



single  
MALT

THE SCOTTISH BILLIONAIRES

M.S. PARKER  
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# SINGLE MALT

---

THE SCOTTISH BILLIONAIRES

M. S. PARKER

BELMONTE PUBLISHING, LLC

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locales or organizations is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2021 Belmonte Publishing LLC

Published by Belmonte Publishing LLC

## CONTENTS

### Free Book

#### The Scottish Billionaires Reading order

1. Brody
2. Freedom
3. Brody
4. Freedom
5. Brody
6. Freedom
7. Brody
8. Freedom
9. Freedom
10. Brody
11. Freedom
12. Brody
13. Freedom
14. Brody
15. Freedom
16. Brody
17. Freedom
18. Brody
19. Freedom
20. Brody
21. Freedom
22. Brody
23. Freedom
24. Brody
25. Freedom
26. Brody

27. [Freedom](#)
28. [Brody](#)
29. [Freedom](#)
30. [Brody](#)
31. [Freedom](#)
32. [Brody](#)
33. [Freedom](#)
34. [Brody](#)
35. [Freedom](#)
36. [Brody](#)
37. [Freedom](#)
38. [Brody](#)
39. [Freedom](#)
40. [Brody](#)
41. [Freedom](#)
42. [Brody](#)
43. [Freedom](#)
44. [Brody](#)
45. [Freedom](#)
46. [Brody](#)
47. [Freedom](#)
48. [Freedom](#)
49. [Brody](#)
50. [Freedom](#)

[The Scottish Billionaires Reading order](#)  
[Office romances by M. S. Parker](#)

# Free Book

Get my new book for FREE! [Click Here](#) to subscriber to my newsletter and start reading the exclusive 200 pages stand-alone steamy romance, *His Inspiration*.

**FREE BOOK!**



**BRAND NEW -  
NEVER RELEASED!**

FREE FOR ALL  
SUBSCRIBERS!

# The Scottish Billionaires Reading order

*Alec's Story:*

[Prequel](#)

- [1. Off Limits](#)
- [2. Breaking Rules](#)
- [3. Mending Fate](#)

*Eoin's Story:*

- [1. Strangers in Love](#)
- [2. Dangers of Love](#)

*Brody's Story:*

1. Single Malt
2. Perfect Blend

One

# Brody

You would think that a man who makes his living making and selling alcohol wouldn't have to spend much time in a tux, but you'd be wrong. Maybe that would have been the case if I only sold to bars and liquor stores, but producing high-end whiskey meant catering to a more prestigious crowd.

Which was why I was only one tuxedo in a crowd of many.

To make matters worse, this New Year's Eve party was at a university. And not just any university. It was Stanford.

Two of my brothers had graduated from here, but that didn't make things easier. In fact, I was thirty-one years old, had a thriving business, was dressed in what was probably the most expensive tux in the room, and I still felt like an imposter. A gawky teenager everyone liked, but no one took seriously.

Intellectually, I knew that wasn't the case. I'd left my easy surfer vibe behind me more than a decade ago and had forged my own empire, independent of the business my father had built, McCrae International Research Institute – MIRI for short. I'd used some of the business contacts my family made over the years, as well as the money I received from my shares of the company, but I'd built Shannon's on my own.

Now, thirteen years after I first thought up the idea, I'd succeeded in making a brand I hoped was worthy of the name it carried.

“Mr. McCrae, I'm glad you were able to make it.”

The familiar voice drew me out of my thoughts, and I fixed a polite smile on my face. I turned to face Dr. Johann Josephs, the British Literature professor who'd invited me to tonight's party.

Glancing around the room, I wasn't entirely sure if I agreed with calling this a party, exactly. Especially a New Year's Eve party. While there were at least two hundred people here, I could still hear classical music playing over the



sound system. It was that quiet. Everyone spoke in low, modulated tones that would've driven me nuts if I'd been here to have fun. Growing up in a massive family meant that most of my life had been filled with noise. I didn't associate much of anything quiet as being enjoyable.

Still, I was here for business, not pleasure.

"Good to see you again, Dr. Josephs." I put out my hand, and he gave it a hearty shake. "How was your Christmas?"

"Productive," he answered with a smile. "I finished my paper on the prevalence of unnecessary graphic sexual violence in British literature over the last thirty years. *Sexing the Cherry* was a particularly useful text."

If I hadn't had several conversations with the interesting professor over the last few weeks, I might've thought he was trying to make me feel stupid. It hadn't taken long, though, for me to realize that he was passionate about his work, and that was just how he talked. Still, I had absolutely no clue how to respond to what he'd just said.

Who would bring up a book called *Sexing the Cherry* at a faculty party?

Better yet, who the hell would *write* a book with that title?

Fortunately, a vague response was best in this situation since we weren't here to talk about books.

"Congratulations. My brother Blaze works at John Hopkins, so I know how important being published is in the academic world."

Dr. Josephs looked confused. "I'm aware of a professor of education at John Hopkins with that distinctive first name, but I thought his last name was Gracen, not McCrae."

I took a deep breath in preparation to explain about my complicated family. "It is. Technically, Blaze is my stepmother's nephew who, with his brother and sister, moved in with us after their parents died. My family tree can get a little confusing, so I usually just keep it simple and call them all my siblings. The details are just technicalities."

"So true." Dr. Josephs scratched the side of his long nose. "Technicalities."

I'd noticed that, if he wasn't entirely sure how to respond to something, Dr. Josephs tended to agree and repeat a part of the statement. It made conversations with him interesting, to say the least. On the positive side, he didn't require as much finesse when it came to bringing up or changing a subject.

"Have you had a chance to speak to any of your colleagues about the whiskey you gave them for Christmas?"

When he and I first started talking just before Thanksgiving, I mentioned that I had three kinds of Shannon's whiskey I could supply Stanford with for any of their faculty events. He'd suggested that he purchase two or three of each and give them to his colleagues as gifts, using their opinions about the whiskey to determine if Shannon's would be a good fit for future events.

Now, as he gave me the rundown of everything he'd been told, I tried to pick out the important pieces and file them away to use when I wrote up my notes from tonight. Even if Stanford decided not to go with Shannon's, I'd have feedback to look over and learn from.

Halfway through the recitation, however, something happened that wasn't normal for me.

I got distracted.

Walking behind Dr. Josephs was a drop-dead gorgeous blonde. She looked to be only a few inches shorter than my own six feet, but some of those came from a pair of sexy high heels. They not only gave her height but made her legs look amazing.

The amazing didn't stop there, though. She had the sort of curves that drew my attention enough that I completely forgot that I was talking to someone about something important. I probably couldn't have even told anyone my name at that moment. When she finally disappeared from my line of sight, I found Dr. Josephs looking at me with an expectant expression.

*Shit.*

Even though I hated to admit that I hadn't heard him, I wasn't going to make the mistake of trying to answer a question I hadn't processed correctly. I didn't, however, feel like I had to tell him exactly *why* I'd been so distracted.

“I’m sorry. My mind got away from me for a minute.”

“No apologies necessary,” Dr. Josephs said with a wide smile. “I often have similar experiences when, in the middle of a conversation, I’ll suddenly come to a new understanding of symbolism in *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. By the time I emerge from that near-trancelike state, fifteen minutes have passed, and I find myself alone, waxing eloquent about James Joyce.”

Strange, but a nice guy.

“Thank you. Now, if you don’t mind repeating the last couple things you said, I’ll have an answer for you.”

For the next twenty minutes, Dr. Josephs and I kept on topic, and by the time he excused himself to speak to the head of the English department, I was feeling pretty good about how the whiskey had been received. The only people who hadn’t liked the whiskey were the two professors who had told Dr. Josephs that they weren’t really big fans of alcohol in general. That balanced out the three wine drinkers who’d been pleasantly surprised that they’d actually enjoyed something new and non-fruity.

All of that meant that I was one step closer to closing the deal, and I should’ve been thrilled.

I was thrilled.

I was also trying to find that blonde again, something that was made increasingly difficult by the number of people who decided that they wanted to know who the unfamiliar face was. Normally, I’d have been thrilled at all the networking, but now, it was just annoying.

By the time everyone had gathered near the insanely large grandfather clock to watch the last five minutes of the year count down, I’d seen the blonde three more times. Once, I’d been close enough to see that she had heart-stopping clear blue eyes, and I thought she smiled at me that time too.

Then, suddenly, she was a foot to my right, draining a glass of champagne and giving the entire room a bored sweep. Bored until her eyes met mine. She raised a single eyebrow, and that was all it took for me to close the distance between us. Even though the room wasn’t loud, I still leaned close to put my mouth next to her ear before speaking.

Damn, she smelled good.

“If I kiss you at midnight, will your partner hit me?”

She looked up at me, lips twitching with amusement. “Partner?”

I shrugged and grinned. “I make no assumptions about a person’s sexuality.”

She considered me for a moment. “And how do you know *I* wouldn’t hit you if you kiss me?”

I wasn’t surprised at the sharp wit. Stanford, after all. I was surprised, however, by how much the banter turned me on.

