? The town? I'm not so sure.

"Are we friends?" A blush tints her cheeks and her fingers fidget.

"We've always been friends."

Her smile widens and a rush of happiness hits me. If I were the reason for that look on her face for the rest of my days, I'd die a happy man. Can two people really pick right up where they left off after so many years and so many experiences apart from one another? As suddenly as the happiness hit me, the guilt that I'm feeling this way about someone other than Laurie weighs me down. I push both feelings to the side for now to examine later.

We run the concession stand like an art. Marla takes the orders and the money, and I fill them. The Sunrise Bay side is cheering nonstop because Jed really is one hell of a quarterback. At least it seems that way based on the five minutes I saw him play when I asked Marla if she minded if I stepped out.

Coach decided to play Cade one quarter, Jed the next, and so forth. They're two completely different players. Cade runs the plays and he's more patient, whereas Jed reads the field well, but he throws the ball away more often because of his lack of patience for the play to pan out. Cade stands on the sidelines, his shoulders stiff, his lips a straight line. It's hard to watch your kids learn a lesson, but it's better for him in the long run.

In the end, the Sunrise Bay Bears win thirty-six to twenty-two with both quarterbacks responsible for an equal amount of touchdowns.

"So are you going straight home after this?" Marla asks. "Do people still head to The Hideout?"

I laugh. "I think the kids head over to Pizza Barn now. Did you guys eat dinner? We could all go."

Her lips twist as she thinks it over.

"It's pizza, Marla."

"Yeah, you're right. Sure. Let's do it."

I do my best not to think about "doing it" with Marla, but that proves impossible.

“You know, Xavier’s got quite an arm.” Ned Turner clasps my shoulder as I wait for a table to clear out. “He was playing on the side of the bleachers with a few boys and it was quite impressive.”

“Thanks. I guess that’s the benefit of having two older brothers who play.”

“Definitely, and this whole Cade versus Jed thing will turn in your favor.” He winks. “I know it.”

Sometimes I hate small towns. As if I’d be hung up on this and stay up at night, worrying if my son is going to play quarterback his senior year. There are so many more important things in life. “There’s room for both. They’re both talented.”

“Oh, definitely.” He leans in close, and the smell of alcohol on his breath burns my nostril hairs. I love Ned, he’s our insurance guy in town, but he takes Friday night football way too seriously. “Between you and me, Cade’s better.”

Marla walks in with her kids, and Ned turns toward her.

“Marla Greene!” He opens his arms.

Posey grabs her mom’s hand and pulls her back, not allowing her to welcome a hug from Ned. I snicker.

Marla gives him a wave. “Hi Ned. Good to see you.”

“We’ll have to catch up sometime. And be sure to come see me if you need insurance.” He grabs his business card out of his jacket pocket and presents it to Marla as though it’s a black Amex. “Call me.”

She shoves it into her purse. “Sure thing. Thanks.”

“I mean, I’m sure Jeff used to handle it, but—”

Marla raises her hand. “Thanks, Ned.”

He takes the hint and walks away, finding someone else to talk to.

Marla does a quick round of introductions before she says, “I’m starving.”

“I’m finally warming up. I couldn’t feel my fingers,” Mandi says.

“I see a girl from science class. Can I go over there?” Nikki asks.

“Sure,” Marla tells her.

“My kids are in the game section. Want to play?” I pull some dollar bills out of my back pocket.

“You sure do know how to win a girl over,” Posey says with her hand out.

“Pos, I have money.” Marla digs in her purse, but I put five singles in

Posey's hand and look at Mandi.

"Fine," she says, and I hand her five too.

"I'll pay you back," Marla says.

I wave her off and head to a table in the back big enough for all of us but far enough from the football team.

"Thanks." She takes off her jacket, and I'm rewarded with the sight of a sweater that's snug around her breasts. She peruses the restaurant and sits down across from me. "So is this place new?"

"Newer. Built after you guys left."

It's an old barn that was converted into a pizza place. Everyone loves it, and it's so big it easily handles a lot of people, especially on Friday nights.

"It's huge." She looks around, giving me the opportunity to really look at her without her knowing.

A waitress comes by, and after much discussion about what every kid eats, we order pizzas.

"Wine or beer?" I ask Marla.

"I'll just have beer."

"A pitcher then," I tell the waitress.

She leaves, and my eyes linger on the team table. Cade's not even socializing, and Jed is being the life of the damn party. Cade's gotta snap out of this.

Marla follows my line of vision and huffs before turning around. "I think Jeff taught him he always has to be on. Like he can't relax and just be himself. I try to tell him to tame it down a little, that people will like him for him, but you remember Jeff."

The one thing I hate about this situation is Jeff is always a topic of conversation. Will this be how it is if something were to happen between us? I have to be okay with that because he's their dad regardless.

"What are the plans between you two? Are you here permanently?"

The waitress comes over, dropping off the pitcher, and I pour our beers.

She leans back, crosses her legs, and takes a sip. "Jeff won't leave Arizona. His business is there. He tried to keep me there, but in the end, I said I couldn't do it anymore. We lived in a town where I was constantly reminded of his affairs. My friends who, let's admit it, probably weren't really my friends, looked at me with pity afterward. Other people would give me advice like 'sleep with the pool boy' or 'hire the best lawyer and hit him where it hurts.' But I just wanted to move on with my life. So I told Jeff he

didn't have a choice, and since he doesn't have time to raise our kids, he eventually agreed and signed papers for me to move the kids."

"And will he come and visit?"

She shrugs. "You know Jeff. Work and money are at the top of his list of priorities." She puts up her hand. "Then probably his new girl." She lowers her hand. "Jed's here." She lowers it more. "Then the girls."

"Whoa, the girls are lower than Jed?"

She laughs. "Yep. He says it's just because he has more in common with a son, but they're not blind. I guess I'm not really sure what the future will bring or how much he'll be involved. Once Jed finishes football, I can almost see Jeff disappearing." She frowns, sadness filling her eyes.

Fuck, that's sad. Jeff's an asshole, but these are his kids. I would've followed an ex to the ends of the earth if she was taking my kids somewhere. Jeff and I might've been cut from the same cloth, but we couldn't be more different in shape.



Chapter Seven

"I wouldn't want to compromise
your morals."

-Marla Greene

Marla

FINALLY A NIGHT TO MYSELF. I left Jed and Nikki in charge of the kids, and I'm sitting at the coffee shop, The Grind, in downtown Sunrise Bay, looking up jobs. Although I get child support and alimony, I need extra income in order to move out of my parents' house. Plus, I want to show my kids that Mom can stand on her own two feet.

A knock on the window startles me, and I turn to find none other than Hank Greene's smiling face.

It's been two weeks since we've had to interact. Both football games since then were away, and we seem to be on opposite schedules, him not attending the one I went to and vice versa.

He walks in, and the barista waves as though they're familiar with one another.

"Hey." Hank takes off his Greene & Sons hat—the company he took over from his father. "Can I sit?"

I shut my laptop. "Sure."

“Want a refill?” He points at my cup.

“No, I’ve had enough caffeine.”

“How about one to go? It’s a great night. Wondered if we could go for a walk?” He sits on the edge of the chair next to me without taking off his coat.

“It’s cold outside.”

He laughs and nods. “True, but the coffee will keep you warm.”

I playfully narrow my eyes and put up my finger. “Okay, you have once around the block.”

His knuckles tap on the table and he stands before going over to the barista, who talks to him about his kids and what they’re up to. She’s older but not as old as us. The ease of their conversation says they know one another outside of customer and server.

Once he pays for our coffees and brings them back, I shrug on my coat, hat, scarf, and gloves. I pick up my laptop bag to swing it crosswise over my body, but Hank grabs the strap.

“We can keep that here. You can trust Zoe.” He steps over and Zoe takes the bag from his hands before storing it behind the counter. He chuckles when he registers my expression. “Promise it’s safe.” He makes a cross over his heart.

Marla, you’re not in Arizona anymore.

The bell rings as we exit. A few loose flurries fall from the sky, the streetlight making them glow.

“So how do you know Zoe?” I ask.

“Is that jealousy I hear?” His tone is playful, but he’s not completely wrong.

“No. Just curious.”

“I own The Grind. Well, I mean, it was Laurie’s and after she died, I didn’t want to sell it even though I know nothing about running a coffee shop. Zoe is the manager and handles most of the operations. Last year she invested, so she owns twenty-five percent. Eventually I’ll have her buy me out.”

One thing I always admired about Hank was the way he never held anything back. His life was always open for inspection and he’d answer every question honestly. It’s an admirable trait.

“Why? Maybe one of your kids will want it.”

He shakes his head. “Laurie and I always agreed that the kids had to make their own way. I don’t want any of them to feel an obligation to take over one

of our businesses or think that maybe Laurie would've wanted that for them. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah." I really admire how well Hank is raising his kids on his own. I could stand to take a lesson from him.

He sips his coffee. "So what were you doing in there?"

I groan, taking my own sip of coffee to delay the embarrassing admission that I need a job and have zero qualifications. "Looking for a job."

"What are you looking to do?"

We turn by the bay, where the shallow water is beginning to freeze. I can't see the mountains in the distance in the dark, but I know they're there. He leads us onto the walking path.

"More like what can I do? I've been a stay-at-home mom for the past eighteen years. Before then, I had limited work experience after I graduated college."

"What did you get your degree in?"

"I never graduated. Once Jeff finished, he convinced me that he had us under control and my time was best spent making a home." The weight of disappointment in myself settles on my shoulders.

"And you enjoyed that?"

"Honestly?"

He stops and nods, looking at me over the rim of his cup as he sips his coffee.

"I did. I loved raising our kids. Being room mother, going on field trips, volunteering, having playdates. Some of the best times with my kids happen when we're in the car on the way somewhere. It's where they always asked me questions and we'd have real conversations, you know? I'd never take that back, but maybe I should've had more balance. Why did I just drop all my own hopes and dreams? Sometimes I think my girls look at me and think, 'I don't want to become her.'"

His shoulder bumps mine. "You're being way too hard on yourself."

"Am I? Because I remember feeling that way about my mom at one point. I thought she didn't have any ambition. And then I turn into her. Now the man who promised he'd take care of me just threw me out and I'm dropping the kids off while wearing a stained sweatshirt and my dad's flannel pants." I find a park bench and sit.

Hank follows, his large body stretching out beside me.

"How did I get here and how on Earth do I pick myself up?" I mumble

before tears sting my eyes, threatening to fall. It will be the lowest of lows for me if I lose it in front of Hank.

“Everyone has regrets, but the great thing about life is that it’s never too late to change what you don’t like. You can pivot and go down a different path.”

I glance at him. “There’s this pesky thing called qualifications that you need to get a job.”

“I’m looking for an assistant. Want to apply?”

I laugh. “So I can lose a finger or two? No thanks.”

“Hey now, there you go underestimating yourself. It’d probably be the whole hand.”

I laugh again, and my head falls to his shoulder in a “thank you for making me not feel like a total loser here” gesture. His arm locks around my body to keep me there, then his lips press to the top of my head. He smells nice, like fresh air with a hint of fire.

I’m not sure if there’s more to him offering me comfort than just being a friendly shoulder to cry on—literally—but something stirs deep in my belly.

“There are lots of options. Think about something you really love to do,” he whispers. “And if all else fails, I’ll hire you. But I will warn you, there’s a required uniform that involves short skirts and heels.”

I swat his stomach and his chest vibrates with a chuckle. I wind myself out of his hold because we’re dangerously close to crossing a line I’m not sure either one of us thinks we should. Our gazes lock once there’s room between us, the glow of the light above the bench shining down on his face. A face that’s older and world-wearier than I last saw it in my youth, but no less handsome.

“Will you go on a date with me?” he asks before I get out the words that we’re looking for trouble. His hand moves up and cradles my cheek.

I lean into his touch. “I—”

“I know what you’re afraid of. The same thing you were in high school—that this town will cast you as the bad guy. The woman who went from cousin to cousin. But I don’t care. I let this opportunity slip away from me once and I won’t do it again. To hell with this town and their gossip and judgments.”

“Easy for you to say.” I slide out of his hold and stand, tossing my coffee into the trash receptacle on the other side of the path.

“It won’t be easy for either of us. I have a dead wife I loved. I grieved for

her in plain sight. If we start things, I'm not naïve enough not to know what people will think."

"This town loves you."

"They'd question whether I ever truly loved Laurie. I know it, and it scares me that my kids might hear that kinda bullshit because I did truly love Laurie with every fiber of my being. I don't necessarily believe in soul mates or being fated to one person, but I do believe in listening to my gut. And my gut tells me there's still something between us worth exploring. It fucking sucks that my wife died and your husband ended up being a cheating asshole. If Laurie hadn't passed, your return would be nothing more than a friend coming back into my life. But that's not the situation. The fact is that I'm a single man and you're a single woman." He breaks the distance and both his hands cradle my cheeks, turning my face upward to look into his eyes. "I like you and I want to explore whatever this is with you. Let's start with a date. Just a date."

His hazel eyes are so earnest and endearing, there's no chance of me not agreeing.

"Yes," I whisper.

His smile could light up the Las Vegas Strip with its wattage. "Good. I'll pick you up Saturday at six."

"Okay."

We walk around the bay and back toward downtown.

"I have some stipulations about the date."

"You do, do you," I say with a smile.

"No talking about spouses. This is just for us to get reacquainted with one another."

A night where the name Jeff doesn't leave my lips. "Sounds good to me. What else?"

"No sleeping together. I'm not easy and don't want you to get the wrong idea."