“If you say no, I’ll respect that.” I took in her full expression, her body language, and then took a little risk by brushing my arm against hers. When she didn’t step back or tell me to leave her alone, I knew I’d read her correctly. “But I’d really like to kiss you in twenty seconds.”

She waited ten of those twenty before placing a hand on my arm. “All right. You better be worth it.”

My smile widened. It’d been a long time since someone had issued a challenge that I’d wanted to rise to this badly.

“Five.”

I placed my hand on the side of her neck, ran my thumb along her jaw.

“Four.”

I didn’t take my eyes off hers.

“Three.”

I leaned down, moving slowly, giving her time to change her mind if she wanted to.

“Two.”

My mouth hovered over hers, and it felt like no one else was in the room.

“One.”

Fireworks.

Not literal ones, but it sure as hell felt that way. Electricity crackled between us, and I let the kiss linger longer than I'd intended, lips moving together as if we'd kissed a thousand times before.

The sedated cheering and clapping finally broke through, and I straightened, letting my hand fall from her face. She looked almost as dazed as I felt.

"I'm Brody."

She collected herself in a heartbeat before smiling. "Freedom."

The expectant expression on her face told me that, like several of my siblings, offering her name always invited questions. Instead of being that predictable, I decided to surprise her and head straight for what I'd known I wanted the second her lips touched mine.

"Are you interested in ringing in the New Year back at my hotel?"

Another sly look, but this one was tinged with that surprise I'd been trying for. "You don't waste any time, do you?"

I shrugged. "I don't see the point."

She gave me a hard look that confirmed my suspicion that she was far more than just a pretty face and a great body. "I'm not looking for a boyfriend."

"I'm not looking to be one."

She examined my face for another few seconds before nodding. "Good. We're on the same page." Her eyes sparkled. "Lead on."

I made a note to thank my siblings for not insisting that I stay with them while I was here. I had a feeling Freedom wasn't going to be a quiet lover.

Two

# Freedom

“Are you sure you don’t want to come to the party?” I called out to my baby sister. “Dr. Ipres said she’d written for an invitation with a plus one.”

A loud sneeze from the general direction of her room was the response, and I sighed. I’d been gone all day, helping my mentor and advisor, Dr. Cicily Ipres, set up for the New Year’s Eve party she was hosting for over a hundred university professors and their significant others.

While the guest list had topped out at two hundred, Dr. Ipres had made certain that I’d be one of those attending, even though I was a graduate student. It was the perfect place to increase networking that would help next fall if I decided to pursue a tenure track.

And now, it sounded like I’d miss out.

I started toward the hall, but Aline was already coming my way. Her pale blonde hair was pulled back into a messy ponytail, and she wore her favorite giant fleece robe that was far too big for her delicate frame, which contributed to her looking more like a child wearing adult clothing than she did a twenty-one-year-old starting her final semester on her way to a master’s degree in education.

“Are you okay?” I asked, resisting the urge to check if she had a fever.

“I’m fine.”

“You sneezed.”

Aline rolled her eyes. “Yes, because I forgot to dust my bookshelf and ended up with a dust bunny the size of a small terrier in my face.”

I held back a sigh. I’d reminded her to dust just two days ago. That was unimportant now, though. “You don’t have to stay home tonight. This is a great opportunity to interact with the professors outside of a classroom.”

She shook her head. “My plans for New Year’s Eve are set in concrete. Binging *Cake Wars* while reading *Heat of the Sun* and eating popcorn.”

“You’re really re-reading that book again? What is that, the tenth time?” I didn’t get it. She was a certified genius, getting into Stanford at just sixteen and earning her master’s degree at twenty-one, but she had an obsession with Erika Summers.

Her adolescent enjoyment of survival books had at least included classics like *Island of the Blue Dolphins* and *Lord of the Flies*. I saw no substantial value to romance novels. All they did was build up a person’s expectations about what ‘love’ was supposed to be.

“I lost count.” Aline reached into the fridge to take out the butter and parmesan cheese.

“Do you want me to stay home with you?” I asked the question even though I really hoped she’d say no. If she needed me, I’d stay, but tonight was a big deal.

“No.” She threw me a brilliant smile. “I want you to go to your party and have a great time. Don’t even think of coming home until well past midnight.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.” She waved a hand as she rummaged through the cabinet, looking for who knew what.

I wasn’t going to ask again. Instead, I did a quick check to make sure that I’d remembered to switch my keys from my everyday purse to my dress one. I already knew I had my emergency credit card and a couple condoms in there since I never took those out. Granted, I wasn’t attending in the hopes of a hook-up, but I believed in being prepared for anything.

Ninety minutes later, I was grateful Aline had chosen to stay home because I’d spotted an opportunity to make tonight even better.

I’d caught him looking at me once before and had gotten the impression that it hadn’t been the first time tonight. I was five-ten in heels, which meant he was probably about six feet tall, and if the way he looked in his tux was any

indication, he had a body as incredible as his face. And that was saying something.

The man was drop-dead gorgeous. Sandy brown hair and light-colored eyes that were either blue, green, or a combination of both. A strong jaw that was not quite rugged enough to keep him from being ‘pretty.’ And I was fairly certain I’d seen a flash of dimples.

If he was a new professor, his classes were going to be packed no matter the subject, but since Dr. Ipres had personally invited a few of the college’s top donors, I couldn’t say for certain why he was here.

The clearly tailor-made tuxedo made me lean toward the latter, actually. As well as Stanford paid its faculty, even tenured professors wouldn’t spend that much on a tux made specifically for them. On the rare occasions they needed something that dressy, they’d rent one.

We danced around each other as the night progressed, with me always staying one step out of his reach, waiting to see if he’d pursue me or lose interest. I wasn’t looking for anything beyond a physical encounter, but I also refused to waste my time on someone who thought of me as interchangeable with another warm body simply because he had to exude some effort.

A man who was willing to accept whoever was easiest was the sort of man who’d care more about getting himself off than making sure I enjoyed myself too. Unfortunately, guys who were that good-looking often had the arrogance to assume that any woman would be so grateful to have them that she’d accept mediocre sex.

I was not that kind of woman. I’d rather take care of myself than sleep with a man who wasn’t going to make it worth my while.

By the time everyone congregated for the final countdown, I’d decided that he’d earned a kiss, at the very least. Where things went from there would depend on how he approached the midnight kiss. A poor pick-up line or conceit would mean things stopped there.

I really hoped he’d thought of something original because I had a few ideas of the things I could do with that body.



\* \* \*

So far, so good.

Brody had invited me back to his hotel room but hadn't argued when I'd said I'd drive there myself. All he'd done was ask if I wanted him to take a cab or if I minded him riding with me. I liked a man who knew how to take charge like he had during that scorching kiss, but who also wasn't the kind of control freak who thought that having a penis meant he had to always be the one behind the wheel.

We seemed to be on the same page when it came to what tonight was. Sex. No last names. No asking why we'd been at the party or where either of us lived. The only sound in the car had been music, but it hadn't been awkward. If anything, the relative quiet had built the tension between us so that, by the time I closed the hotel room door behind me, my panties were damp.

The heat in his blue-green eyes made my mouth go dry, and I watched in silence as he took off his jacket and tie, draping them over the closest chair. He toed off his shoes, and I did the same, never taking my gaze off him. The top two buttons of his shirt were next, and when he stalked toward me, the power and grace contained in that body made things low in my stomach clench. He had to have been an athlete at some point in his life because men didn't just move like that.

I didn't even realize that I'd taken a step back until I felt the cool wood of the door, and a thrill went through me. Without my heels, I had to tilt my head back to see his face.

"If you say stop, I'll stop," he promised, his voice a low rumble that slid over my skin like a touch. "Anything you want to tell me?"

So many things sprang to mind, but only one made it to my lips.

"Make me come."

He gave me a cocky grin that made me think he was the type of man who could live up to the promise I saw in his body. “Gladly.”

Then his mouth was on mine, and I forgot everything but the feel of his lips, the taste of fine whiskey on his tongue. Heat shot through me, a straight line to the throbbing between my legs. He leaned against me, all the hard parts of his body fitting perfectly with the soft parts of mine. While my little sister was slender and delicate, more like our former-model mother, I’d taken after my dad’s side of the family. All curves and no apologies.

As he explored my mouth, his hands slid down my sides to my hips, squeezed them, and then began to pull up my dress. When his fingertips brushed my bare skin, I gasped. I felt his lips curve against mine in a smile, and I responded with a nip at his bottom lip.

The sound he made could only be described as a growl, and he pushed his knee between my legs, pressing against my mound. His mouth moved from mine down to my jaw, and I turned my head slightly to make it easier for him. When he sucked on my pulse point, I found enough presence of mind to issue a single command.

“No marks.”

I felt him nod, and then I allowed myself to fall back under the pleasurable spell he was casting over me. He rocked his knee, giving me the sort of friction that sent little zings of electricity through me, had me digging my nails into his shoulders through his shirt.

“Can you get off this way?” He grabbed my hips again and used his grip to drag me up his thigh.

I nodded, already feeling that familiar tension coiling in my stomach. My eyes were closed, everything focused on that bright point inside me.

“Then do it, lass.”

The growl contained a British accent, and what he’d called me should’ve been a hint, but it wasn’t important right now. Only the meaning of his words.

“Show me how pretty you are when you come. Take this one for yourself, and then I’ll take you. Make you come again on my cock. Hear you scream.”

The rough edge to his voice, the slight bite of pain from how hard his hands were holding on to me, the friction from two layers of cloth rubbing against each other and against me, all of them built and built the pressure inside me until I finally exploded.

I came with a shudder and a cry, vaguely aware that my nails had torn through material and into flesh, but unable to form any words as a wave of pleasure rolled over me. He held me up until I could stand on my own before stepping back. It wasn’t until he turned around to move farther into his room that I noticed the small red spots on the shoulders of his shirt.

“Shit.”

He turned around, concern on his face. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

I gave him an incredulous look. “Did *you* hurt *me*?” I gestured toward his upper torso. “I drew blood.”

He looked confused, but when he moved his arms and winced, remorse flooded me. Remorse and embarrassment.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“I’m taking it as a compliment.” He took a step toward me, his mouth curving into a smug grin. “You clearly enjoyed yourself.”

“I ruined your shirt,” I pointed out.

With a grin, he jerked open his shirt, a couple buttons popping off, but he didn’t even appear to notice them. He tossed the shirt aside and raised an eyebrow. “I don’t care.”

I barely heard what he said because I was too busy staring at the absolutely magnificent torso in front of me. In the dim light, I could see what appeared to be scar tissue in a few places, but it didn’t make me want to touch him any less. I wondered for a moment what had happened but then decided that it didn’t matter.

“Well, damn.” I let my admiration bleed into my words. “What else are you hiding under those clothes?”

“I showed you some of mine,” he countered. “Are you going to show me some of yours?”

As I reached for the side zipper, I let myself appreciate his confidence. A lot of people would be self-conscious of scars like that, but he just watched me, his arms crossed and a smirk on his face.

I let the dress drop to the floor and stepped out of it. I didn’t plan on being here long enough for it to get wrinkled, so I left it where it was and let him take a full, long look at me in my teal lace bra and panty set. I knew I looked good in it, but to see the naked hunger on his face was gratifying.

I waited for him to say something, but instead, he did something. He took off his pants, and if I’d thought he looked good without a shirt, it was nothing compared to seeing him completely naked. That trail of golden-brown curls that ran down from his belly button pointed to a long, thick shaft with a slight upward curve. He wrapped a hand around it, stroking himself as he waited for me to take the next step.

“Condom,” I said as I reached behind me to take off my bra. By the time I’d taken it and my underwear off, he was finishing rolling one on.

I didn’t know if he moved first or if I did, but we were suddenly together, tumbling into his bed, limbs tangled, and mouths fused. I lost track of who was touching where, of fingers pinching and slipping, of teeth and tongue and lips.

I cried out when he buried himself inside me with one smooth stroke, but before he could ask if I was okay, I pushed my hips up, wanting him deeper, wanting more of that delicious fullness, of the way we fit together. He cursed, and I begged for more. We found a rhythm quickly and an angle that had the base of his shaft rubbing my clitoris, and I found myself hurtling back toward climax.

When it crashed over me, Brody made good on his promise to have me screaming his name, and I couldn’t find it in me to be embarrassed. In fact, as he drove into me harder and faster, chasing his own release, a third orgasm

rolled into the second, cresting seconds after his body stiffened with his own release.

We stayed there, locked together until he found the strength to move and roll off me. Before it could get awkward, he chuckled. “Hell of a way to ring in the new year.”

I couldn't have said it better myself.

Three

## Brody

I loved my work, and I was a social enough person that I actually enjoyed the networking part of the business, but I was starting to wonder if I should start looking into hiring someone to take care of the clients who needed a little extra attention.

Dr. Josephs was a nice guy, and I knew he wasn't drawing things out in an attempt to get a better deal or free samples. Honestly, I'd gotten the impression that he was one of the most genuine people I'd ever met.

That didn't mean I wanted to come back to Stanford again, especially for another business meeting where I was treated to a lengthy lecture about a discussion he had with a colleague about his latest paper. I appreciated people who were passionate about their work – hell, I was one of them – but you had to learn to read people to figure out if you were boring them. Dr. Josephs didn't have that particular skill, and there was only so much a person could listen to before wanting to stick something sharp in their ear.

If I hadn't thought that a contract with Stanford's English department would be good for my business, I might've politely declined the second invitation, putting the responsibility on him to reach out if he was interested in using Shannon's to supply whiskey. Money wasn't the reason I was interested in Stanford, anyway.

In the decade since Shannon's had released its first whiskey, I'd built a reputation for quality liquor, starting with bars around San Ramon and then moving outward. About six or seven years later, I'd had contracts with bars and hotels all over the West Coast. Most of the larger chains had put my whiskey in their hotels all over the world, which had expanded my reach exponentially. Financially, I could've left it there and not really done much of anything else, or I could've stepped back completely and let someone else do the rest of the work, but McCraes didn't know how to be lazy.

So, I'd decided that I wanted to grow my client base in a different area. My parents served on various charity boards, and I was familiar with the type of fundraisers they attended and held. Not wanting anyone to accuse my parents of nepotism, I'd decided to find my own way into upper-class society circles.

Granted, two of my brothers were Stanford alumni, but neither of them was in a position to actually make any decisions on behalf of the university, and they weren't my only siblings who'd graduated from prestigious colleges. My stepsister Paris Carideo had a degree from Yale and my step-cousin slash brother Blaze Gracen was a Professor of Education at John Hopkins, his alma mater.

Still, I'd wanted to go to a few other universities first, so that when I approached ones connected to my family, it would be clear that I wanted to be judged on my own merits. When I'd finally reached out to Stanford a few weeks ago, I'd been able to tell them that my best whiskey was being served at alumni and faculty fundraisers at both Cornell and Columbia.

I sighed as I pulled into the Stanford Shopping Center parking garage. Neither of the faculty members at either of those schools had taken this long to make a decision. I liked Dr. Josephs, but I honestly wondered how anything got done when he was in charge. Then again, maybe he was put in charge of things like this because it guaranteed that nothing would change.

I found a good spot and then headed for Fleming's. Shannon's didn't make wine, but I'd made it a point to get a bottle or two from a few places near the universities I scouted since wine and champagne would be my primary competition for the type of events I was pitching.

I was halfway there when I saw a familiar face...and a familiar body.

Freedom had her head slightly turned, so she hadn't seen me yet, and I took advantage of that to admire her. She wasn't in the same sort of dress she'd been in the first time I'd seen her, obviously, but she looked just as good in the simple dark blue dress she wore right now. The heels looked like they were the same, but I wouldn't have placed a bet on it. I was more interested in how they made her legs look than what they actually were.

Even as I found myself staring, she was reaching for the door and caught my reflection in the glass. She turned, surprise on her face. "Brody?"

“Hey.” I gave her my usual charming smile. “Just getting off work?”

The question was stupid, but I wanted to know if she was meeting a guy, and that seemed a better way to find out than flat-out asking or thinking I might be jealous.

“Are you?” She gave me an almost-defiant look, the sort intended to quickly remind me that she and I hadn’t been on a date the other night. When we’d parted, neither one of us had ever planned to see the other again. We owed each other no answers or explanations.

All right. I guess I’d have to try something else.

“Can I buy you a drink?”

“I don’t date.”

I supposed that answered my question about whether or not she was meeting someone.

Before I could respond, she took a step closer to me, those eyes of hers blazing, and spoke again, her voice low enough that I barely heard her. “I don’t date, but I do fuck.”

My eyebrows shot up, but I managed to control the rest of my expression. “Is that an invitation?”

“More like a challenge.” She reached up to run her finger down my cheek. “You up for it?”

“I don’t have a room.” It killed me to say it, but I wasn’t about to suggest we hook-up in some random bathroom. I definitely didn’t know her well enough to do that.

“Do you have a car?”

I gestured toward the parking garage. “I do.”

“Let’s go.” She walked past me in the direction I’d pointed.

My head was spinning, but I wasn’t about to turn down a second go with her. Since New Year’s Eve, I’d been dreaming about her every night and woken up hard every morning. I’d been with my fair share of women, but none of



them had gotten under my skin the way she had.

Tempted as I was to stay behind her just so I could watch that amazing ass, I moved up next to her so I could direct her to where I'd parked. I'd never been so glad to have tinted windows in my car or to have found a space that would limit visibility. I still wondered if she was going to have me drive us somewhere, but the fact that she'd been the one behind the wheel last time, it seemed more likely that we were actually going to hook-up in my car.

Fuck.

Blood rushed south as I pushed the unlock button on my fob...and then realized that I didn't know which door to open.

"Your call," she said. "I'm on top."

I opened the door behind the driver's seat, pausing only to get out my wallet and retrieve the condom I always kept there. We might not have actual intercourse, but she'd said that she fucked. Better to be prepared.

I got into the back seat and then slid across to the passenger's side of the car, where I had more leg room. I'd barely gotten settled when the door closed, and she was climbing onto me.