I laugh and lean into him. "Well, jeez, I was planning to drop under the table and give you a blow job. I guess that's not happening now."

He holds up his hands. "I strike my last comment from the record. Maybe we can negotiate different terms."

"No way, you already laid down the law, Hank Greene. I wouldn't want to compromise your morals."

He chuckles and stops me right before we near The Grind. He presses my

back to a brick wall, and I can't help but glance around to see if anyone else sees us.

"One more rule." He places his finger to my lips. "Leave it all at home. Just have a night for Marla McAlister-Greene, okay?"

It's a tall order, but I hope I can pull it off. "All right."

"You're not the best negotiator. Maybe stay away from that field of employment." He backs away and opens the door of The Grind.

I smile at Hank and walk through the door to find a member of the gossip brigade eyeing us as Zoe prepares his coffee. His eyes zero in between us, presumably to see if we're holding hands.

"They're still around, huh?"

Hank catches his eye. "Hey, Earl."

The guy nods his hello.

Hank leans in close to me. "Alive and kicking. They're on to us, just so you know. This will be reported to the others and a full investigation might be launched."

I laugh as Hank reaches over the counter to retrieve my bag, then he secures it over my shoulder. "I forgot what a gentleman you were."


"I forgot how great it feels to have someone to be a gentleman with."

Warmth fills my veins, and as though I have the power to see the future, a feeling comes over me that I've never felt before, not even with Jeff. As though I'm right where I should be. As though I was meant to be in this moment at this time in my life. A serenity calms my anxiety for the first time since I've been back.

He puts his arm out as an offering. "Now let me see you home."

I slide my arm through. "Well, thank you, sir."

We leave The Grind, and as the snow spins through the air, falling to the ground, I find myself falling too.



Chapter Eight

"Oh, you."
-Nikki Greene

Hank

"YOU CAN'T GO OUT with her," Cade says. "She's your cousin."

I button up my shirt. "No, she married my cousin. And they're divorced, so she's not related to us anymore."

"Dad! Are you trying to make us outcasts?" Cade stands in the doorway, watching me. He didn't play last night as quarterback. Instead the coach tried him out as tight end.

"You're not going to be outcasts. You've all lived here your entire lives."

"The guys are gonna razz me about kissing cousins or some crap like that. Hell, Xavier is already getting it because he hangs out with Mandi now. People are saying they'll have babies with three heads."

"Are you telling me Xavier wants to date Mandi?" I grab my wallet and keys.

"No. Gross. Are you listening to me?" Cade puts his arms on either side of my bedroom door as though he's going to stop me. "It's bad enough

people are all high-fiving Jed now and he's got all the girls' attention at school. This is only gonna make it worse for me."

"You'll play the next game. Stop worrying." I wait for him to get out of my way.

"Dad, you can't leave." Chevelle winds through her brother's legs and secures herself to my legs, holding tight.

"Cade is going to watch you tonight. He said you get your game of choice." I look at Cade with pleading eyes.

He sighs and nods. Mostly because Chevelle loves to play card games and she's kind of a card shark who never gets enough. God help me if she ever discovers poker and plays for real money.

"Really?" She looks at Cade.

He sighs. "Adam was looking for you," he lies and we both know it.

"What does he want?" she asks.

"He said he can beat you at rummy. Go school him." Cade steps out of the way.

Chevelle runs out, me following before Cade can cage me in again.

"Dad, please, think about how this is going to affect me." He follows me down the stairs.

I grab my jacket from the front hallway closet. "Believe me, no one will even know we went on a date. I'm taking her to Anchorage."

That relaxes his shoulders a bit.

"But I'm gonna be honest with you," I say.

Adam runs down with Chevelle right behind him. "I never said that. Stop following me. Dad!"

"I like her. I asked her on a date because I want to get to know her again. So you might want to start getting used to the idea that I might have a..." I pause when the word girlfriend comes to mind. It makes us sound young and inexperienced.

"A what, Dad?" Chevelle asks.

Adam stares at me too.

"A new mom." Cade looks at his sister. "Aunt Marla is going to be your new mother."

He rushes up the stairs while Chevelle's mouth falls open. "Who will be my mom? I don't want a new mom." She kicks me in the shin and follows her brother.

"I like her. She seems nice," Adam says with a shrug and heads into the

kitchen.

I take a deep breath before leaving the house. I'll need to talk to the kids about me dating. Because although I've been alone for the five years since Laurie passed away, it's time that I get back out there, whether it's Marla or not. They need to get used to the idea that I might have someone special in my life.

"Cade, you're responsible!" A door slams and I escape the house into the quietness of my truck.

On the way to Marla's, I can't help feeling as though I'm biting off more than I can chew. Maybe Cade's right. Maybe my time to make something happen with Marla has passed. I can't resurrect the us from high school. Maybe those two vines weren't ever meant to wrap around one another and become one.

If only I could stop the gut feeling that says this is right and our time is now. It's what I trusted when I asked Laurie to marry me. I trusted that gut feeling after she died, and again when I took over my dad's business. It can't be steering me wrong now.

Pulling into Marla's driveway, I find Posey sitting on the stairs up to their front door. I park and climb out of the truck. "Hey, Posey."

She pats the spot next to her, so I sit, holding back my smile. "Mom says you two are going to dinner?"

I nod. "Yeah, we are."

"Without any kids." Her small eyebrows rise up into her hairline.

"Sometimes adults need adult time."

"Uh-huh. My daddy used to take my mom on date nights. Is that what this is?"

How come I think Jeff only did it when he did something wrong or felt guilty for sleeping with someone else? "It is."

"You like my mommy?" She turns to me and crosses her arms.

"I do."

She nods as if that pleases her. "She smiles a lot around you."

"I'm glad. I smile a lot around her too."

She narrows her eyes ever so slightly. "I think she likes you."

"Even better."

She stands and steps up one stair so she's eye level with me. Her long red hair is half pulled back with a few pieces escaping. Her finger juts out as she points at me. "You better not hurt her."

I hold up my hands. "I promise."

"My daddy hurt her."

I frown. "I know."

"Okay." She rushes up the steps and opens up the door. "Now you ring the doorbell so we can answer, and you can wait for her to make her entrance."

Before she has a chance to shut the door, I put up my finger. "How old are you again?"

"Age is just a number," she says, points at the doorbell, and closes the door quietly.

At least one of Marla's kids isn't going to give her trouble.

I ring the doorbell, and no one answers. Through the side window, I see Posey on the couch six feet away. I ring again and the blonde daughter, Nikki, answers the door.

"Can you not hear that?" she says to Posey on the couch. "Oh. You." She leaves the door open and walks away. "She's still getting ready."

"Thanks."

Nikki leaves the room, blowing on her nails, and Jed walks in through the back door, a sweaty mess.

He nods to me. "What's up?"

"You working out?"

Two more large bodies follow him. Derek and Lincoln from the football team. Guys who are usually found hanging around my place. I blow out a breath.

"Mr. Greene!" Derek says, putting up his hand for a high five.

"Derek. Lincoln." I nod at them both and give Derek the high five he's looking for.

"Jed's got a killer gym in the garage out back. Better than the school's. We were just working out." Lincoln thumbs in the direction of outside.

"Nice. Hope it will help. You boys really needed a win yesterday." I mentally reprimand myself for resorting to adolescent passive-aggressive bullshit because Jed was the quarterback at last night's game when they lost.

Although the loss wasn't completely his fault, he helped it by throwing two interceptions, one that resulted in a pick six. But I'm the grown-up here and need to act like one.

"We still have state in the bag," Jed says.

I nod, biting my tongue.

“Next week we play Lake Starlight!” Derek rubs his hands together. “I can’t wait to crush them.”

“Let’s just be happy they don’t have Liam Kelly anymore,” Lincoln says.

“Truth,” Derek says.

Jed can’t bring much to the conversation since he’s new to town. I’m about to fill him in about Liam Kelly when Marla comes into the room. She’s wearing dark pants, high boots, a short black sweater, and a coat swung over her arm. She’s gorgeous. Especially with her chestnut hair down and curled.

“Hey,” I say, standing.

The three boys stand there looking from Marla to me.

“You’re going out with Jed’s mom?” Lincoln asks with wide eyes.

Shit. I guess my date with Marla won’t be as on the down-low as I’d hoped. *Sorry, Cade.*

I ignore them and break the distance to her. “Ready?”

“Yeah.” She takes the lead, grabbing her purse from by the door. “Nikki is in charge, okay?”

Jed is still speechless. I guess Marla didn’t tell him about the date. She hugs Posey, then we’re outside with three teenage boys gawking at us through the living room window.

“I’ve never been able to get a room full of teenage boys not to say a word.” I open the truck door and she climbs in as though she’s used to pick-up trucks and not fancy sports cars that take corners on a dime.

“I didn’t tell Jed. He mentioned going out, so I thought he’d already be gone. Or out in the garage. I wanted to just enjoy this evening and save having to listen to his thoughts about it until after our date.”

I round the front of the truck and slide in beside her. My keys hover by the ignition. “You look stunning, by the way. I might have to rethink my stance of not sleeping with anyone on the first date.”

She laughs so hard, her head falls back to the headrest. “Sorry, I’ve been repeating the rules to myself all week so I don’t break any.”

I start the truck. “Let’s get out of Sunrise Bay and head somewhere we aren’t considered cousins.”

“Sounds great to me.”

On the drive, we make conversation, mostly about the weather and football. Easy topics.

I park in the lot of the cooking school. “I couldn’t stand the idea of us in a stuffy restaurant or watching a movie. This place has a cook-off. Couples

each make a meal and the owner judges.”

She giggles. “And what do we win?”

“I think a coupon to come back. It’s more about the experience.”

She nods. “Awesome. Let’s go win a coupon.”

Her hand goes for the door, but I stop her with my hand on her arm closest to me. “Hold on.”

I climb out of my truck and head to her side, where I open the passenger door and offer my hand. The softness of her palm spurs me to think of what it would feel like to have it wrapped around another part of my body. I feel like a thirteen-year-old again, not a man in his early forties. Jesus.

We walk into the cooking school hand in hand, and we’re the youngest couple by probably twenty years.

“I think we’ve got some ringers here,” I whisper.

“Might as well forget the coupon.” She glances at her watch. “Isn’t it past their bedtime?”

We share a laugh that disrupts the other couples, and all their eyes land on us. Marla slides to my side, almost hiding behind me.

“Hank and Marla, right?” Kat, the woman in charge, asks. I talked to her on the phone about getting a spot for tonight. It’s been a while since I’ve done anything like this.

“That’s us,” I say. As weird as it might be, I love referring to Marla and myself as us.

“Great, let’s get some aprons on you both and get started. The menu is at your station.” She hands us two aprons.

I tie Marla’s in the back, and she ties mine. We wash our hands and listen to Kat go through the directions. When she finishes, I’m put in charge of cutting vegetables.

“Do you cook a lot?” I ask Marla as she puts together a marinade.

“I cooked, but I’m not a cook. I’d always try these elaborate recipes”—she whisks away—“and we’d end up throwing most of it out.”

“When L—”

She points at me.

I laugh because I almost mentioned Laurie’s name. “I live and die by the Crock-Pot.”

“I never was prepared enough. I’m a ‘go to the grocery store an hour before I have to cook’ kind of person.”

“Mom brings things over sometimes, but she’s got this new friend now,

so I don't see her as much as I used to."

She puts the meat in the marinade, washes her hands, then puts a plastic wrap over the dish and places it in the fridge. "How is your mom?"

"She's fine, and if you run into her, I'm sure she'll be bragging about me. I've already gotten the third degree from her about your return."

"What can I say? Mothers love me. Well, that's not completely true."

"J—" I laugh as I almost mess up again by saying her ex-husband's name.

"I'm thinking we should've made up some penalties if you mess up." She leans forward, taunting me.

If she was mine right now, I'd kiss her because she's adorable when she's playful.

"What would the penalty have been?"

"Hmm..."

She's thinking about it, but Kat interrupts us before Marla can answer. She gives us directions on the next step.

"I'm not sure why I didn't think of this before, but we might just win this thing with my salad dressing recipe." Marla heads to the food area to grab lettuce for a salad.

I continue chopping and wait for her to explain when she returns. I haven't had this much fun since... well, I need to keep my own promise. As hard as it is, if I really want to move on, I need to push Laurie out of my mind, at least for tonight.



Chapter Nine

"I'm resorting to horny
seventeen-year-old tactics."

—Hank Greene

Marla

HOW DID I not think about this when Hank mentioned the cooking school? I grab vinegar, oil, and all the spices and herbs I'll need.

When I return, Hank is chopping the lettuce. "Tell me about this salad dressing that will secure our victory."

I glance around and pretend as though someone might be able to hear us and steal my recipe. "About two years ago, I went on this diet, and all the low-calorie salad dressings were awful. So I did some research and started making my own. The diet wore off, as they always do."

"They always do," Hank says with a chuckle.

"But I continued to use them because at least they cut calories still and they tasted really good."

He places the lettuce into a bowl. "I can't wait to taste it."

With that declaration, nerves consume me. Jeff liked my salad dressings and that's saying something, but my mother-in-law always said they tasted homemade. I wanted to pull my hair out and say, "Because they are!" I mix

the ingredients together and set the bowl in the fridge because I need it to chill as long as possible for the flavors to come out. At least the herbs are fresh, which will help the flavor come out faster.

Hank and I work side by side. He tells me about his dad and taking over the contracting business. I try to steer clear of talking about the kids because that leads to talking about Jeff. I can't help but feel boring because unless he wants to know how to make homemade Play-Doh, I don't have much else.