Everything dissolved into groping and kissing, tongues tangling. Hands over and under clothes, tugging and shifting and unzipping. I honestly didn't know which of us rolled on the condom because, as soon as she sank down on me, all I could think was, *holy fuck so tight hot damn how fucking lucky so fucking gorgeous tits bouncing ride me fuck...*

The words poured through my mind, chasing out everything that wasn't her and here and now.

Our coupling was fierce and quick, bodies coming together hard and fast, our breathing harsh. She'd drawn blood with her nails before, but I had a feeling both of us would end up with bruises after this. I was determined to make sure she didn't regret any of them.

One hand between us, I found that slick wet spot where we were joined and rubbed my thumb over her clit. She cursed, and her head fell back, her expression twisting up in such a way that I knew she was already close.

The pressure in my balls said I wouldn't be far behind, but she was going to come first if I had to mentally recite the name of every brand of alcohol I knew to hold it off.

Fortunately, it didn't come to that.

Less than a minute later, she cried out, and her body tightened around mine. I pushed up into her, holding her tight, and came.

Stanford.

Fuck.

# Freedom

Brody wasn't the first guy I'd had sex with more than once, but he was definitely the one who'd made the biggest impression. I was halfway home before my body finally stopped throbbing, and I knew it'd be a while before memories of him wouldn't be enough to get me off. I had fantasy fodder for the near future, and that made my smile widen.

My final semester started on January fourteenth, and that meant that I needed to start narrowing my focus on what I would be doing after graduation. Aline and I hadn't discussed anything seriously, but we wouldn't be able to put it off much longer. Our schedules were set, and we already knew our graduation date – June first – but I didn't think any of this was real for Aline yet.

At least her degree pretty much determined what she'd be doing once she finished school, as well as the usual schedule. She could continue her education and pursue a doctorate, but if she'd intended to move right into that, she should've already been planning it.

She might have been a genius graduating with honors, but this was Stanford and far more competitive than other universities. She'd never expressed any interest in doctorate work, so I felt safe in assuming that she'd spend the summer deciding which of the prestigious private schools, either in Palo Alto or back in Los Angeles, she would apply to. Her future was a matter of where, not what.

That wasn't the case for me. My degree in International Policy left multiple avenues open to me, and I had yet to make any definite decision. Dr. Ipres, as my advisor, had talked to me about several possibilities, and the one she seemed to think would fit me best was working for an embassy.

Being able to converse in more than half a dozen languages would make me quite a valuable asset, and it would be a way to facilitate better relations with other countries. I wasn't political, exactly, but governments had to work with

each other, and an embassy seemed like a good way to be involved without being affected too much by a change in political party power.

I locked the car and headed inside, shivering as cool air blew against my bare legs. The sun was almost down, and the heat was going with it. The forecast said we'd be hitting a record low tonight, and for someone raised in L.A., that meant bundling up at home and kicking up the heat.

When I entered the apartment, I found that I wasn't the only one thinking along the lines of staying warm. The temperature was already higher than it had been when I'd left this afternoon. And it smelled amazing. Aline had been baking bread. She didn't do it often, mostly because of how busy she was during the school year, but every so often, she'd get the urge for fresh-baked rolls.

I loved those days. I could make decent bread, but Aline had a real talent for it.

"You have anything specific in mind to go with that?" I asked as I went into the kitchen to see Aline turning over the pan to get the rolls onto the rack. "I think we have what we need for spaghetti."

If she would've told me earlier that she was baking, I would've made sure to have something ready instead of trying to figure it out now, and I wouldn't have been thinking about whether or not the leftovers in the fridge would keep for another day. Still, it would be worth a little trouble to have such a good meal.

"I already have the soup on the stove." Aline pointed at a pot. "That's the last of what Mom sent with us."

I frowned at her voice rather than the words. I didn't mind her having taken the initiative to defrost and heat up the soup. No, what I was thinking was that she didn't sound right. Congested.

"Are you feeling all right?" I asked, reaching out to put my hand on her forehead. "You don't sound well."

Aline rolled her eyes but didn't pull away. "I have a cold, that's all."

“You were sneezing earlier this week,” I reminded her. “And you’re burning up now.”

“Your hands are freezing,” she countered. “And I told you the sneezes were from dust.”

“At least take your temperature.” She might’ve been right about my hands being cold, but I didn’t want to take any chances. “I can keep an eye on the soup.”

She sighed but headed for the bathroom.

“The last thing you need is to start off your last semester sick,” I called after her.

Aline didn’t like to acknowledge that she had a delicate constitution. Our mom’s pregnancy with her had been extremely risky, and she’d been born six weeks early. Both Mom and Aline had almost died. While my sister hadn’t experienced any real long-term issues, she wasn’t someone who could afford to be lackadaisical about her health.

“Ninety-eight exactly,” Aline said as she came back into the kitchen. “It’s a cold.”

“You still need to take it easy.” I reached for the bowls. “Even a cold can be dangerous if you get too run down.”

“I’ll spend the rest of the evening on the couch with hot tea and honey, and I’ll turn in early. Okay?” She retrieved silverware from the drawer and set the utensils next to the bowls.

I brought the still-hot rolls to the table. “After dinner, get me your book list, and I’ll get them tomorrow when I pick up mine.”

“All right,” she said. “Can you get me a new thumb drive while you’re there too?”

I didn’t understand Aline’s need to have a new thumb drive for every semester or why she kept every single one of them, but it wasn’t as if either of us were hurting for money. Our parents were well-off and had established trusts for both of us to use for our education and the pursuits of our respective

careers, so if a new drive each semester was what she wanted, who was I to argue?

I agreed, even as my mind was already shifting my schedule around to accommodate spending more time in the bookstore. My own books would be waiting, but I'd need to actually go through the store to find the ones Aline needed.

I couldn't get to the store any earlier unless I wanted to cancel my dentist appointment, but that would mean I'd have to reschedule, and I doubted they'd have an opening before classes started again. I'd still be able to get the grocery shopping done, but the time would have to come from somewhere. If the leftovers from tonight would keep, I could take the time from dinner preparation, but if not, I'd have to either ask Aline to make dinner again or pick something up on my way home.

At least when the stress of the next few months got to me, I had some scorching memories to call on for relief.

Five

## Brody

I breathed a sigh of relief as I walked through my door and tossed my keys and mail on the table. When I'd left Palo Alto after Freedom and I had finished, I hadn't come back to San Ramon. I'd gone to San Jose.

My oldest brother slash step-cousin, Austin, lived there and had heard of a new hotel that would be perfect for Shannon's. I'd stopped by to see him, but it hadn't been a long visit. Not surprisingly, he'd been busy, and I'd been there on business.

The meeting had gone well, and I was confident that, once the hotel's lawyers had a look at the contract, I'd add them to my list of clients. Hopefully, I'd be able to take care of the details in a single trip.

San Jose wasn't far, but any time I met with a client for the first time or when I knew I'd be drinking, I got a hotel room. I could hold my liquor, but I wasn't willing to risk anyone's safety if I misjudged myself. Because of that, I was used to being away a great deal, but right now, I was looking forward to being home.

As it always did after I spent the holidays with family, my own place seemed bare. In the six years I'd lived here, I'd never decorated for the holidays or put up a tree. Not because I was the Grinch or Scrooge, but because I really didn't see the point. I lived here alone and didn't have many visitors.

I'd made a point of getting an apartment with three bedrooms so I could have a guest room and one specifically for Evanne, but my niece had only stayed here once. With Alec living in Seattle and his own time with Evanne being limited by his custody arrangement with his ex, I didn't get to see my only niece as much as I would've liked, and most of the time I did see her, it was at my parents' house, or when I went to Seattle on business. Still, the room was here.

I smiled as I remembered how excited she'd been on Christmas to see everyone. Almost everyone had made it this year, and the ones who hadn't been able to come had at least been able to video call, including my younger brother, Eoin, who was overseas with his unit. He'd enlisted in the army right out of high school, and it'd been the best thing in the world for him.

Once I dumped my dirty clothes into my hamper and changed into shorts and a t-shirt, I headed for the kitchen to grab a sports drink from the fridge. I'd eaten lunch in San Jose so that, by the time I got home, I could get in a workout before crashing for the rest of the day.

My building had a nice communal fitness room that made paying for a gym membership pointless, especially since having one here meant I didn't have to get back in my car and drive to yet another place. All I needed to do was go downstairs. In fact, the only drawback came during the first few months when I'd had to turn down advances from a few women. My first year out on my own, I'd made the mistake of hooking up with a neighbor who hadn't taken me seriously when I'd said that I wasn't looking for anything serious.

I now had hard and fast rules about the sort of women who were off-limits, and ones who lived in my building were right under women I worked with in terms of "hell no." And "worked with" included ones whose business I was trying to get. I'd been propositioned a time or two that way, but at least that hadn't been an area where I'd needed to learn the hard way.

I frowned as I made my way across the room to the rowing machine. Did Freedom count as a business contact since she obviously was involved at Stanford?

No, I decided. I hadn't pitched my product to her, and she hadn't been at any of the meetings I'd attended. Plus, neither one of us had talked about what we did for a living or our connection to the university. Although, if I was being completely honest, I wasn't sure if I would've chosen work over her if it'd been an issue.

I'd thought a second round would get her out of my head, but it hadn't. It didn't help that I'd been in my damn car after we'd fucked in it, the scent of sex and her all around me. Not to mention the memories that had been playing through my mind all weekend.



As I moved from the rowing machine to the weights, I let myself consider something I'd been trying to push out of my head ever since I'd left the shopping center.

Stanford was about an hour away from San Ramon, but maybe that wouldn't be too far for a casual fuckbuddy or friends-with-benefits kind of relationship. I didn't do serious, but I also believed in taking opportunities when they came up.

Being able to have sex with Freedom on a semi-regular basis just might be worth any hassle that would come along with being an hour away from each other.

# Freedom

Aline had started feeling better before the weekend was done, and even though she never said *I told you so*, I'd thought it on my own. I should have just waited to see how things went and only made my suggestions if absolutely necessary. She wasn't unintelligent, and it wasn't as if she didn't manage things independently.

Even as a child, she'd never had problems with doing her homework or studying for tests – not that she'd ever really needed to do much studying. She'd always gotten up on time on her own, and since starting college, had made it to all her classes without needing me to remind her or help her get around campus.

In the near future, she'd be in charge of an entire classroom of children. Take care of them, teach them. She'd excelled during her time as a student teacher, and I had no doubt she'd do the same when she was fully licensed. She was going to be amazing.

“What do you think about getting pizza for dinner?” Aline asked as she breezed into the living room. “It's our last free Friday for a while. I thought we could relax, maybe watch a movie.”

“Pizza sounds good,” I agreed. “Pepperoni, bacon, and extra cheese?”

“With breadsticks and dipping sauce.” She grinned at me. “And one of those massive chocolate chip cookies.”

She plopped down on the couch and leaned against me the way she had done since she was a toddler. I was four years older than her, and she'd been small for so long that even when she'd finally ended up at a respectable five feet, four inches, we'd often still end up with her curled up against my side like she was five and I was nine again.

“Anything in particular you want to watch?” I asked. “Comedy or musical?”

Aline shrugged. "I'm not sure. Maybe one of each? One now and then one during dinner?"

My phone rang before I could respond, and as soon as I saw the name, I answered it. "Dr. Ipres, hello."

"Good afternoon," she said. "Are you free at the moment?"

"I am."

I stood, and Aline stretched out on the couch, picking up her Kindle from the low coffee table.

"Is something wrong?" I asked as I went back to my bedroom.

I didn't think Dr. Ipres was going to be discussing anything that Aline couldn't know about, but Aline could sometimes get overly excited by something she was reading and talk out loud to the characters. Not long after she'd moved in here, I'd been on a video call with a study group when she'd shouted something along the lines of "why would you do that" and scared the life out of me.

"Nothing's wrong," Dr. Ipres said. "I know this is short notice, but I was wondering if you'd be willing to help me with an incoming student."

I was confused. "What do you need me to do?"

"A fellow faculty member is friends with a couple in Spain who have recently moved to California. Their daughter, Karina, will be starting at Stanford on Monday, and while she does know English, her family is concerned that, if she's left on her own, at least for this semester, she'll fall behind."

I really hoped this wasn't going to be a request for me to hand-hold this girl all semester.

"Dr. Josephs had arranged for his TA to show Karina around over the weekend, forgetting that the young man had taken the semester off because his mother was having major surgery."

I'd taken two of Dr. Josephs's classes during my sophomore year, and I'd liked him well enough. He was extremely intelligent and articulate on his

subjects, but it had been clear that his teaching assistants had been the ones to keep him organized. Brilliant but scatter-brained.

“He came to see me early this morning because he’d suddenly realized that he needed someone to take his TA’s place, and that person needed to be fluent in Spanish.” Dr. Ipres sighed. “That’s also when he told me that Karina is interested in the Department of Classics, specifically wanting to focus on Greek studies.”

Now, I understood. “Which means it would make sense to have someone who speaks both Spanish and Greek to help with any cross-translation issues.”

“Precisely.”

I held back a sigh. I hadn’t wanted to take on anything extra this semester, but Dr. Ipres had been a wonderful mentor and advisor. Plus, I knew she’d mention this in any recommendation letter, and it would look good on my resumé. Not only would I be able to say that I’d done translating from other languages to English or vice versa, but also had gone from one language to another, with neither one being my native tongue.

“Will I be able to meet her prior to her starting classes?”

“Thank you,” Dr. Ipres said, relief evident in her voice. “She’ll actually be at my office in about forty minutes. Would you be able to meet me there? It shouldn’t take long.”

“I’ll be there in twenty minutes,” I promised.

“Thank you,” Dr. Ipres said again, the gratitude coming across loud and clear. “I’ll see you then.”

Re-arranging my schedule for today, at least, would be easy. I’d pick up pizza on the way home, and we could still have our dinner and movie. While Aline watched, I could do my usual pre-semester skimming of my textbooks, as well as make any necessary notes about this Karina.

After quickly changing clothes into something more professional than my sweats, I went back to the living room to explain the change in plans to my sister.

Twenty-two minutes later, I walked into Dr. Ipres's office, already talking as I entered the room. "I'm sorry I'm late. There was a new detour that took me a couple blocks out of the way and—"

The rest of what I'd intended to say died on my tongue as I realized my mentor wasn't alone. Sitting in the chair opposite Dr. Ipres's desk was a pretty, dark-haired young woman.

"It's quite all right," Dr. Ipres said with a smile. If I hadn't known her as well as I did, I might've missed the tightening at the corners of her mouth and the annoyance in her eyes. I didn't think it was directed at me. "Freedom Mercier, meet Karina Montoya."

"That is really your name?" Her heavily accented question held curiosity rather than ridicule.

"It is." I sat down next to her, giving her a polite smile.

"Ms. Mercier will be your guide," Dr. Ipres explained. "She will show you around campus, ensure that you know where everything is. If at any point this semester you have questions or difficulties understanding your professors, you can reach out to her."

Karina looked over at me and rattled off a question in Spanish.

I raised an eyebrow and answered, letting her know that I actually did know that Spanish wasn't the same in every country and that I'd studied many of the differences between the largest of the Spanish-speaking countries.

"You are very good," she admitted before turning her attention back to Dr. Ipres. "She will do."

I folded my hands onto my lap, allowing my own annoyance at the question to translate into pressure there rather than showing any emotion on my face.

"Ms. Mercier is one of our top Political Science students," Dr. Ipres said, her tone taking on an edge, as if Karina's words had offended her on my behalf. "She is fluent in several languages, including Spanish and Greek, which is why she was chosen to assist you as you transition to life here at Stanford."

A flush of pride colored my cheeks. Dr. Ipres was a tough professor, always pushing us to excel, and while she didn't disapprove of complimenting students who did well, she also didn't offer praise easily.

"Where is your dormitory?" Karina asked, deigning to look my way.

"I live in an off-campus apartment with my sister."

For some reason, that seemed to annoy her. "To which sorority do you belong?"

"I'm not in one." I resisted the impulse to tell her that one of the reasons I had accomplished what Dr. Ipres had said was because I focused all of my energy on my work. I really didn't dislike or look down on the sororities. It would have been snark on my part.

Karina sighed. "Do you at least know of the best clubs? I do not wish to be working all the time. What is the American saying? 'All work and no play will make Jack a dull boy?'"

Dr. Ipres saved me from having to answer that particular question. "Two clubs in the area allow admittance at the age of eighteen with a stamp that marks them as underage. The rest require a photo ID stating that you are the legal drinking age of twenty-one."

Another sigh, as if this was the most disappointing news she'd ever heard. At least she didn't ask if I could get her a fake ID, though I wouldn't put it past her to ask it when Dr. Ipres wasn't around. Karina didn't seem like a cruel or mean person, but everything she'd displayed so far made me think that she wasn't going to accept anything that interfered with what she wanted to do.

I wondered if Dr. Ipres was regretting helping out Dr. Josephs as much as I was regretting accepting the task. Instead of coming up with an excuse as to why I wasn't the right person for the job, however, I just reminded myself that Dr. Ipres had been good to me, and I didn't want to let her down. It was, after all, only for one semester. I could put up with anything for that period of time if it was for someone I respected, and this had the added benefit of reflecting well on me for potential employers.

That didn't mean I had to enjoy it, though.

Seven

# Brody

“You look like you lost some weight,” Theresa said as she gave me a hug. “Are you taking care of yourself?”

“I’m fine, Mom,” I promised before kissing her forehead. “And I promise I weigh the same as I did at Christmas. If anything, I weigh more after everything I ate that day.”

“Good to see you, lad.” Da gave me a brief hug, thumping me on the back hard enough to make me think I might need to start going to the gym more often.

“Uncle Brody!” My eight-year-old niece barreled into me.

I managed to shift enough to avoid getting a shoulder in my crotch and then glared at my brother as he tried not to laugh. Alec was the firstborn on the McCrae side of the family and the only one of us kids to retain a Scottish accent. It wasn’t as thick as Da’s, but having spent his college years in Glasgow and consciously making a point to keep his accent, it was there unless he decided to intentionally Americanize it.