"Do you feel like Sunrise Bay has changed at all?" he asks.

"A little bit. I mean, it's taken on a very different look. More modern."

He nods. "You should come to the town meeting next week. They're talking about tearing down the old fishing wharf because Art Billings died last year. Before he died, the place was getting pretty run down, but no one has maintained it since he passed. My son's friend's dad wants to buy it and build it into a tourist attraction with boats that go out on the water. Then the fishing boats could use it too."

"Art Billings died?" He was a good man. He had no family to pass his company down to and I'd always hoped he'd find someone he trusted enough to sell it to, but I guess he didn't.

"Yeah, his health had been declining for years. But the whole town is torn on the issue. Cameron—that's my son's friend—his dad is really pushing hard though. I think we can all agree that an increase in tourism comes with both the good and the bad."

"That's true. You think of the money it can generate for the town's businesses, but I'm sure our small-town feel will suffer at the same time."

"That's why you should vote. You are a resident again."

"Technically, I'm not. I'm living with my parents."

"Did you change your license to an Alaskan one?"

"Yes."

"Then you are. Come on. We'll go together. Really get this town talking." He winks.

"I'll go, but maybe we shouldn't walk in together. We could pretend both of us being there is a coincidence."

He smirks and shakes his head, placing the meat on the small griddle we were given. I can't tell if he's happy or disappointed. "Deal."

Kat tells us all that we have fifteen minutes until we have to present our meal. I can't believe how fast time flew by. I run to the fridge and grab our salad and dressing. Hank prepares the vegetables and the meat while I do the

salad, waiting until only a minute until the bell goes off before I put the dressing on, so it doesn't make the lettuce soggy.

The buzzer goes off, and Hank grabs me and wraps me up in a hug.

"Great job, partner," he says in my ear.

"Thanks." I'm taken aback by his show of affection, but the longer I remain in his arms, the more I realize that I feel safe. Being this close to him makes me happy.

The entire time we were preparing the meal, I kept wishing I could kiss him. I wonder how he kisses, if he'll be slow or urgent. Will the tension release and we'll claw at one another until we're satisfied, or will we be slow and savor each other?

After we separate, Kat comes by and tastes our food. She takes a bite of the salad and points. "Love this dressing."

I smile wide at her. "Thanks."

"You went out on your own, huh?"

"I did."

Hank sidles up next to me, his hand resting on my hip as though we're a real couple. One who will be going home and sharing a bed tonight.

"And my guess is this strong guy cooked the steak?"

"I did," Hank says, and his hand squeezes my side.

I find myself sinking into his solid weight. The physical nature of his job has made sure those muscles he used to have under his T-shirts in high school are still there.

"Nice. You two did great." Kat sounds surprised, as though she thought we were failures from the minute we walked in.

As she goes to the next table, Hank takes a fork and stabs the salad. He chews and swallows, eyes widening. "Damn, that's good, and I'm not a salad guy."

"Not a lot of Alaskans are."

He mocks offense. "Don't stereotype your new home."

"I'm just saying." I shrug with a smile. Jeez, I can't seem to stop smiling around him.

He points at the salad with his fork before stabbing another forkful. "This is what you should be doing."

"What?"

"Make salad dressings and sell them."

I laugh. "You're insane."

He continues to eat the salad, and I pick up a fork to eat it as well. It is good, but how would I ever start anything like that? There have got to be so many rules and regulations with food.

“I see your mind whirling at the possibilities,” he says softly. Then he takes the bowl of lettuce with the tongs and stops at the first table beside us. “Try this and tell us your opinion.”

They look at him skeptically, but they taste it and smile and nod as though they’re in agreement.

Hank goes around the room, and my cheeks heat the more praise I get. It wasn’t even chilled long enough.

He returns with an empty bowl. “Now I’m going to need you to whip up a batch for my own private use. The doctor said I need more greens.” He pats his flat stomach.

A weird rush comes over me, and it takes me a minute to realize what it is. No one except maybe my parents have ever believed in me like this. I step up to him and rise on my tiptoes, my lips pressing to his.

At first he freezes and doesn’t move. I shift to fall back on my heels, but his arm swings around my waist and he keeps me plastered to his body. His tongue slides in and I melt into his hold when it glides against mine. Forgetting where we are, I moan into his mouth and he groans, his hand falling to the back of my head.

Clapping commences around us. I tear my lips from his, turning my head to look away from everyone and pressing my cheek to Hank’s chest.

“Sorry, folks, we’re new to this dating thing.” Hank puts up one hand.

Someone in the room refers to young love. I giggle because we almost have adult children.

“Never let the romance die,” one man says.

“Gotta keep that sexual energy alive and kicking,” a woman says.

As more comments roll around, I grip Hank to shield me from my embarrassment. He doesn’t seem to mind, wrapping his arms around me. I forgot how nice it felt to be part of a couple.

The next Friday, I’m in the bleachers with a blanket over my lap and Posey at my side. Mandi and Nikki claim their blood hasn’t thickened enough yet, and

since it's only growing colder, they opted to stay home. We're playing Lake Starlight High School, who I guess Sunrise Bay beat last year at state. It's a big deal and is all Jed talked about this week.

"Go, Jed!" Posey screams, although there's no way he heard her over the cheerleaders on the track.

"Hank!" someone in the crowd says.

My gaze can't help but seek him out. He's at the fence, talking to whoever must have called to him. His youngest, Chevelle, is at his side. Adam and Xavier are throwing a football back and forth behind him.

Other than us meeting again at The Grind on Wednesday, I haven't seen him. But he did text me and ask if I wanted to do pizza tonight again after the game. Another night with just the two of us would be nice but it's not to be. With my parents not being here, I have no babysitter.

Hank shakes the guy's hand and looks up in the stands. I try to act as though I don't care, a game I would have played in high school. Good thing Posey wasn't my wing-woman back then.

"Hank! Hank!" Posey raises her hand.

He smiles and walks to the set of stairs closest to us. My stomach feels as though there's a little girl jumping on a trampoline in there. Every time he gets stopped by someone on his way to us, I want to scream.

After what feels like a lifetime, he's at the edge of our bleacher. "May I?"

Posey slides over and I slide too, leaving enough room for him and Chevelle. Chevelle pulls coloring pages and markers out of her backpack.

She looks past me and her dad at Posey. "Do you want to color?"

"Sure." Posey throws the blanket off her lap, and the two girls go farther down the bleacher to spread out more.

"How was your week?" Hank asks, his knuckles running along the side of my thigh where no one will see.

"It was okay. My kids are officially done with salad and dressings."

Ever since we went to the cooking showdown, I've been trying to master the recipes, replicate them, and figure out a way to do something more with them.

"Bring them to my place. Though my boys are kind of meat-and-potato guys. Chevelle loves salad though."

I smile at him. "I'll bring some over this week."

"Great." Hank winks.

There goes my stomach again. "Did you want some blanket?"

“Hey now, I’m a man. I don’t need a blanket.” He chuckles but takes the edge and slides it over his lap.

A huge roar erupts in the crowd, but I missed the play.

Hank leans toward me. “There are more pluses to having a blanket over you other than warmth.” His large hand covers my thigh under the thick material.

I swear I might pass out from the exhilaration of having his hand on me. Has it really been so long since I’ve felt sexual arousal that a hand on my thigh threatens to send me over the edge? I lick my lips and find him staring at them.

One of Chevelle’s friends comes over and asks if she wants to go play with the other kids down where Adam and Xavier are.

“Sure.” Chevelle stands.

Posey stares at her coloring page, looking sad.

Chevelle stops after a couple of stairs. “Aren’t you coming?”

Posey’s face lights up and she looks at me for permission.

“Just stay with Chevelle, okay?”

“Okay.” Posey scrambles to her feet, almost tripping, and leaves side by side with Chevelle and her friend.

“That was nice,” I say.

He squeezes my thigh. “Want to go grab some hot chocolate?”

“Aren’t we supposed to watch our kids?”

His hand falls in mine and he tugs. “Come on. How often are all of our kids distracted?”

He’s so right. We don’t hold hands as we walk down the bleacher stairs, but his knuckles brush mine more than once. There’s something to be said about trying to remain a secret.

He buys me a hot chocolate then nods toward the rear of the bleachers. “I know a short cut,” he says with a devilish smile.

“You do, huh?” I follow him.

I’m not surprised there’s no shortcut behind the equipment shed, but there’s a secret little place no one can see. He takes my hot chocolate and puts it on the ground beside his.

“You think just because you got me behind a shed I’m going to make out with you?” I feign indignation.

He moves in front of me and backs me up until my back hits the woodshed, his fingers weaving through my hair. “I’m resorting to horny

seventeen-year-old tactics because there is no way I was going to go that entire game without kissing you.”

“I don’t remember being asked.”

His lips stop right before touching mine. “Make my year and allow me to kiss you, Marla?”

I nod, and he tentatively places his lips to mine. The minute his tongue glides along the seam, it’s game over. I wrap my legs around his waist, and he presses me back firmer. He feels so good. My body alive and demanding more. He nips at my bottom lip and I pant as his mouth lowers, his thumb running down the front of my throat.

“Fuck, this is trouble.” His voice is gravelly, and my core clenches.

“I know.” I pant for a breath because my body went into inferno territory from one kiss.

Two kids holding hands walk around the shed and startle when they see us. We break apart and they scurry off.

“I guess this is a popular place,” I say.

He kisses me one more time without tongue. “Go out with me again?”

Did he really think it was a question I would say no to?

“Only if you promise to kiss me like that again.”

His deep chuckle promises to send me to the edge of my sanity with need. I can’t wait.



Chapter Ten

"I've never liked the sound
of my name more."

-Marla Greene

Marla

WE PULL up to Glacier Point Resort in Lake Starlight and my stomach grows giddy over having an entire night alone with Hank. Part of me feels as though our relationship is skyrocketing into space with the speed of a space shuttle, and another part of me feels as though we've been together forever.

For the past month, we've met at The Grind on Monday nights. We're not affectionate in public, and since he owns the place, it's not uncommon to find him there. I think that helps with the gossip. Hank comes to dinner at our house on Tuesdays, though Jed always says he has to work out. I go to his house with Posey and Mandi on Thursdays, where Cade hardly looks me in the eye. Hank surprised me after the last football game, telling me his mom would watch all the kids at her house for the night. Jed and Cade opted to stay on their own at their respective houses though. I've yet to talk to Hank about my concerns for those two.

A valet opens the passenger door of the truck, and I step out and wait for Hank to join me. We walk through the rotating doors and find the lobby

packed with people.

“I’m going to check-in.” Hank kisses my cheek and walks over to the reception area.

I take in my surroundings. The chandeliers, the bustle of life with laughter and smiles and cheer. Everyone looks as though they’re having the time of their lives. I kind of feel that way too. I let my vision linger on Hank, who’s looking right at me. We share a smile. It’s been so long since I remember feeling so hopeful about my future.

After Jeff left, I imagined my life would be put on hold until the kids all grew up. What man would want a woman raising four children? But with Hank, I can’t help but think... maybe. Marrying a man like Hank would be so different from my first marriage. Better for sure.

“Ready?” he asks, coming back to me. His hand slides into mine. “They’re bringing our luggage to our room.”

“Great.”

We take the elevators up to the fourth floor and walk down the empty hallway to our room. I think we’re both unsure how this will go. Other than kissing and some feeling-over-the-clothes make-out sessions, we haven’t done much about the sexual part of our relationship.

He opens the door and I step into a lavish room with a perfect view of the mountains and a lake so clear I could probably see straight down to the bottom. I sense him drawing closer to me before his arms wrap around my waist and he tugs me back to his chest. “There’s no pressure.”

I circle in his arms to face him. “I want to. I want this.”

He bends his chin down and kisses me. “Me too.”

“But...”

He chuckles. “We’re both rusty.” He kisses me again.

A knock on the door interrupts us. Hank welcomes the bellboy in, tips him, then shuts and locks the door behind him. I sit on the edge of the bed with my palms on either side of my legs.

He stares at me until I look at him. “You need to relax.”

“It’s been a while. Like even before I divorced.”

We’ve never really talked about whether Hank has slept with anyone since Laurie passed away, and I don’t want to ask outright. Rusty could mean two months by some people’s perspective.

“Do you want me to do a striptease?” His fingers go to the buttons on his shirt, and he wiggles his hips from side to side as he unbuttons it. He takes it

off, leaving him in a T-shirt and jeans.

I laugh, but he continues sauntering my way, teasing me as he raises the hem of his T-shirt and lowers it back down. His hands slide between my inner thighs and he steps between my parted legs.

“If it makes you feel better, you’re my first after Laurie.”

My heart trips over a few beats. “Really?”

He shrugs. “I never liked anyone enough to put myself in a sticky situation. You do know the only way not to get pregnant is abstinence.” He uses a teacher tone.

I giggle. “Are you suggesting you’re okay if I get pregnant?”

“I like you enough not to care about any repercussions. I just want in your pants.”

“Can you be serious for a minute?”

He leans into me until my back hits the mattress and he’s hovering over me. “Can I kiss you?”

I swat his chest. “You know you don’t have to ask me that.”

His lips meet mine and I slide my arms around his neck. The weight of his body falls over mine and we both slide to get higher up on the bed. His thigh nudges my legs apart and he grinds into my core. I move my arms to reach under his T-shirt, but he grabs it by the back and tugs it over his neck, leaving his chest exposed for my viewing pleasure.

Forget milk, contractor work does a body good. Damn, he’s all rippled and smooth and flat.

“I love your body,” he says, his hand sliding up my sweater.

Nudging him off me, I get up on my knees. He lies down on his back, his fingers unbuttoning my jeans. He lowers my zipper, getting a glimpse of my panties. It’s hard to find a place to have a wax job without everyone knowing it, so I drove all the way to Anchorage in preparation for tonight. I pull off my sweater, leaving me in my white cami, sans bra.

“Stay right there, I’m getting some water to put out this fire.” He pretends to shift to get off the bed, but rises to his knees and kisses me, his hands molding to my breasts, tugging the fabric down so my breasts are exposed.

When he leans back to appraise his work, his eyes smolder and all that worrying I’ve been doing about this moment dissipates. This man wants me and feeling wanton is the biggest aphrodisiac there is.

He takes my legs out from under me and my back falls to the mattress only seconds before his mouth covers my nipple and sucks it. My fingers

wind through the strands of his dark blond hair while my eyes fight to stay open despite the sensations rushing through my body.

I'm not sure I remember Jeff ever cherishing my body like Hank is. His mouth never stays in one place too long, as though he's worried he'll leave a part of my body untouched. I welcome the exploration because I fully intend on exploring his body over the next twelve hours too.

Somewhere between the kisses and touching and moaning, we shed each other's clothes. I watch Hank get off the bed, heading to his overnight bag, and I'd like some of whatever he's doing. His body is amazing for being in his forties, and his long thick length pointing north makes me tingle with just the thought of him inside me.

"What?" he asks, standing at the foot of the bed, rolling on a condom. "I figured better safe than sorry."

I rise up on my elbows. "I have an IUD."

"So off?"

"Are you clean?" I can't stop the smile spreading across my face. I'm barely able to swallow my laugh. We both know we're clean. The first thing I did after Jeff told he'd been cheating was get tested. Not like we had been sleeping together anyway.

He tears it off and tosses it into the trash can. "Bareback it is."

I open my legs wider, welcoming his hips. The tip of his dick pushes against my opening.

"You're sure?" he asks.

I nod. "Kiss me."

He does, and his tongue licks the seam of my lips as his hard length slowly enters me. At first we're all sensual movements, gliding, sliding like trained ballet dancers. But after he's fully inside me, he stills and I lock my legs around his waist. After a few seconds, he moves, but his head dips to take my nipple into his mouth and his hands grab my ass.

He thrusts instead of gliding into me. It's incredible how fast he gets me right to the brink of my orgasm. I'm clenching my walls around him so hard to keep from coming that Hank is growling. I've never been so happy I practiced Kegel exercises after my babies.

Soon though, I lose all control and my hands can't get enough of him. Words of praise drip from my mouth about how good he is, how I've never been this turned on, how badly I want to come. His only answer is to tell me how much he loves fucking me and how he's dreamed of this moment since I

arrived back in town. Sweat drips between our bodies and Hank looks down at me with so much emotion in his eyes, my orgasm waves the white flag. I come so hard, every muscle in my body tenses so that I'm gripping him like a fist.

A devilish smirk crosses Hank's face and he relentlessly pumps into me before a few off-tempo thrusts and a loud groan. He falls on me, kissing me before rolling over and lying next to me. Shit, I've been missing that in my life for a long, long time.

"I'll be right back," he says, still panting.

He comes back with a washcloth, and after we're both cleaned up, he opens the sheets and comforter for me to slip under.

"I think we deserve an afternoon nap," he says.

I nuzzle into his chest, his fingers running along my back, and that same sensation wraps around me. That I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be.

Three hours later, I wake up to the door clicking shut and I bolt up, finding the bed empty. I look around.

Hank is wheeling in a room service tray. "Did you think I left you?" He chuckles. "I'm waiting for the encore."

Did I? No. I think I was just in such a deep sleep, I forgot where I was. I turn toward the clock, happy to see I didn't sleep away too much of our date.

"Hungry?" he asks without me answering the previous question. He's got on a pair of flannel pants and no shirt.

I bite my bottom lip at how delectable he looks. But my body must sense sustenance nearby because my stomach rumbles. "What did you get?"

"A little bit of everything," he says, taking off the silver lids. There's a hamburger, pasta, fries, fish, quesadillas.

"Looks yummy." I get out of the bed to grab some clothes, but before I get to my suitcase, he grabs me and kisses my neck, his erection nudging against my ass.

"I want you again," he mumbles into my skin.

I circle around and fall to my knees, then I pull down the waistband of his pants, freeing his cock. I grip the base and run my tongue along the length, my eyes on his the entire time.

His hand falls to the back of my head and his eyes grow more heated as I open my mouth over the tip and swallow him down. “Fuck, Marla.”
I’ve never liked the sound of my name more.



Chapter Eleven

"That's a relationship I'd like to be in."
~Hank Greene

Hank

IT'S late and the view out the window is only darkness. We sit on the couch in the hotel room with a tray of desserts in front of us. Marla picks up a piece of cheesecake, digs a fork in, and offers it to me. I open my mouth and swallow. She's so sexy and beautiful. I hate that a small amount of guilt niggles at my happiness because of Laurie.

"What are you thinking about?" She leans forward and presses her lips to mine. "You look upset."

"Nothing."

She tilts her head and raises her eyebrows.

I remain silent, not wanting to ruin this night by talking about my dead wife.

She places the cheesecake down on the table. "You can talk to me about her, you know."

From her expression, I'm sure she means it. "I'm so happy to be here with you."

She wiggles her feet under my ass and leans her back on the other side of the couch. “Me too. But?”

“A part of me feels like I’m doing something wrong.”

She doesn’t say anything, and her face shows no reaction either. I can’t tell if I’ve completely insulted this woman I care about after sleeping with her for the first time or not.

“She died so suddenly, and the circumstances were tragic.”

I shake my head. “We’re not talking about this.”

She gets up on her knees and scoots closer to me, taking my hands. “One thing I think went wrong with Jeff and me was that we were never really good friends.” She looks at the ceiling then back at me. “We never talked. Sure, we discussed the kids or their schedules or his work, but we didn’t really confide about much else with each other.”

I squeeze her hands.

“It’s what scares me about Jed. Jeff couldn’t be vulnerable with me—he saw it as a sign of weakness. So when things went wrong with his business, he’d drown it in alcohol or, as I found out later, women. He never trusted me enough to come to me.”

“Maybe he didn’t want to burden you with it.”

She shakes her head. “That wasn’t it. I couldn’t make him feel better because he didn’t trust me to do it. We never had that mutual respect for one another. We weren’t a team. Look at Jed. Do you think I’d raise my kids to act that way? And I know deep down that sweet little boy I used to know is in there. I practically raised Posey by myself because Jeff was at work so much by then.”

I chuckle. That girl is well beyond her years.

“I’m not sure what’s going to happen with us, but I don’t want another relationship like that,” she says. “Our pasts are our pasts. Do I feel a little threatened by Laurie? In all honesty, I do. But that’s my problem and I’ll discuss it with you if I ever feel like it might overwhelm me or affect what we have. But we’re new, and if I’m your first relationship after Laurie, it’s going to churn up some feelings. And I want to be the one to hold your hand while you sort through them.”

I shake my head at her.

“What?”

I lean forward and wrap my hand around the back of her neck, pulling her into me for a kiss. “Just you. You’re amazing.”

She shakes her head as though she doesn't believe me. "Would you tell me what happened? Or is it too painful?" She leans back, takes my foot between her hands, and massages.

My chest constricts. I haven't had to do this in a long time. Everyone in our lives is more than aware of the tragedy that took my wife. "It was on the small lake about a quarter mile away from the house. Chevelle was five. She was going through this phase where she would follow Cade or the other boys everywhere. She was sure they were always doing fun things she was told she was too young to do. The boys had been out on the lake a week earlier, messing around. But the weather had gotten warmer."

I take a moment and start back up. "I don't know all the specifics because I had all the boys with me at football. I know that Chevelle had fallen asleep on the couch before the boys and I left, so I suspect she must've woken and went looking for them, not realizing they weren't home. I pulled up to the house just as Laurie was running toward the lake, screaming for Chevelle. I threw the truck into park and ran after her. By the time I got there, Laurie was standing on the ice in the center of the lake, Chevelle beside her. We looked at one another with a sigh of relief as she told Chevelle to slowly walk toward me."

She runs her hand up to my calf, and I fight the tears threatening to break free.

"It was this shared look like, 'man, we almost lost her.' I remember Laurie was in her pajamas, her hair in a ponytail. A smile was just about to form on her lips as Chevelle grew closer to me. Then it was like a movie. Laurie stepped forward and this loud crack echoed across the lake. The ice splintered like a cobweb. Her eyes widened and terror flashed in them right before the ice broke and she sank down."

I almost feel the chill of the air that day. The screams that I recognized as my own later on. The boys coming to the edge of the lake. Me yelling at them to take Chevelle and to call for help.

"Our neighbors heard the screams and came running. I jumped in the water, but it was so dark. I couldn't see anything, and the chunks of ice were too big."

Marla runs her smooth palms slowly over my skin as though she's soothing me. And it does help. A little.

"Eventually I felt my hand brush against something, and it was her. I got her out. At first I thought the same thing I had earlier—that we'd dodged a

bullet. You know? I got us to the side of the lake and our neighbor returned with blankets. I remember her dropping them and saying she'd keep the kids busy. She must've seen what I didn't—Laurie's blue lips and still body. I wrapped her up while her husband tried to wrap blankets around me, but I think my adrenaline had kicked in. I started CPR. An ambulance came and took both of us, but she'd been trapped under the ice too long. She drowned."

I release a breath, finding Marla with a familiar expression on her face. The same one of empathy or sympathy I got for years afterward. I haven't actually relived that story in a while. For the first couple years after she passed, I would run through what happened every day. Try to figure out if there was some way I could've saved her, something I should've done differently.

"I'm sorry."

I nod, lips pressed together. "Thanks."

"I know my words don't mean anything. I can't imagine what it was like for you all."

"Chevelle was so young. She still has nightmares occasionally, although they've gotten far less now. I worry as she gets older about the guilt she might feel, but she was five. She didn't know any better. So many times I wondered, why wasn't it me? Laurie could handle the kids so much better."

"From what I've seen, you've done a great job."

"Thanks." I open my arms and she hugs me.

Her lips skate across my jaw. "Thank you for telling me."

I nod and kiss the top of her head. "I'm glad you forced it out of me."

She playfully hits me and we both chuckle, though it sounds a little sadder than normal.

A few minutes later, when we're still holding each other, I say, "Marla?"

She looks at me. "Yeah?"

"I like what you said. About being friends and trusting one another. Having a true partner. That's a relationship I'd like to be in."

She smiles and kisses my jaw, laying her head back on my chest.

I loved Laurie. We had a good solid marriage. When someone dies, you tend to remember only the good times and the good qualities of that person. Sure, I remember us fighting, but we had five kids. That's a given. But we had a good life together until it was ripped away.

Spending this time with Marla makes me remember how much I love being someone's other half. I want to share that with someone again. But it's

way too soon for me to tell that to Marla.



Chapter Twelve

"I'm all in."

~Marla Greene

Marla

A WEEK after our night at Glacier Point, we're walking hand in hand across the Sunrise Bay high school football field. After the night we shared together, it was like the flick of a light switch and we turned from budding relationship into a couple.

Although people have seen us around together, we mostly keep to one another's houses for the kids. The snow is falling, and I wanted to go somewhere we could see the entire sky. Of course, Hank suggested the football field with some joke about having sex on the fifty-yard line. I might've been game if I didn't fear my ass getting stuck to the icy field.

"Want to go make out under the bleachers?" he asks, eyebrows waggling.

"Can we talk?" I ask nervously.

"Sure." He stops and tugs my hand, leading me over to the bleachers.

We sit next to one another, our thighs touching.

God, this going to sound like I'm giving him some ultimatum, but I don't have a lot of choice. Our situation is complicated. "I don't really know how

to bring this up—”

He puts his hand over mine on my thigh. “Just to be clear, if you’re breaking up with me right now, I’m not cool being friends.”

I laugh. Does he really have no idea I’m falling in love with him? “No. That’s not it. I don’t have the luxury of time at my age and circumstance, otherwise I probably wouldn’t even be having this conversation with you right now. Not that I’m asking for some major commitment. But the kids all go to the same school and it’s hard enough for them already, having had to start new. Especially since Jed is in his senior year. Kids can be cruel, and I just can’t...” I stop. What am I doing? I sound as though I’m asking him for a marriage proposal after only dating for a couple of months.

“Go on,” he says.

“Okay, I’m going to own this and if you don’t feel the same, so be it, but I’m done taking the back seat when it comes to my life and what I want.”

A wicked smile crosses his lips. “Do you want to have sex in the concession stand? I have a spare key.” He starts to rise off the bleachers.

“Hank!” I shout, although the smile on my face says I get the joke.

“Sorry. Go ahead.” He eases back down and urges me with his hand squeezing mine.

“I like you a lot, and although it hasn’t been long, I see this working out between us, as crazy as that sounds.” My stomach pitches at the thought that he may not feel the same. “I guess I’m telling you this because I need to know where you stand. If this relationship is a way to get back at your cousin—which I don’t think it is, but I have to ask because for some reason, my head doesn’t always hear my gut. But if we do this and it crashes and burns, my kids will feel the brunt of the fall and I can’t have that and know I didn’t directly ask. That I allowed it to just play out. I can’t gamble with my kids’ lives.”

He stares out into the darkness of the field, only illuminated by the full moon above.

God, say something. Anything. Say I’m crazy.