“Hey, kiddo.” I gave her a hug. “You back in school yet?”

“Of course, Uncle Brody.” Evanne rolled her eyes before skipping off.

“Eight goin’ on thirty, that one,” I said to Alec.

Aside from when my emotions got the best of me, the only time I really had an accent was when I spoke to Alec. When we’d first moved to the U.S., Alec had seen changing the way we spoke as losing our mother all over again, distancing ourselves from her. I was the only one he’d told that to, so I’d done my best to maintain my own accent, at least when I talked to him.

“Aye.” The love on his face as he watched his daughter was plain to see. He wasn’t the most vocal person when it came to talking about how he felt, but no one who ever saw them together could doubt how much he loved her.

We all did, regardless of which of us shared DNA with her. We'd all fight and die for her without question. McCrae, Carideo, Gracen. It didn't matter if we called our parents Da and Theresa or Patrick and Mom, or some mixture of the two. We were family.

"Brody, please tell me you have whiskey with you." Paris's mocha brown eyes were slightly panicked as she came up to me. "I forgot to get the wine, and we can't make a toast with water. It's bad luck."

I resisted the urge to pat my sister on the head just to annoy her. She just wanted everything to go well for Theresa's birthday. Like a good big brother, I held up the bag I'd brought in along with Mom's present.

"I always bring a couple bottles for the family to take home."

"You're a lifesaver." She kissed my cheek and raced off with the bag.

"She forgot the wine, didn't she?" Rome asked, shaking his head. "I told her I'd help her with the planning, but she insisted she wanted to do it herself since she would be here."

"She forgot it," I confirmed. "But if I was you, I wouldn't mention it."

Rome gave me a sideways look. "I'm not an idiot."

"Well, you did challenge Sean to an eggnog drinking contest at Christmas, and when he said no, you decided to prove to him it wasn't a bad idea to—"

Rome punched my shoulder. "Shut up," he hissed. "Mom doesn't know about that."

"Everyone, come over to the computer," Mom called out. "Xander's doing a video call."

I followed the rest of my siblings over to where Mom was sitting. Sean's twin, Xander, lived in England where he played football – *real* football as Da would say – for Tottenham Hotspur, which meant he lived farther away from home than any of the rest of us. Which also meant he made it home the least amount. Needless-to-say, this wasn't the first time we'd done a video call with him.

Or some of the others.



Over the past two years, we'd at least shifted to conference calls where we could get everyone at once. Well, almost everyone. Eoin wasn't always able to join in, and I saw that was the case today. That meant we'd be talking to Xander as well as Blaze in Baltimore, Rose from her ranch in Colorado, and the New York trio: Maggie, London, and Carson.

After everyone was on the call, Paris handed out a finger of whiskey to those of us who were present, and everyone in their own homes got whatever they had available. When we were all set, we looked to Da for the toast.

"Another year with this wonderful woman." Da smiled at Theresa, his light blue eyes shining. "And every day, I thank the good Lord for her comin' into this world an unmentioned number of years ago."

Mom smacked his arm playfully.

"I ken better than to be tellin' a woman's age," he said with a grin that looked just like the one I saw in the mirror every morning.

She laughed. "Get on with it, Patrick."

"Happy birthday." He leaned down and kissed her cheek. "To my heart, my love. *Sláinte*." He raised his glass, and we did the same, echoing the last word.

After the toast, Mom and Da talked to my siblings on the screen while the rest of us drifted around the living room, waiting for the call to end and Paris to bring out the cake. I followed Cory and Fury, telling myself I just wanted to tell them how things were going with my possible Stanford contract.

It had nothing to do with the woman I'd found there.

"You heard from Dr. Josephs yet?" Fury asked as he leaned against the entryway to the kitchen.

I shook my head. "He said he'll get back to me by the end of the month."

"I like the guy," Fury said, "but you know how there's that whole 'absent-minded professor' stereotype? That's him."

"He lost my paper on *Lord of the Rings* and the Industrial Revolution," Cory said. "It was a good thing I always kept my papers for an extra semester, or I

might've ended up flunking one of the literature classes I needed to graduate.”

“Did he ever go off on tangents that you could barely understand?” I asked. “I mean, I know I didn't go to college, and I wouldn't have been able to get into Stanford if I'd applied, but I don't think I'm a stupid person, and I could hardly follow anything once he got going on some paper he'd had published.”

Cory laughed. “Yeah, he would always get so caught up in whatever subject he was into at the time that he could spend an entire class off the syllabus and never even notice that no one had any clue what he was talking about.”

None of us said anything for a couple minutes, but that wasn't unusual with those two. Neither of them were very talkative. I didn't mind, though. Everyone else was talking enough that it wasn't quiet in the room.

I wanted to ask them about Freedom. She had the sort of name that would stick out even if they'd just heard it in passing, and if they'd ever seen her, they'd definitely remember. Except I wasn't actually sure if I wanted to know if they knew her. If they did, I'd have to ask if they'd hooked up with her, and that wasn't something any guy wanted to ask his brother, let alone two of them.

Fortunately, another topic of conversation came up when Alec joined us.

“Have any of you heard from Eoin?”

“He talked to Da and Theresa yesterday,” Cory said. “Wished her a happy birthday.”

Like me, the twins went back and forth between calling Theresa by her first name and calling her Mom. Also like me, they tended to use her first name more often when Alec was around. Out of all of us, he'd had the most difficulty accepting our stepmom, and it'd taken him a long time to call her mom at all. He loved her and our family, but not everything in life was simple.

“He still coming home in the spring?”

“As far as I know,” Cory answered. “Seems like things are going pretty well.”

We all knew that ‘pretty well’ was about as good as we would get. Eoin never promised that he’d be fine, not like that, anyway. He wasn’t superstitious, and he never minded talking about plans for when his tour was over, that sort of thing, but he’d told me once that he felt like saying anything like “I’ll be fine” would be like lying because he couldn’t promise that.

Still, he’d made it through two tours overseas without any injuries more serious than scrapes and bruises. Not even a broken bone. It’d be the same this time too.

And maybe next year, he’d get to be home for at least one holiday or birthday.

Eight

# Freedom

I looked at the checklist that Dr. Ipres had given me, even though I'd already memorized it. When her TA had abruptly left at the beginning of the previous fall semester, I'd volunteered to help her until she could find a new teaching assistant, and while I'd known that there was a possibility of her not finding one for the spring semester either, I hadn't realized that my unofficial volunteering would include party preparation.

Of a sort, anyway.

Technically, the event was an exhibit of a Greek art collection recently purchased by a wealthy friend of hers, but a surprising number of the same elements went into planning both types of events. For example, Dr. Ipres wanted background music. She said she trusted me to find the right kind to set the mood.

I probably wouldn't have laughed at her word choice if she hadn't written it in a slightly different way for the list – *mood music*, she'd called it.

Fortunately, I'd been able to disguise my laughter as a coughing fit because that wasn't something I really wanted to have to explain to my advisor. She was fluent in English, but one of the things I'd learned when studying various languages was that no matter how much a person knew when it came to pronunciation, grammar, sentence structure, those sorts of things, there would always be phrases and plays on words that didn't carry over. Non-native speakers gradually picked them up over time, but which ones they learned depended on numerous factors.

Apparently, Dr. Ipres hadn't gotten to 'mood music.'

I'd spent the last couple hours figuring out what that meant for an art show. I had ten days from today to put everything together, and I wanted it to be perfect. Classical seemed like the best choice, but that wasn't a small genre. Other people might've just pulled up something generic and gone with it, but

there was a big difference between Beethoven's "Fifth Symphony" and Debussy's "Claire de Lune." And that wasn't even taking into consideration how many different instruments and centuries the genre spanned.

Finally, I decided to make several lists for Dr. Ipres to choose from. Most would be traditional classical music, such as Hayden and Mozart, but I thought I'd go outside the box for at least one of them. Dr. Ipres had sent me a handful of pictures of the collection, so I intended to use those pictures to create a playlist out of movie and television scores. I didn't know how well it would come across, but I liked the idea of taking some initiative to try something different. I didn't often get that opportunity in my field.

Now that I knew what I planned to do with the music, I could put that aside while I took care of something that needed to be done within normal business hours. Like the next item on my list.

Alcohol.

Champagne was a given, and I remembered what we'd had at the New Year's Eve party, which meant I just had to place the order for the same. That took half an hour. Technically, sparkling water and apple juice weren't alcoholic, but I lumped them under that same category since the place that supplied the champagne also offered non-alcoholic drinks, so it made sense to do it that way. The next was to order the red and white wines. The last one on the list was whiskey.

I thought it was a little odd that Dr. Ipres had specifically requested whiskey. While I hadn't been to a plethora of art exhibits in my twenty-five years, I had gone to a few charity events with my parents, both as a child and an adult. Whiskey wasn't that common unless there was an open bar that was offering a greater variety of liquor, but Dr. Ipres hadn't put any sort of mixed drinks on the list. Just champagne, wine, and whiskey.