“I don’t gamble with my kids either. There are things that scare me with you.” He pauses, and I hold my breath. “I’m terrified of this being harder than either of us imagine. Cade is beyond furious about us dating. Jed never looks too happy either. Posey made me promise when I showed up for our first date that I wouldn’t hurt you.”

Oh, my sweet girl.

“When we come out, this town is going to have a field day with the gossip.” He looks at me. “If Jeff comes and asks for you back, what will you say?”

I shake my head. “That’s over. One hundred percent. What if I don’t live up to what you had with Laurie?”

His hand moves from covering mine to cupping my chin. “Don’t ever think that. I’m not comparing what I had with Laurie to what we have, and neither should you. I guess what I’m saying is, there’s a lot on the line. More than when we were in high school. But you’ve always been in here in some way. Even when we were just friends.” He covers his heart with his free hand. “I don’t play games or give one shit about Jeff. I want this, Marla, and I think the good that can come from us being together outweighs the struggles we’re going to go through.”

“So what does that mean?” I ask.

He leans forward, his lips millimeters from mine. “I’m all in.”

“Really?” I whisper back.

“Somewhere in the middle of this, I... oh hell, I’ve fallen in love with you.”

“Me too.” I sound like a teenage girl who just scored her dream guy, but my heart sores and my body feels as though it could float away.

He crashes his lips to mine and his hand on my hip urges me up and over him so I’m straddling his hips. Our lips are frantic. His hands roam my body, falling to my ass, pushing me forward so I rock against his hard dick.

“God, I want you,” he says, breaking the kiss for his lips to travel down my jaw. My head falls back and he casts open-mouthed kisses along the center of my neck. His hands roam up under the hem of my thick sweater. “You have no idea how many times I’ve beaten off to you in that cami.”

I giggle, my hand falling down his stomach. I unbutton his pants, digging my hand down the front, past the elastic waistband of his boxers until I hold the weight of his length in my palm.

“Fuck.” His teeth nip at my neck. “Sweater off now.”

With the use of one of his hands and one of mine, we discard it, tossing it out of the way. Goose bumps break out across my skin, but Hank is enough to keep me warm. Or distracted at least.

As his breath is growling when I grip him tighter and he’s bucking into my hand, a flashlight shines into Hank’s eyes from below.

“What’s going on here?”

I turn, catching sight of a police badge on the man's chest, and scramble to get off Hank's lap.

"It's like we're back in high school." Hank laughs as I throw my sweater back on. He buttons himself back up and stands, making his way down to talk to the cop.

I'm mortified as the police officer asks the dreaded question, "What are you two doing here?"

I can't help but love the rush of excitement that comes from discovering this playful side of myself—even if it might get me in trouble.



Chapter Thirteen

"Are you trying to kill my entire social life."
—Cade Greene

Hank

SUNDAY MORNING, I decide it's a breakfast out morning for the Greene clan—mostly because I haven't gotten to the grocery store. We load up in my truck and head downtown to Two Brothers and an Egg. The local station is on the radio, talking about fishing weather and the type of fish that are biting. There's only ever local news and seventies music because the town voted and since most of our population are my parents' age or slightly younger, they went with the seventies.

The DJ, Chip, gets on the air and tells everyone about today's expected wind speeds and what bait they should use if they're headed out on the water. "And now I want to welcome a new segment I've been asked to add. It's called 'Locals Behaving Badly.'"

"What's this?" Cade turns up the volume.

So far today he hasn't given me a ton of hell, which is a nice change. Then again, he doesn't know about the cops finding me making out with Marla on the bleachers. Thank God I was able to talk us out of that one.

“An anonymous follower thought it might be fun to provide updates about any locals caught doing things they shouldn’t. I think it’ll bring some new life to this news station, and to that point, our first story is really juicy. If you have kids in the room, you might want to turn the volume down for a minute.”

Cade laughs and turns it up louder.

“Your sister and brother are in the car,” I warn him with a glare.

“Chevelle and Adam, cover your ears,” he says.

I watch through the rearview mirror as they actually listen to him. I don’t know whether to be happy or sad that they view him as an authority figure. It probably means I’ve been working too much.

“Cade, it’s just gossip,” I say.

“Shh...” His eyes are lit up with anticipation. It’s a look I haven’t seen since Jed showed up at his high school, so I glance one more time at the youngest Greenes to make sure their ears are covered.

“Everyone is aware that Marla Greene returned to town with her kids but no Jeff Greene in tow. Those of us who went to high school with her know about the brief moment senior year when we thought she was destined to be with another Greene from Sunrise Bay.”

My hand goes for the dial, but Cade laughs, swiping my hand away. Since I’m stuck in a turn, it’s either let it play out or side swipe a car.

“Well, get a load of this... last night, Marla and Hank were caught trying to relive some old memories on the high school football field. Things got hot and heavy and they were found making out in the bleachers. Who knows where things would’ve gone if the cop hadn’t found Hank with his pants down?”

“Dad!” Fisher yells from the back seat.

I change the station, pissed off.

Cade throws himself back in the seat with so much force, Chevelle flinches. “My life is officially over.” The smile on his face turns into a scowl.

I’m officially the worst dad ever.

“I don’t get it. Why did Dad have his pants off?” Xavier asks.

“I can’t even think about it,” Fisher says, rubbing his eyes as if the visual of me with a woman will haunt him for eternity.

“Seriously? Are you trying to kill my entire social life?” Cade seethes.

I park along the curb outside Two Brothers and an Egg. “Let’s just have breakfast and drop it.”

Cade looks out the window. There's already a line forming outside the restaurant. "Hell. No."

"Watch it," I say.

"I'm not going in there so everyone can stare at us because you can't control yourself."

I run my hand down my face and turn around in the seat. "Listen." I remove Chevelle's hands from her ears. Adam removes his. "I want you all to understand that what's between Marla and I is serious, so you're going to hear things about us. Yes, we're dating but it's more than that. I'm in love with her. I understand that this is the first time any of you have seen me with a woman who isn't your mother. I know it might make you uncomfortable, but..."

Cade opens the door, slams it, and walks down the sidewalk.

I sigh.

Fisher joins him a second later. It doesn't take long for Xavier to tag along.

"Where are they going?" Chevelle asks.

"Let's just have some breakfast. Do you guys have any questions?"

Adam shrugs. "I like Marla."

I ruffle his hair. "I'm glad."

"Won't Mommy be mad?" Chevelle asks.

My heart petrifies and cracks, turning to ash.

"Mom is dead," Adam says matter-of-factly to his little sister.

I glare at Adam, and he shrugs like "What does she not understand?"

I put my hand on Chevelle's knee. "I think Mommy would want me to be happy, and spending time with Marla makes me happy."

"But..." Her bottom lip quivers.

God, this is a thousand times harder than I thought it would be.

"She's not coming back. You understand that, right?" Adam says to Chevelle.

Through the window, I spot Chip from the radio station walking by. Obviously the report we listened to was recorded earlier. I wonder how many times that thing is gonna be aired. He's busy shaking hands and laughing with some of the people in line. Laughing at my fucking expense.

"Just sit tight for a second," I tell my two youngest and grab the keys out of the ignition, stepping out of my truck.

Lucky for me, Chip is at the tail end of my truck. Hopefully what I'm

about to do won't be witnessed by my kids.

"Chip!"

He turns around with a smirk as he nods in my direction, saying goodbye to the other guy who must see my expression isn't a good one because his eyes widen.

"Hey, Romeo," Chip says.

I cock my fist back and punch him clean across the face. "That's for playing with people's lives."

His hand flies to his jaw and he scrambles to get back on his feet. Not my best moment, especially since there are now faces plastered to the windows of Two Brothers and an Egg, but I'm not gonna let him think he can talk about me and hurt my kids that way. "Hey, man, I wasn't the one who wanted it."

"And who did?" I'm usually a cool-mannered guy. Not much upsets me, but I have five kids who will have to deal with the fallout from his report. What this will do to Marla and her reputation in town only makes it worse.

"It was your mom."

"What?"

He steps back as though he's afraid I'm going to hit him again, holding up his hands. "Her and that new friend of hers. They came to me this morning with the story. Thought it might break the ice for you two so you can stop hiding. And the station's ratings are down. I'm sorry, Hank."

The anger boiling inside me dissipates to a simmer. "I'm sorry, Chip." I wince at the bruise that's already forming. "Put some ice on that."

I climb back into my truck and start the engine.

"I thought we were eating breakfast?" Adam asks.

"Change of plans. We're going to Grandma's."

"Yay!" Chevelle yells.

Before I go, I shoot off two texts. The first is to Cade.

Me: You better watch your brothers. I'm going to Grandma's if you want to meet me there otherwise I'll see you at home.

The second text is harder to find words for.

Me: You might already know this, but we've been outed to the entire town by the local radio station. You might want to talk to your kids today. Don't worry, I'm handling the source it came from to make sure it doesn't happen again.

I toss my phone into the center console and head to my parents' house, which sits just outside of the downtown, up on a mountainside with a perfect view of the bay. I park in the circular drive and slam the truck door. Adam comes to my side, Chevelle skipping ahead of us up the pathway.

Using my key, I open the front door, but I stop in my tracks when I see boxes stacked everywhere.

"Is Grandma moving?" Adam asks.

I look down at him.

Chevelle skips into one room and right back out. "It's empty."

I shake my head. What the hell is going on?



Chapter Fourteen

"Fine. Date your cousin."
-Jed Greene

Marla

HANK: You might already know this, but we've been outed to the entire town by the local radio station. You might want to talk to your kids today. Don't worry, I'm handling the source it came from to make sure it doesn't happen again.

Me: I heard it this morning. Planning on a family breakfast discussion. Hope things are okay with you.

Hank doesn't get back to me, which I hope doesn't mean things are imploding on his end. Posey sidles up next to me at the table. I've allowed the kids to sleep in today, which is good because after the wonderful Chip Cooperton decided to out me and Hank to all of our hometown, I need the

kids to hear about how serious our relationship is from me and not someone else. Especially since now everyone will be talking about it.

I kiss the top of her head. “Cereal?”

“Can you make pancakes?”

I smile at my usually too-mature eight-year-old who thankfully isn’t acting like an adult this morning. “Why don’t you help me?”

She sits up straighter. “Can I crack the eggs?”

I slide out of my chair and nod. “Yep.”

“Yay!”

I decide to make a big breakfast. Hopefully full bellies will make up for the fact I’m going to break some harsh news to them this morning.

By the time the hash browns are done, Mandi comes downstairs in what has become all she wears these days—flannel pants and sweatshirts. She leans against me, and I hug her to my side, kissing her temple.

“How was last night?” she asks.

I nod. “It was fun. Thank you for asking.”

She nods and grabs plates, setting them on the table. Nikki comes down minutes later and surprisingly doesn’t argue with her sister over the fact that she’s wearing Nikki’s sweatshirt. Hopefully that’s a good sign.

“Bacon?” Jed joins us ten minutes later and steals a piece from the paper plate.

“Can you get the milk and juice out of the fridge?” I ask.

“Sure thing.”

“I’ll get the cups,” Nikki says.

I look at Posey, who is manning the pancake station with a spatula that looks bigger than her head, and smile. In the year and a half since the divorce, we’ve found our groove. Then I frown when I realize I’m about to throw a boulder in the middle of the road for us. For a moment, I ponder just letting us have this day, but I worry they’ll hear my news from someone else.

Once we’re sitting down to eat, we go around the table and play a game of Guess Who. You tell three facts about anyone from a celebrity to a sports figure to an everyday person we all know and see who guesses the right answer. Although Posey and I sometimes play, the older kids stopped being interested around the time of the divorce. I chalked it up to them growing older and too mature. So it’s nice to enjoy the game with them again.

Jed finishes eating first, rising from the table and announcing he’s going to meet some of the guys from the football team at the movie theater.

“Wait, Jed. Can you sit back down?”

He places his dish in the sink and he must hear something in my voice because his eyebrows draw down. He slowly returns to the table, folding himself back into the kitchen chair, eyes on me the entire time.

“What’s wrong?” Nikki asks. She has every right to assume the worst. These family discussions only really happen when their lives are about to be upheaved.

“You’re scaring me. Is it about Daddy?” Posey asks.

I shake my head.

“Are we moving again?” Mandi pipes up.

I shake my head again. The words are on the tip of my tongue, but they won’t come out because I have no idea what will happen when they do. “We’re staying in Sunrise Bay. Hopefully we’ll be in our own house before Grandma and Grandpa return. Dad is fine in Arizona. I’m sure he’ll make his weekly call tonight.”

“Then what?” Jed asks.

Posey slides into the chair closest to her brother, and he puts his arm around her as though he’s going to protect her. The comforting move puts tears in my eyes because I haven’t seen that side of Jed since we moved up here.

“As you all know, I’ve been seeing Hank Greene for a bit.”

Nikki rolls her eyes. “We know, and I hope no one has seen you guys because he’s kinda related to you.”

I pat her hand. “He’s not related to me. He’s your dad’s cousin, which makes him—”

“Our cousin once removed, but not Mom’s,” Posey says.

I point at her, assuming she’s right. I don’t know why I always find figuring it out so confusing.

“Still, he’s related to us. It’s weird,” Mandi says.

All the children nod except for my sweet Posey.

I shake my head. “He’s not related to *me*.”

Own this, Marla. You are their mother and you deserve to be happy. This isn’t the end of the world. A happy mother only sets a better example for her daughters.

“Anyway, I’m not young anymore, and I’m not interested in dating around and playing the field.”

Jed releases a huge breath. “Thank God. So you’re done with this dating

thing? I mean, I don't really care if you date, but you chose the one guy in this town who has the same last name as us. It's creepy."