I was far from a whiskey connoisseur, but I had sampled some a time or two. Alcohol in various forms showed up in cultures all across the world. Understanding that aspect of a country's culture was more important than a lot of people realized. When I first realized that whiskey was on the list, I'd thought that I'd need to do some research for this particular product, but Dr. Ipres had surprised me by providing a name.

“Shannon’s,” I said the name out loud.

I wondered where the name came from. Could’ve been a wife or mom or girlfriend, or the person who’d named it could’ve named it after herself. Or himself. While not common in America, Shannon could be a guy’s name. I’d satisfy my curiosity later, though. Dr. Ipres had the number written down too. Wherever she’d found this Shannon’s, it’d made quite an impression on her.

I dialed the number, and since Aline was at a meeting with her advisor, I put the phone on speaker.

“Good afternoon, Shannon’s. How may I help you?” The woman’s voice was bright and professional, a good combination.

“Hi, my name is Freedom Mercier, and I’m calling on behalf of Stanford University.”

“Oh!” The excitement in the woman’s voice surprised me. “Let me get Mr. McCrae on the line. He’s been waiting to hear from you.”

Even if she’d waited to put me on hold, I was too confused to be able to think of a single thing to say. I had no idea who this Mr. McCrae was or why he’d be waiting to hear from me. My mind raced, trying to figure it out, so I wasn’t off-balance when Mr. McCrae came on the line. Perhaps Dr. Ipres had mentioned something to him about reaching out for an event or two in the future. That was the only logical answer I could think of.

“Freedom?”

I froze. All of me. Every single cell. Including my brain. I couldn’t think because I didn’t want to think because that would mean I’d have to actually acknowledge what I’d heard.

“Freedom?” The man I couldn’t possibly know cleared his throat. “Miss Mercier?”

The hesitation in his voice helped me regain some sense of equilibrium, at least enough for me to speak. “Mr. McCrae?”

Not that I had anything intelligent to say, apparently.

“You can call me Brody.”

Shit.

His voice was even, not a hint of emotion in it, and I knew it was because he wasn't one hundred percent positive that I was the woman he'd screwed. The odds were in his favor, of course, since I didn't have a common name and I'd said I was from Stanford. Maybe he didn't want to make the assumption and be wrong...or maybe he was giving me the choice about whether or not we'd acknowledge that we knew each other.

I wasn't going to let us both be awkward or have to tell Dr. Ipres that I couldn't get the whiskey she wanted because I was too cowardly to face someone with whom I'd had two sexual encounters.

"I'm okay with using first names if you are," I managed to say.

"All right." There was relief in those two words. "I have to admit, I'm a little surprised to hear from you. I wasn't aware you worked with Dr. Josephs."

I frowned. "I'm not following. I'm calling on behalf of Dr. Cicily Ipres. She's having an art exhibit and gave me the name Shannon's as the place to order whiskey for the event."

"Huh." After a brief pause, he spoke again, "I was at the New Year's Eve party at the invitation of Dr. Josephs because I'm trying to negotiate a contract to be the whiskey provider for any university functions."

I suddenly remembered how that first kiss had tasted like fine whiskey.

Shit.

"She and Dr. Josephs are friendly, so that's probably how she has your name." I pulled myself together. This was business. That was all. "Shall we discuss the art exhibit?"

Nine

# Freedom

I glared at the offensive wall and wondered if Dr. Ipres would be opposed to me taking a sledgehammer to it. Accent walls were a thing. I understood that. *This* wall, however, was less of an accent and more of an assault.

What had, up until last week, been a perfectly average space with tasteful ecru walls was now three walls of a decent burnt orange color...and one Pepto-Bismol pink. Personally, I thought the orange was too dark for the space, but at least it wasn't, well, hideous.

"Is this an American thing?" Karina asked as she sidled up to me. She had a two-hour break between her morning and afternoon classes and had decided to 'help' me with the art exhibit preparation.

Lucky me.

"Is what an American thing?" I kept my gaze on the wall, as if it would change color out of sheer embarrassment or contrition.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her gesture toward the wall. "Using such a color. It makes me think of that commercial."

And then she started to sing the "indigestion, upset stomach, diarrhea" jingle.

I cut her off as quickly and politely as I could. "No. This is a 'people with no taste' thing."

She gave me a puzzled look.

"Someone who doesn't know what looks good," I explained.

"What will you do?" She walked back to the barstool where she'd been sitting for the past half hour, snapping her gum and doing something on her phone. To my surprise, she actually looked at me as if she wanted an answer.



The problem was, I wasn't quite sure what to tell her. I'd only realized that this problem existed fifteen minutes ago when I'd pulled off what I believed to be a painter's sheet. Fortunately, my mind moved quickly, and the first step of how to handle this popped into my head.

"I need to find out who was in charge of having this space painted," I said as I walked over to where Karina sat.

I'd brought my laptop with me, and I booted it up. Dr. Ipres had a class right now, which meant that calling her was out of the question, and making calls to random department heads most likely wouldn't accomplish anything aside from annoying the professors.

Another thought followed that one. While it was possible that a specific department had requested that this room be painted, the possibility also existed that the decision had been made by a committee of some kind. I hadn't really paid much attention to who was in charge of directing the maintenance staff and grounds crew.

Mass email would be the most likely to get me a result. I'd keep it brief to avoid wasting anyone's time, and it might take a day or two for me to receive an answer, but it was definitely the most efficient way to accomplish what I needed.

*To whom it may concern,*

*The upcoming Greek art exhibit, sponsored by Dr. Ipres, will be taking place in the recently-renovated second-floor space in the Cantor Arts Center. I need to speak with the person or persons who arranged for the work to be done. My contact details are listed below.*

*Thank you.*

I hated writing these sorts of emails. Give me a clear-cut direction and a specific person to communicate with, and I was fine. I had no problem being firm and asking tough questions if I knew I was speaking to the right person.

When it came to diplomacy, however, I wasn't quite as skilled in written form as I was face-to-face or on the phone. I'd theorized that it was due to my inability to read or convey body language through email and text, but whatever the reason, I struggled with that particular aspect of communication.

“You are asking for help?” Karina’s voice at my shoulder startled me.

“What?”

She pointed at the screen. “You are asking for help.”

The way her statement rubbed me the wrong way made no sense. The words held no malice or even accusation, but I still bristled. Fortunately, I was self-aware enough to know that this was my issue and not hers, even if I didn’t know the exact personal reasons for my response.

“I need information, and this is the most efficient way of getting it,” I explained. “Once I know which person or department approved and hired a company to renovate and paint this room, I can contact the company and ask them about the color scheme choice.”

“You could ask the person who hired them, right?”

I nodded. “I could, but if someone I work with specifically wanted those colors, they might be insulted that I’m asking about it.”

Karina frowned, as if the concept that I didn’t want to butt heads with the faculty was foreign to her. I doubted it was a language issue, though. Even in the very brief amount of time I’d spent with her had revealed a self-centered nature that rarely expressed any consideration or understanding of anything beyond her world.

I could have explained to Karina that, in addition to having most of a semester left where I would need to interact with a member of the faculty, I also hadn’t yet ruled out pursuing a doctorate or a tenure position here. Making the wrong person angry could negatively impact my career path.

Instead, I deflected and then changed the subject. “While I wait for a response, I’m going to go back to my list and see what I can do without needing that information.”

Surprising me, she stayed where she was and watched my every move closely. I ignored her and focused on the work. If she wanted to ask questions, I’d answer them, but I wasn’t her babysitter, and I wasn’t here to entertain her.

“Do you plan these things often?” she asked.

Of course she wanted to talk.

“I’ve helped with a few events before, but this is the first one I’ve done the majority of the work for.”

“Will there be a live band?”

Her question almost made me smile. Almost. “This isn’t really a ‘live band’ type of event.”

“But we will be drinking.”

She said it as a statement, but it was more the *we* of it that I needed to address. “Anyone in attendance who is old enough to drink will be allowed to have alcohol, but an ID will be required.”

She gave me a smirk wide enough to be seen out of the corner of my eye. “Certainly.”

I kept my tone casual. “Anyone attempting to use a fake ID will go in front of the disciplinary committee.”

She sighed. “It is probably all wine and champagne. I have plenty of that back home.”

I knew that countries all had their own legal age when it came to drinking, but I had no idea if Karina was lying or just trying to manipulate me. If it was the latter, she either wasn’t very good at it, or she was used to easier marks.

I ignored the comment and flipped to another tab on my browser, forgetting until I saw what I’d been staring at over breakfast this morning.

“Wow!”

Shit.

She followed with a few Spanish exclamations that said essentially the same thing. She was impressed.

I started to close the window but realized that would only make things worse. I had to act as if what was on my screen meant nothing.

Because it didn't.

"Shannon's is providing the whiskey for the event. Dr. Ipres asked for it specifically." I clicked a link on the page to take it to the list of places that served Shannon's, hoping the tension in my body didn't show in my movements.

"Does he come with the whiskey?" She leaned over and used the touchpad to go back to the previous page. "I would drink him up."