My head falls forward and I massage my temples.

"Jeez, Mom, I was ready to say I wanted to live with Dad," Nikki says.

My head whips in her direction. That's not even an option. No matter who I date, she's not living with him and his girlfriend. "Listen. Stop with all these comments. Hank is your dad's cousin, therefore I am not related to the man. If I had chosen to take back my maiden name after the divorce, he and I wouldn't even have the same last name. Can we please all agree on that?"

They nod, though hesitantly.

"I am only going to date Hank Greene. I love him and he loves me and we're going to explore a relationship with one another. What I'm telling you is that this is serious between us."

Jed groans.

Nikki's head falls to the table with a quiet bang.

Mandi's eyes widen.

Posey sits there beaming at me.

"I know you all have your concerns about this, but I didn't say we're getting married or anything like that. But I refuse to hide from you the fact I'm seeing someone. You're all old enough to understand why I might want some companionship in my life. It might work out or it might not, but Hank and I are grown-ups. We are the parents."

"So that's it? It's done? We don't have a say?" Jed asks, Nikki's head bobbing in agreement. I see they're going to be the hardest to win over.

"I understand that you've never seen me with a man who wasn't your father, so it will be hard for you. And I'm not suggesting you have to be happy *about* it, but I would like it if you were happy *for* me because Hank makes me happy."

"Did you two, like, really date in high school? Is this like one of those Hallmark movies where you always loved him, but you married Dad?" Nikki asks.

I almost laugh because it sounds like the rumors were already spreading about us even before the radio station report. "No. Hank and I were friends. That's all. I loved your father. When your dad and I split up I was really sad, as you probably know."

They all nod. Tears come to my eyes as I remember how I wanted to spare them from seeing how broken I was.

“I’m not sad now, but Hank...” How do I tell my kids he gives me butterflies and stomach flips like when I was seventeen and I’d catch him smiling at me in the hallway? How I can’t stop laughing and smiling when I’m around him? “Let’s just say, I’m choosing happiness. And I understand that it’s hard on you, but I’d really appreciate your support.”

Posey crawls into my lap and puts her small arms around my neck in a tight hug. “I support you.”

Nikki and Mandi reach across the table.

“We do too. I still think it’s a Hallmark movie,” Nikki says.

Jed sits there, and we all look at him. He sighs. “They’re going to bust my balls about this at school even more now that you’re official. Cade hates me. And...” He releases a deep breath. “Fine. Date your cousin.”

“He’s not her cousin!” all four of us girls scream, and we laugh together.

I grab Jed’s hand and he squeezes mine, which hopefully is a sign he might not be ecstatic, but he’ll deal with it. Everyone picks up dishes, assuming the family discussion is over.

“One more thing,” I say. “I guess the radio station in town reported that Hank and I went on the date and...” I bite my lip. I cover Posey’s ears and she squirms. “We were caught on the bleachers last night, kissing.”

“Mom!” Nikki yells.

“Way to make it easy on us.” Jed shakes his head and walks away.

I let go of Posey’s ears and she looks around. “What did I miss? Come on. I can’t be the only one who doesn’t know.”

“Mom kissed Hank and everyone in town knows,” Mandi says.

“Mandi!”

She shrugs and walks away. “Believe me, she was gonna find out.”

As the kitchen clears out, I sit at the table and sigh. I’ve got good kids. Hopefully this doesn’t mess them up too much. But I can’t shake the feeling that in the long run, seeing me pick myself back up out of the rubble and moving on with my life will be good for them.

I pick up my phone and see that Hank still hasn’t texted me back.

Me: It’s done. Jeez, who knew I could be so scared of my own kids?

No response.

Me: I'm thinking of you. Hope everything is okay.



Chapter Fifteen

"It's just a little push in the right direction."
—Ethel Greene

Hank

“MOM!” I yell into the nearly empty house, reading all the names on the boxes. Some have storage written on them, others Hank, then one says Northern Lights.

My shoulders fall. Chevelle is skipping from room to room, telling me how they’re all empty.

“Hank?” Mom comes from the kitchen and Chevelle runs up to her, hugging her. Chevelle is almost as tall as her grandma now.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

She looks at her foyer with the rounded staircase along the wall and the chandelier she’d always brag about because she found it at a flea market. “What?” She looks at me with a blank expression.

“The boxes!”

“Oh.” She pats Chevelle on her back and hugs Adam. “So tall.” She kisses his cheek. “I’m moving.”

“And you didn’t think to tell me this?”

“I was going to tell you.” She pushes Chevelle and Adam in front of her with her hand on their shoulders. “I have some cookies in the kitchen. Fresh and hot. Go.”

They both almost knock the other one to the floor trying to get there first.

After they’re out of earshot, she steps over to me. “I’m moving into Northern Lights Retirement Center. I don’t want the grandkids to think it’s because I’m old though.”

I have no words.

Since I opt not to say anything, she continues. “I’ve had so much fun with Dori, and there isn’t anything here for me. You don’t need me anymore and the kids are getting so big. This house is all just memories of how old I’ve become. The stairs hurt my knees. It’s too much house for one person. It was meant to be enjoyed by a family.”

“But why didn’t you tell me?”

She giggles. “You’ve had your hands full. Or maybe that’s Marla.”

I ignore her comment for the moment. “But Northern Lights is in Lake Starlight.”

“You act like it’s in the lower forty-eight. It’s a twenty-minute drive.” She moves into the family room, and sure enough, it’s half packed, though the furniture’s still there. “This is just too much space. It was too big of a house even when there were three of us, and now it’s just me.”

I stare at a picture of the land back when my dad bought it. He’d decided to leave Anchorage when Sunrise Bay was nothing but a fishing town. He owned the land for almost eight years, building the house bit by bit until he finished it. My mom says he was never around during her pregnancy, but it was worth it to bring me home from the hospital to this house.

“The kids still need you.”

She pats my cheek. “And I’ll be there whenever you want. I can still drive, you know. But you all have your own lives.”

I guess she’s right. The boys are older, and they don’t want anything to do with me, let alone their grandma. It’s only a few years before Adam and Chevelle are where they are now.

“Still, I could’ve helped you if you told me.”

She waves me off. “Dori knew this moving company. They’ve been so good about being patient with me deciding what to keep and pack. I’ll move a lot of stuff into a storage unit unless you want it.”

I sit on the sofa and rest my forearms on my thighs. “Mom, how are you

affording Northern Lights? It's expensive."

She sits next to me and places her hand on mine. "Your dad was always concerned with money. He worked so hard to give us the life he thought we deserved, and the day he passed that business down to you, he was so proud and happy. But I was in charge of the money, and my mom always taught me not to spend all your money when the sun is shining and there are no clouds in the sky."

"You mean save it for a rainy day?"

"No. I mean what I said. I'm not senile."

I chuckle. "Okay."

"There were years your dad didn't have enough work to fill his day, and there were others he couldn't keep up. You know how it is."

I nod, although my dad left me a pretty thriving business. Especially when he started doing work outside of Sunrise Bay. By the time I took it over, we were well in the black with four employees under our belt. Now I have six full-time and four part-time employees. Usually in the summer months, college students help me build decks, pergolas, and other outdoor projects for people to enjoy the few short months we have of great weather.

"So you have the money?"

She nods. "I have the money. You don't have to take care of me."

"And the house? Are you putting it up on the market?"

She hems and haws. "That depends on you."

"Me?" My forehead wrinkles. "I can't afford this place."

She moves my hand to her lap and covers our joined hands with her other one. This is her way of comforting me when she's going to bring up a topic I don't want to talk about. She did it when she told me about my dad's passing, and after Laurie died, I felt as if we were statues in this position.

"I know you and Laurie bought that house you're in now. It's the only one the kids know. And I don't blame you for wanting to stay there. This house does need remodeling, and most of the rooms haven't been used in years. But you're welcome to move in here. Your dad built it, so there's no mortgage."

I slide my hand out of hers and stand, walking to the back window. The pool hasn't been opened in years and is covered with leaves and dirt. The concrete surrounding it more gray than white. She's right about this place needing work, and that's probably on me because I slacked off on my responsibilities over the years. I should have helped her more.

“You’re sure about moving?” I look back at her over my shoulder.

She nods. “You’ll understand when you’re as old as me. I need to be around people my own age.” She walks over to me and we both stare out the window. “I know it needs some work, but you’re a contractor.” We laugh. “Just think about it. No need to answer right now. It’s big enough for a large family though.”

“Each kid would have their own room,” I say.

“Or a few kids could share a room. It’s not the end of the world. Plus two will be out of the house next year.”

I look at her, confused by her math. Maybe she is going senile.

“Cade and Jed are going to college, no?”

“What are you talking about? Are you confusing Jed for Fisher?”

She rolls her eyes. “I listen to the radio too.”

I point at her.

She must realize I know because she laughs and backs up, holding up her hands. “Come on. It’s just a little push in the right direction.”

“And three of my boys aren’t talking to me right now because of it.”

She waves me off. “So what? They’ll get over it.”

“Cade is already struggling with Marla and the kids returning. Your stunt didn’t help.”

“It’s fun. People laugh. You and Marla don’t have to hide now.”

I inhale deeply, praying for patience. “I wasn’t going to hide, but the kids don’t want to hear about their dad and some woman making out in the bleachers.”

She points at me. “Well then maybe you two should be more discreet.”

I shake my head and push a hand through my hair. “Thanks for the tip. It wasn’t your story to share, Mom.”

She takes a rag lying on a box and wipes down the mantel, looking over her shoulder. “You’re my business. Your happiness is my utmost concern. Years from now, you’ll be laughing about it.”

“What are you, twelve? I think Dori’s a bad influence on you.”

She laughs, moving from the mantel to the end tables. “We have fun together.”

“You never would’ve done something like this before you started hanging around her.”

“This how you talk to your teenagers?” She continues to dust every wood surface in the room. “That’s the great thing about friends. They pull out sides

of you, you didn't know existed. Like Marla. She'll probably pull out things about you. Let's just hope it's not your penis in public again." She snickers.

My jaw drops. "Oh my God."

"Relax." She turns around to face me. "You're taking it too seriously."

"Because you put us in a bad position with the kids."

"Like I said, they'll get over it. They should want to see you happy, and I know that Marla makes you happy."

A smile tugs at the corner of my mouth when I think about her. She does make me happy, but we're in that beginning stage of a relationship when everything is roses. What if it doesn't last?

The front door opens and Xavier yells, "Grandma!"

"In here, sweetie," she says.

In walks Xavier, Cade, and Fisher. I knew they'd never walk all the way home. None of them look my way as they cross the room and hug their grandma hello.

"Cookies are in the kitchen," she says.

Xavier and Fisher walk out of the room first. Cade tries to move, but Mom grabs the sleeve of his jacket and tugs him back.

"You two are going to talk." She points at me and him, then at the couch. "Sit."

Cade might have a smart mouth with me, but not with his grandma, so he sits on the sofa without a word.

"I'm going to make sure they have chocolate milk." She leaves us alone.

I would usually say something about the kids having too much sugar and chocolate this early in the day, but skipped the restaurant and I don't have it in me right now anyway.

"Listen," I start because Cade would sit here silent forever if I let him. "I'm sorry about the radio thing. I know it puts you in a shitty position with your friends and the kids at school."

I get nothing in return. He stares out to the back of the house.

"And it was irresponsible for me to get caught on the high school grounds. I should've been more discreet. I apologize for those two things—although one is out of my control, you can blame your gr—" I stop, not wanting to make this about her.

Still he says nothing.

"I also understand your issues with Jed, but you're a good quarterback too. And whether or not you play quarterback doesn't matter in the whole

scheme of your life.”

His head whips in my direction. That got his attention. “How can you say that? You played, your cousin Jeff played, Grandpa played. And now I’ll be the one who doesn’t.”

“You are playing, Cade, and what did me playing quarterback in high school get me? I took over my dad’s business.”

He sits up straighter and looks me in the eye for the first time in weeks. “Imagine another contractor came into this town and stole your clients and everyone bragged about how great he is compared to you.”

My shoulders fall. I nod, understanding his point. “Gotcha. But all of that has nothing to do with Marla and me.”

“Except that Jed is her son. And the kids are already saying shit about you two after you did the concession stand and went for pizza a couple of times after the games.”

“And how does Jed handle it?”

“He makes jokes like he doesn’t care. He calls me “cuz” in the hall.”

I had a feeling Jed’s personality was similar to his dad’s, but I’m not sure if it’s an act or whether it really doesn’t bother him.

I look toward the kitchen and back at Cade. “After your mom died, I didn’t think I would ever find another woman I could be happy with. Hell, I didn’t even think I’d date. I was so concerned with you guys and getting you through the loss of your mom that it was the farthest thing from my mind. Marla and I never dated in high school, but we did become good friends and I did have feelings for her then. When she came back to town, it felt like there might be something there. I wanted to explore if that feeling was still there.”

“And?”

“It is. I probably went about this the wrong way. But at the same time, I’m not apologizing for falling in love with an amazing woman. At some point, a parent has to live their own life, and if I thought she would be any kind of detriment to you guys, we wouldn’t be together. Have you thought about Chevelle or Adam or even Xavier? They’re young. Maybe having a woman in their lives would be good for them. Especially Chevelle.”

“Are you going to marry her?”

I would never admit to him that I can see Marla and me married at some point. Not yet anyway. That would make me seem crazy. “We’re not there yet. But I am in love with her.”

He rolls his eyes and sighs, allowing his body to sink into the couch.

“You don’t have to be okay with this, but you will treat Marla with respect when you’re around her. You have a choice, Cade, to accept it or not, but I will not allow you to be cruel to her or her kids. Do you understand?”

He nods.

I stand to allow him to think about what he wants to do. I’m just about to leave the room when he calls out to me. I turn to face him.

“Can you at least just not kiss her and stuff in public?”

I chuckle. “I’ll try not to.”

He stands and breaks the distance with his head down. “I just miss Mom.”

I put my arm around my oldest son. “Me too.”

We walk into the kitchen. Just like when Laurie died, step by step we’ll get to where we need to be. If I learned anything from losing my wife, it was that you can come back from almost anything.



Chapter Sixteen

"Marla. Hank."
-Principal Torres

Marla

THINGS ARE normalish in both Greene households since Chip decided to listen to two senior citizens about spreading gossip on the local radio station. Of course, a few jerks like to call us “kissing cousins” as a joke, but for the most part, people seem fine with Hank and me dating. We’re out as a couple in public, holding hands, being affectionate, and having dates. It’s a great feeling not to be hiding anymore. The younger Greenes are enjoying having other kids their own age to play with—with the exception of our two oldest boys.

I’m in the kitchen on a Friday afternoon, getting together some salad dressings. Two Brothers and an Egg offered to add them to the lunch menu. It’s a small start, but a start all the same.

My phone rings and I press the speaker button, not bothering to look at who’s calling. “Hello?”

“What the hell, Mar? You’re dating our cousin?”

Jeff. I’m kind of surprised it’s taken him this long to hear about it. Then

again, he doesn't know anyone in Sunrise Bay. At least no one he keeps in touch with.

"Clarification. I'm dating *your* cousin."

"I always knew you had a thing for him." He disregards my comment because that's what he does. "I think I'm gonna come take Jed and bring him down here. His high school coach came to me the other night and said they need him for the finals. You know that team is going to state."

I try to rein in my temper. The last thing I want to do is make him angry. Through all our years of marriage, I learned to walk the tightrope. "And how does Melissa feel about this?"

"She's fine with it."

"Really? She's willing to give up all her Friday nights to go sit in a stadium filled with people and watch your son play football?"

"Yes. She likes the sport."

"I'll bet she does."

"This isn't about her anyway. Listen, I talked to my lawyer."

"You what?" I drop the oil and it spills all over the floor. My hands shake. Did he really think I would agree to this? He can't just yank his son around so he can live vicariously through him. "He's old enough to make his own decision about where he lives."

"And he did. I talked to him last night. How do you think I found out about you and your cousin?"

"Again, *your* cousin. He agreed?" I can't keep the hurt from my voice.

Jeff laughs. "Seriously, you should've stayed here in Arizona. Why you ran home like a little girl, I still don't understand. Moving Jed up there his senior year, of course he wasn't gonna be happy about it. Plus, if he wants to play in college, he needs to be at a top high school. Hate to break it to you, but Sunrise Bay isn't on that list. Just ask your cousin."

I clench my hands at his sly way of referring to Hank not continuing his football career after high school. I'm not even sure Jed wants to play in college. He's seemed happy the last couple weeks. Am I such a horrible mom that I don't even know my own son?

"I have to call you back." I click the phone off. My body sinks to the floor as I look at the oil spreading across the linoleum.

Am I really so stuck in my own bubble of happiness that I didn't realize my son wasn't happy? What kind of mother does that? My children's happiness means more than mine does.

A vehicle pulls up in the driveway. I hear a car door shut, then the front door of the house opens and shuts.

“Marla!” Hank calls.

I don’t answer, but he finds me on the kitchen floor with my back against the wall.

“What happened?” He steps over me, grabbing paper towels to clean up the oil. “Are you hurt?” He drops the towels on the oil and crouches to my level. “Marla?”

“Jeff is going to take Jed back to Arizona, and apparently he wants to go.”

“Who wants to go? Jed?”

I nod.

He sighs and his head falls back to look at the ceiling for a moment. “I’m here because we have something more immediate to handle.”

I sit up straighter “What?”

“Just be calm, okay? It’s about Cade and Jed.”

My stomach sinks. “What happened?”

“They’re in the principal’s office for fighting.”

My eyes close and my shoulders sink. Hank stands and holds out his hand to me. I take his offering and he pulls me up.

“Before we go.” He holds me to his chest. “We are a united front. I know we’re only dating, but I think I speak for both of us that this thing between us is only growing stronger. So when we go in there, we’re a team.”

“What if Jed goes back?” Unshed tears sting my eyes.

Hank shakes his head. “He won’t, and if he does want to, we’ll talk to him and change his mind. Don’t let your mind spin out of control. We should’ve fixed this earlier with the boys, but we didn’t. So let’s go and clear this up with them now. Let them know they need to be a team too.”

I grab my phone and my purse, agreeing with Hank. But my mind is filled with so many what-ifs, I have no memory of making it out of the house or into Hank’s truck.

We arrive at the high school, where both of us know the way to the principal’s office. In the waiting area, Cade is in one chair and Jed is in the

one on the opposite side.

Principal Torres comes out of his office when he spots us and calls us all in. “Marla. Hank.”

We both get a nod. Principal Torres was our classmate. Great. It’s an extra layer of embarrassment that we have the delinquent sons.

Hank looks at Cade with a disapproving glare while Jed holds his usual cocky smirk. It’s the one he uses in front of everyone who isn’t family.

“These two got into it during lunch. They’re both refusing to tell me any specifics. I’m thinking of sitting them out of the game tonight.”

“What?” Jed sits up straighter. Finally the smirk drops off his face.

Cade shrugs as though he couldn’t care less.

“Whatever you think is necessary,” Hank says.

“Seriously? My dad would’ve fought for us to play! Your dad’s such a pussy,” Jed yells.

Cade stands. “At least my dad can keep his dick in his pants.”

Jed stands and they start toward one another.

“Say one more thing about my dad,” Jed threatens.

Cade lets out an arrogant cackle that I’m surprised to hear. “I could list everything wrong with your dad and you. You think you’re so cool and so popular. But you’re a high school quarterback, and when high school is over, you’ll be a has-been.”

“Says the kid who lost his starting position,” Jed fires back.

“Only because your lips are attached to Coach’s ass. Look at the record, hotshot. We’re not going to state. Almost every game you were quarterback, you lost.”

“It wasn’t my fault the receivers can’t catch a damn throw.”

Cade laughs. I step forward, but Hank stops me by putting his hand on my forearm. I look at him.

He leans in to say to me, “They have to get this out.”

“Get a clue. Your dad is friends with Coach. They played together here,” Cade says.

Oh my God. How did I not think of that until now? I look at Hank and he blinks in surprise.

“What are you saying?” Jed asks, but his cocky stance falters.

“You got my position because Coach is friends with your dad, and he called in a favor.”

“No.” Jed looks at me.

I shrug because I don't really know. I do remember Jeff playing with Coach Zeke, and I wouldn't put that kind of manipulation past Jeff.

"Before you got here, Coach was always bragging about his year and how they won state. How he and Jeff Greene are the reason they won."

Hank nods, apparently remembering it all. "I never thought he would... I mean... holy shit."

"What?" I ask him.

Hank shakes his head with a look to say, "I'll tell you later."

"You have no idea," Jed says. "If I wasn't better than you, then why does my old high school want me to play for them in the playoffs because they have a shot at state?"

Cade shrugs. "I don't care. Go back to Arizona. Make them lose for a change."

"Cade," Hank's tone is one of warning.

He turns to his dad, holding out his hands. "What do you want from me? He's taken everything away from me this year." Cade slides by Jed and walks out of the office.

Jed's eyes search me out. "Is it true?"

I shrug again. "I don't know."

But Jeff has always found ways of manipulating people to get what he wants.

"I trust you guys to handle this. They can play tonight, but detention all next week," Torres says. "I'll be talking to Coach Zeke as well."

"Thanks, Thor," Hank says, referring to him by his nickname.

This town is too small sometimes.

"Jed, let's go," I say to him, then tell Hank that I'll call him later.

Jed touches his cheek where a bruise is forming, and he walks out of the office ahead of me.

Hank grabs my hand and pulls me to his chest. "I'll check in with you later. But..." He looks over my shoulder. "You need to talk to Jeff. Zeke is sporting a new fishing boat. He was bragging about it at the beginning of the season."

I huff. "You're not serious?"

"I am." He bites his lip. "I'm sorry I didn't put it all together sooner."

"Don't be. It just means you're not a manipulating asshole." I kiss him quickly, and he squeezes my hip before releasing me.

Jed is outside in his truck when I approach. I signal for him to get out of

the driver's side. He rolls his eyes but does it, and I climb into the driver's seat. I send Nikki a text to say she's in charge until I return home and there's oil on the floor in the kitchen and not to slip.

I drive Jed to his grandparents' house. Not my parents' house. Jeff's parents' old home. We park along the street and stare at the two-bedroom ranch that looks worse for wear.

"What is this?" Jed asks.

"This is where Grandma and Grandpa Greene lived."

"What?"

"This is where your dad grew up."

Jed sounds surprised when he says, "Grandma and Grandpa have money. Why would they live like this?"

"Your dad bought their house in Arizona. Your dad bought their cars. Your dad gives them an allowance every month. This is where they lived until your dad moved them to Arizona."

Jed's jaw hangs open. "Why didn't anyone tell us?"

"Your dad is ashamed. He always was. That's where his cockiness comes from. It's a protection mechanism. He's trying to act like someone he's not. I stood by for too long and allowed you to do the same. Jed, wearing a mask your entire life and hiding who you are isn't worth it. Did your dad pay Coach Zeke? I honestly don't know, but I can see it. It's your dad's way of making himself feel powerful and important, of making people do things he wants them to. And I'm sorry if you were one of his pawns. Maybe you weren't. He probably did it all for you."

"Bullshit. He did it for himself." He pounds his fist on the dash. "I've been an idiot. Playing week after week. Cade is right, I lost almost every game."

"But it wasn't all you. You guys are a team."

He's quiet for a few minutes and it's until I hear him sniffing that I glance over. "I knew, Mom."

"Knew that Dad paid off Coach Zeke?"

He shakes his head. "No. I knew Cade was better. It's why I asked his two best friends to work out with me." His head falls into his hands. "I'm just like him. I'm just like Dad. I manipulated the situation with the hopes that no one would notice." His back wracks with sobs.

Motherhood sucks sometimes.

I put my hand on his back and rub up and down, just like I did when he

was a little boy. “You did what came naturally. But the good thing is, you’re only seventeen. You can do the right thing and people will forgive you.”

“Dad wants me to go back to Arizona,” he says to his hands.

“He told me.”

He picks up his head and looks at me, regret in his eyes. “He called last night. I told him about you and Hank.”

I nod. “I know.”

“I’m sorry. I was just so angry. I know it’s not an excuse.”

I squeeze his shoulder. “No, it’s not, but you’ve been through a lot of change.”

“I don’t want to be like him,” he says, looking me in the eye. “What if it’s, like, engrained or genetic or something and I destroy my entire life like he did with his?”

I tilt my head, not understanding.

“Cheating on you. He ruined his life by cheating on you. I always thought maybe Dad could change and win you back, but I see how happy you are with Hank. So much happier than you ever were with Dad.”

I look at him with a sad smile. “I am. I’m glad you notice.” I take his head in my hands, willing him to really take in my words. “You choose who you are. You are the only one who can control you. You want to be a better person? You can. You want to be a better quarterback? You can. You want to be a better son?” He sighs, and I laugh. “You can.”

“Thanks, Mom.” He leans in and hugs me.

“That’s why I’m here.”

“Can I tell you something?” he says in my ear.

“Anything.”

“I don’t like playing quarterback.”

I pull back and we laugh until we’re unsure if our tears are from the crying or the laughter. Finally, I have my son back.



Chapter Seventeen

"Lucky for me."

-Hank Greene

Hank

IT'S the last Friday night football game of the season. This could be Marla's last one, but with three boys coming up the ranks, I might as well pitch a tent and call the bleachers home. Marla and Posey are waiting for me at the field entrance, and I kiss Marla hello and pick up Posey.

"Let's stop at the concession. I need candy today," I say.

"Twinsies!" Posey agrees. "Third grade is for the birds."

Marla laughs, and I swing an arm around her back.

"I heard Cade is starting tonight?" Marla says.

"I heard that too."

She's giving me the look. The one she gives when she's apologizing. I can't wait until she trusts my reactions enough to never give me that look—I'm pretty sure it spawned from Jeff's reactions to things. But it will take time and I'm a patient man.

I drop Posey on the ground. "Go get whatever you want."

I position us so we can keep an eye on Posey and talk privately. I tuck a

section of hair that's fallen out of Marla's knit hat behind her ear. She looks as if she has something to say.

"What?" I ask.

"I just can't believe Jeff did it. I mean, who pays off a high school coach?"

I chuckle. "Jeff apparently. But unless you cut the check, I'm unsure why you're apologizing to me."

Her forehead falls to my chest. I place my finger under her chin and force her to look me in the eye.

"Cade missed this entire season."

"He played. Not as much as he wanted, but he wasn't going to be drafted. I think both the boys learned important lessons this year. Hopefully they'll develop a friendship that will stand a long time." I refrain from telling her I hope they find a brotherhood since with any luck, they'll be stepbrothers one day.

Looking out onto the field, I spot Cade with Coach Justin, going over a play. Zeke was let go this afternoon. I always liked Torres. But the surprise is that Jed is in their circle too.

"If they win this, they might get a spot. Sure, Greywall has to lose which..." My head moves side to side because they are a powerhouse. "But they could."

"All ready. They said they'll put it on your tab, Hank," Posey says.

"Posey, what do you have?" Mandi yells from the side of the fence where she's with Adam and a mixture of girls and guys huddled together.

"They only want me for my candy," she says before walking over.

A few minutes later, Chevelle and Posey emerge from the crowd with less candy than Posey started with. They climb the bleachers and sit down together, watching the cheerleaders.

"Come on. Let's go watch our boys play what might be their last game." I hold Marla's hand and she comes with me. "What did Jeff say?"

"He tried to deny it, but then said he didn't see the harm in what he did. Jed asked me to tell him that he wouldn't be moving to Arizona. Jeff said he was going to fight me, but I'm not worried. He won't."

"He's missing a lot," I say, my gaze bouncing over all of our kids.

We walk up the bleachers and sit down near Chevelle and Posey. Marla says, "He wouldn't appreciate it anyway."

The game starts and Cade runs out to quarterback with the first true smile

I've seen on his face in a long time. Surprisingly, Jed jogs out right after him. Derek hikes the ball and Cade does what he does best, staying patient until he has a clearing. He throws it and Jed catches, running into the end zone for a touchdown.

The entire stadium goes crazy and the boys on the field chest bump. When Cade and Jed come face to face, there's a slight pause before they jump and bump chests, smiles on both their faces. Cade smacks the back of Jed's helmet, congratulating him on the catch, and they both get in position again.

"He wouldn't. The best things in life don't have monetary value, and he hasn't figured that out yet. Lucky for me." I kiss Marla as tears of happiness stream down her face.



Cade

Three years later

"YOU DO REALIZE they'll be in their sixties when the kid graduates high school?" Jed laughs next to me as our Uber drives past the city limits sign of Sunrise Bay.

Anyone who knew us when we first met would be shocked to hear that we don't just attend the same college, we room together. Who would've known Jed is a pretty great guy? Still a little cocky at times, but I can be too. Our senior year, we scored the last spot in the playoffs but got eliminated right before state finals. As my dad and Marla always say, it's the journey, not the end result.

"They'll be showing up in walkers at his graduation." I slap the seat. "Our

family can't get any weirder anyway.”

“True story!”

There's a new baby in the Greene family. Rylan Greene. Only Hank and Marla Greene would decide to have a baby when there's light at the end of the tunnel of having nine kids out of the house. Though Jed and I have money on the fact that they didn't plan the pregnancy. No one really wants to think about how that happened, so we didn't ask.

I pull up to what was my grandparents' house and is now Dad and Marla's. They were quick to move in after their engagement that turned into an even quicker wedding. But Grandma Ethel is happy the house is in use. Jed and I both have dibs on it after they die (joking, obviously) because we had to put so much work into renovations being Dad's manual laborers.

The Uber parks on the hill where we can see the blue stork sign with Rylan's name, length, and weight. This kid's gonna be spoiled beyond belief.

“I'm starving,” Jed says, getting out of the car and thanking our driver with a mumble.

“Thanks, man.” I get out too, and we each retrieve our weekend bags from the trunk.

We walk into the house to find that it looks as if a baby store has exploded inside.

Jed picks up a box. “What the hell?”

“That's a breast pump, man.”

His body shakes and he drops it back into the pile consisting of a swing, a stroller, two car seats, and a stack of laundry baskets.

Posey runs out of the family room, and her socks slide along until Jed grabs her and tickles her. “I'm too old for that.” She squirms out of his grip but then attaches herself to his stomach. “I missed you guys.”

She comes to me next. It's kind of cool having so many siblings now, even if they are stepsiblings but also our second cousins.

“Come on. Rylan's awake,” Posey says.

Jed looks back at me and we share the look to say, “Here we go.”

We walk into the living room to find there's no baby. Marla's got a blanket over her shoulder. Dad's sleeping next to her. There's an entire playpen or something along the wall and a changing station next to it.

“A baby needs all this stuff?” I ask, looking around.

“Hey, Mom.” Jed leans forward to kiss Marla on the cheek. “Whoa. Fuck.”

Marla slaps his arm for swearing.

Jed shuts his eyes and turns away. "You're lucky I'm not blind now."

Dad stirs awake and blinks.

"I did it for you too. Hank is taking the real brunt of me breastfeeding. A new man has taken over his duties."

My head falls back and Jed looks as if he might lose it. "Seriously, keep that to yourself!"

Marla laughs, and Dad rises from the couch to hug us.

"Boys, you're old enough to understand I had to go cold turkey. It could be over a year."

"What's a little breastmilk," I say, and Jed picks up a stuffed bear and throws it at me.

It's not that I don't see Marla as a mother figure, but it doesn't gross me out the same way it does Jed.

"Good to see you guys getting along." Dad hugs both of us.

Jed seems oddly comfortable with the affection. But he keeps a lot in about his relationship with his dad. There's animosity there, but he never wants to talk about it.

"Where is everyone?" I ask.

"Here and there. No one is ever in this house at the same time, I swear."

Marla rolls her eyes. "They have lives."

We sit down while Jed heads to the fridge, grabs a bunch of containers, and fixes a plate.

Posey disappears upstairs.

"Hey, Dad, you mind if I borrow the truck?" I ask.

He nods and pulls the keys from his pocket, handing them to me, knowing where I'm going. It's usually my first stop before I come home, but with Jed with me, I couldn't.

"Family dinner tonight, okay?" he says.

"Yeah. I'll be a half hour tops."

Ten minutes later, I pull into Sunrise Bay Cemetery and wind down the path to my mom's burial plot. I park my dad's truck and walk up the short hill. Sometimes I'm still surprised to read her name on the stone.

"Hey, Mom," I say. "Just got in from school. Marla had the baby. It's a boy. They named him Rylan. He's healthy."

My eye catches sight of a blonde a few rows away. She looks familiar, but I can't really place her. She's openly crying on a new grave site filled

with dirt and no plaque.

I shake my head. “So, anyway... school’s good, and before you think about it, there’s no one serious in my life.” I laugh.

The girl lies down on the dirt and her head is turned. Is that Clara, Xavier’s friend?

“Clara!” I yell, but the girl doesn’t say anything or look my way. I turn my attention back to my mom. “It’s amazing how things have changed. Jed’s probably my closest friend now. Crazy, huh?”

The girl gets up, and yeah, it’s totally Clara. Xavier and Clara have been friends since they were in diapers. The girl slept over at our house a million times and went everywhere with us.

“Grades are good. No worries there. No Dean’s List or anything though. Sorry, Mom, hold up.”

I jog over to Clara. The closer I get, the more positive I am she’s Clara. “Clara! It’s me, Cade. Xavier’s brother. Are you okay?”

She looks me dead in the eye and scowls. The hairs on the back of my head rise, and my gut tells me something I can’t decipher or put into words.

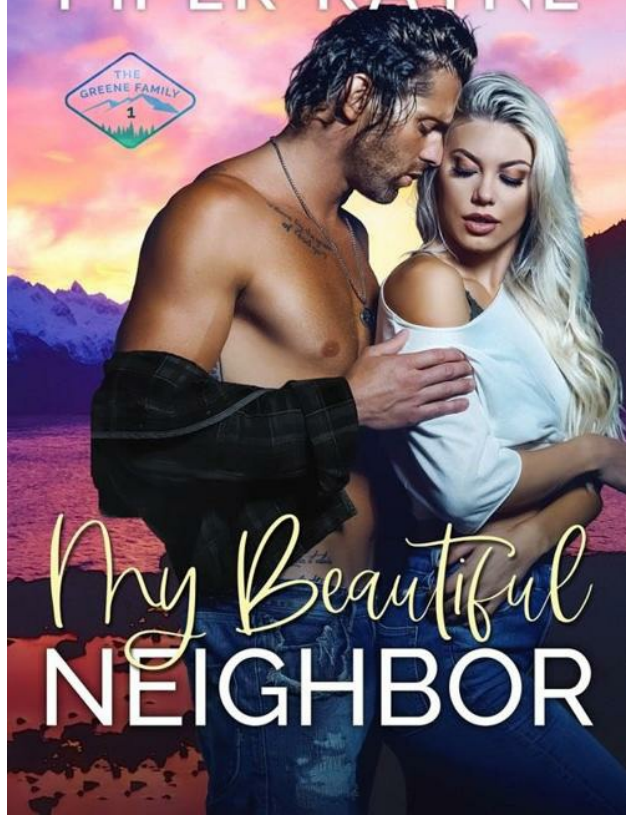
“My name isn’t Clara.” She walks down the hill and gets into a car before the tires squeal, announcing her exit.

Fast forward ten years when a new mystery woman comes into Sunrise Bay, throwing Cade Greene off his game.

My Beautiful Neighbor is a **fish out of water, small town, forced proximity** love story you can’t miss!

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

PIPER RAYNE



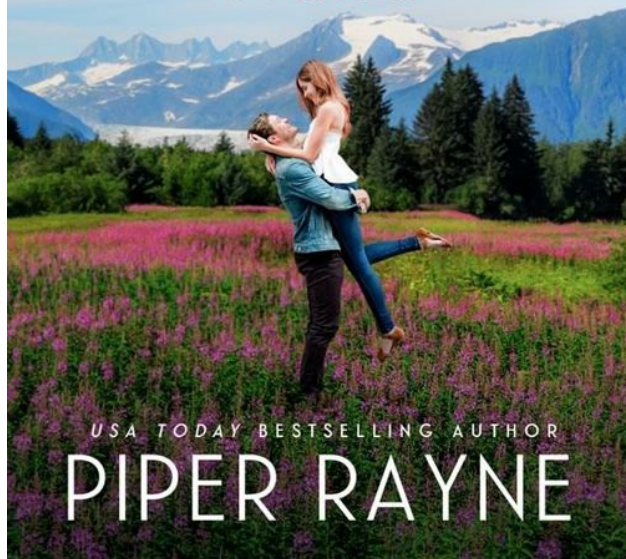
My Beautiful
NEIGHBOR

Freddie

BOOK ONE, [Lessons from a One-Night Stand \(CLICK HERE\)](#) in our much loved BIG FAMILY ROM COM series, The Baileys, is **FREE** on all retailers!

Series is complete and ready to BINGE!

Lessons
from a
*One-Night
Stand*



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

PIPER RAYNE

About Piper & Rayne

Piper Rayne is a USA Today Bestselling Author duo who write “heartwarming humor with a side of sizzle” about families, whether that be blood or found. They both have e-readers full of one-clickable books, they're married to husbands who drive them to drink, and they're both chauffeurs to their kids. Most of all, they love hot heroes and quirky heroines who make them laugh, and they hope you do, too!



Also by Piper Rayne

Chicago Grizzlies

[Something like Hate](#)

[Something like Lust](#)

[Something like Love](#)

Lake Starlight

[The Problem with Second Chances](#)

[The Issue with Bad Boy Roommates](#)

[The Trouble with Runaway Brides](#)

The Baileys

[Lessons from a One-Night Stand](#)

[Advice from a Jilted Bride](#)

[Birth of a Baby Daddy](#)

[Operation Bailey Wedding \(Novella\)](#)

[Falling for My Brother's Best Friend](#)

[Demise of a Self-Centered Playboy](#)

[Confessions of a Naughty Nanny](#)

[Operation Bailey Babies \(Novella\)](#)

[Secrets of the World's Worst Matchmaker](#)

[Winning My Best Friend's Girl](#)

[Rules for Dating your Ex](#)

[Operation Bailey Birthday \(Novella\)](#)

The Greene Family

[My Twist of Fortune](#)

[My Beautiful Neighbor](#)

[My Almost Ex](#)

[My Vegas Groom](#)

[A Greene Family Summer Bash](#)

[My Sister's Flirty Friend](#)
[My Unexpected Surprise](#)
[My Famous Frenemy](#)
[A Greene Family Vacation](#)
[My Scorned Best Friend](#)
[My Fake Fiancé](#)
[My Brother's Forbidden Friend](#)
[A Greene Family Christmas](#)

The Modern Love World

[Charmed by the Bartender](#)
[Hooked by the Boxer](#)
[Mad about the Banker](#)

The Single Dads Club

[Real Deal](#)
[Dirty Talker](#)
[Sexy Beast](#)

Hollywood Hearts

[Mister Mom](#)
[Animal Attraction](#)
[Domestic Bliss](#)

Bedroom Games

[Cold as Ice](#)
[On Thin Ice](#)
[Break the Ice](#)
[Box Set](#)

Charity Case

[Manic Monday](#)
[Afternoon Delight](#)
[Happy Hour](#)

Blue Collar Brothers

[Flirting with Fire](#)
[Crushing on the Cop](#)
[Engaged to the EMT](#)

White Collar Brothers

[Sexy Filthy Boss](#)
[Dirty Flirty Enemy](#)
[Wild Steamy Hook-up](#)

The Rooftop Crew

[My Bestie's Ex](#)
[A Royal Mistake](#)
[The Rival Roomies](#)
[Our Star-Crossed Kiss](#)
[The Do-Over](#)
[A Co-Workers Crush](#)

Hockey Hotties

[My Lucky #13](#)
[The Trouble with #9](#)
[Faking it with #41](#)
[Sneaking around with #34](#)
[Second Shot with #76](#)
[Offside with #55](#)

Kingsmen Football Stars

[You Had Your Chance, Lee Burrows](#)
[You Can't Kiss the Nanny, Brady Banks](#)
[Over My Brother's Dead Body, Chase Andrews](#)

Plain Daisy Ranch

[The One I Left Behind](#)

Standalones

[Single and Ready to Jingle](#)
[Claus & Effect](#)