I wanted to snap at her that he was too old for her, that she needed to stay away from him, but I caught myself in time.

"Mr. McCrae is the owner of Shannon's," I said in what I hoped was a casual tone. "He doesn't make deliveries."

"Did he give you a special delivery?" She grinned at me in a way that left absolutely no doubt about what she was asking.

I shot her an annoyed look and closed the browser window, but I didn't acknowledge her question.

"Do you have a boyfriend? A lover?" She plopped down on the stool next to me.

Apparently, she'd found something interesting enough to take her attention from her phone.

Me.

Wonderful.

Ten

## Brody

I only wanted to look professional. That was why I'd brought a suit and tie with me instead of my usual dress shirt and slacks. It had nothing to do with the fact that this particular business meeting was with Freedom. I didn't care what she thought of me.

We'd managed to have a civil discussion when we'd talked on the phone about Shannon's supplying the alcohol for the art exhibit. We could meet and keep it purely professional.

I had absolutely no interest in anything more.

And I certainly wasn't hoping that she'd look at me and want me.

She'd told me to meet her at the Cantor Arts Center, which was easy enough to find. The problem was that she hadn't said where in the building, so as I walked inside, I stopped and looked around, hoping she'd be waiting for me. When I didn't see her, I took out my phone to check the time.

And maybe to also check to see if she'd called or texted.

I didn't see anything from her, but I did see that it was exactly one o'clock, which was when she'd told me to be here. A part of me wondered if she was intentionally keeping me waiting, just to prove that she could. Not in some petty, mean way, but more like establishing that we were going by business roles, not personal ones.

Heels clicked on the floor, and I turned, knowing it was her before I even saw her approaching figure. "Brody."

At least she was sticking with my first name. I didn't want to go back to Miss Mercier and Mr. McCrae, even if I wasn't interested in anything personal with her. Which I wasn't. If we were going to work together, I wanted us to be at ease with each other, especially if Dr. Josephs signed a contract with me.

I could feel a smile curving my lips, and it took all my willpower not to give her a lazy once over, linger on parts as I remembered what it had been like to touch her, taste her. Instead, I kept my head and my eyes up, refusing to look anywhere but her face.

Not that it was a hardship to look there. She wasn't simply physically beautiful, though. She had intelligence and a sharp wit, the sort anyone could see in those clear blue eyes. She didn't miss much, and I had a feeling that she understood even more than she let on, preferring to let people judge her by her appearance. And they would. Asshole men who thought she was just a hot body that would be a great lay. Bitchy women who'd assume that she'd only gotten where she was by fucking people in power.

I wouldn't claim to know her well, but in the short time we'd spent together, I had figured out that she was the type of woman who worked hard and refused to let anyone treat her as unworthy or undeserving.

In fact, I had the feeling that she'd rip the balls off anyone who even tried.

"Freedom." I held out my hand automatically, just like I would have during any business meeting, regardless of how many times I'd met the person. The zing of electricity that went through me when she took my hand was something else. Something I'd never felt with anyone in my life.

I didn't know if it was my imagination that we held onto each other's hands a little longer than was appropriate for a professional handshake, but it felt that way. As if she had been thinking the same thing, we both let go at the same time.

"This way."

She started to walk, and I followed, about a half-step behind for a couple feet until I found her rhythm. She refused to meet pace, but that didn't surprise or bother me. I couldn't deny that I wanted to get to know her, figure out why I couldn't get her out of my head, and if that meant letting her take the lead, I was fine with that, especially under these circumstances. The last thing I needed was to initiate something that backfired on me and lost me not only this event but anything else in Stanford too. I needed to be cautious.

"This is the space we'll be working with," she said as we entered the room.

I tried not to wince when I saw that hideous pink wall, but she must have caught at least some of my expression because she laughed.

“Yes, I’m aware of how ugly it is.”

“I’m glad to hear that because I’d be worried if you didn’t.” I went a bit closer, my arm brushing against hers in a movement that could have been accidental. “Please tell me it’s going to be a different color by the time of the exhibit.”

She cleared her throat and stepped back, her smile going back to polite and professional. “I’m meeting with the contractor on Monday to discuss what he did.” She shook her head, looking torn between amusement and annoyance. “Apparently, the right hand didn’t know that the left hand had horrible taste in colors.”

I turned in a slow circle, taking in everything else. “It’s a good space otherwise.”

“It is,” she said. “Now, Shannon’s whiskey isn’t the only beverage that will be available at the event. We’ll have champagne and wine as well as a few non-alcoholic options available.”

“Are you going to have a bartender or a wait staff?” I followed her subject shift to the actual event.

“That’s one of the things I haven’t yet decided,” she said. “Which do you feel works best for your product?”

A little surprised by her question, I had to take a minute to think. “I suppose it would depend on how you want the drinks served. Wine and champagne aren’t served with ice, while whiskey and many non-alcoholic options are often requested with either a little or a lot of it.”

She nodded. “I was thinking along those same lines.”

Something else occurred to me. “Will this event be invitation only?”

“Dr. Ipres wants to have an invitation-only reception for ninety minutes and then open it to general students and faculty who need their ID to get in.” She tucked some wayward hair behind her ear. “We’ll also allow one guest per

person.”

I looked over at the front doors. “So, you’ll have security at the entrance, then? Or someone checking IDs and invitations?”

“Campus security will be providing people for the doors and to walk the floor.” She tapped her chin with a finger, drawing attention to a perfect manicure that more than one of my sisters would’ve envied. “We’ll need someone to check IDs to make sure we don’t have any underage drinking.”

“If what I’ve heard about college from my siblings is true, that will be a job all on its own.” I wanted to smack myself as soon as the words came out of my mouth. I wasn’t ashamed that I hadn’t gone to college, but there was a difference between not being ashamed of it and making a joke of how my only information on the college experience came from my siblings.

“I’ve already had one eighteen-year-old ask about drinking.” Her cheeks flushed. “Sorry. That was unprofessional of me.”

I made a dismissive gesture. “Don’t worry about it.” Before she could debate it, I brought the conversation back to what we’d been discussing. “Do you plan to limit drinks or make it a completely open bar?”

Freedom sighed and rubbed her forehead. “That’s a good idea.”

Shit. I hadn’t meant to make her feel bad.

I wanted to tell her that she would’ve thought of it herself, that this was something I’d come up with first because it was part of my job as a supplier of alcohol to think of things that affected how I did that job. Such as how much whiskey needed to be provided for specific events. But I knew that, no matter how helpful and informative I was trying to be, it could sound condescending and patronizing, which was the last thing I wanted.

“What did the other suppliers say?” I asked instead.

“I haven’t talked to them other than the basic preliminaries,” she answered, seeming to snap out of her frustration fairly quickly.

I couldn’t stop the smile that came when I heard that I was the only one she’d asked about this. She could’ve reached out to all the suppliers, and it



would've been completely professional.

But she'd just asked me.

"Each person could get a marker of some kind when they come in, and they could use that at the bar."

I wasn't sure if she was talking to me or herself, but since it wasn't a question, I kept my mouth shut and listened, waiting for a chance to help.

"Tickets can be lost or stolen. Given away." Her forehead furrowed as she talked through the idea. "People might come through more than once, just to get more tickets. If no one's having a party, that increases the likelihood of crashers who just want to drink and goof off."

Watching her mind work was fascinating.

"An ID scan would work for students and faculty." She turned toward the door, the expression in her eyes making me think that what she was seeing wasn't actually there, only a picture in her mind. "Scan it at the entrance and have a two-drink limit on it. Scan it at the bar where it'll register if the person is twenty-one or over. Provide guest cards for non-faculty and students. Keeping track of both will also give us a more accurate count of attendees, which will help for similar events in the future. So, if we estimate one hundred to one hundred twenty invitations, then the capacity..." Her voice trailed off, and I assumed she was doing the math in her head.

"Impressive." I couldn't help myself.

"What?" She blinked as if she'd forgotten I was there.

Not good for my ego, but I didn't mind a bruise or two.

"How you broke down my question and figured out a way to get what you wanted in only a few minutes."

"Impressive for a woman." The words had bite.

"No," I countered. "For anyone."

Her eyes narrowed slightly, as if she didn't believe me, but she didn't actually argue.

I took the opportunity to expound on my statement. “I’ve done business with people all over, and I’ve seen plenty of them have to postpone decisions because they can’t think on their feet like you just did. It’s usually either something impulsive because they don’t want to take the extra time, or them needing to run numbers and that sort of thing. You did it all in your head, including the math.”

A flush stained her cheeks, and for a moment, I thought that my explanation had made her angrier. When I looked closer, though, I realized she was embarrassed. I didn’t know if it was because of what I’d said or the fact that it was me who’d said it, but I liked the reaction. I liked that I’d gotten under her skin in some way.

“So, like I said, impressive.” My voice had lowered unintentionally, and the statement came out almost...sexual. Her blush grew darker, but now I could see the heat in her eyes.

Fuck.

She wanted me too.

“Let’s take a seat and discuss numbers.” Freedom gestured toward the stools. “I’d like to get your thoughts on how the different types of beverages might be broken up between guests.”

I grinned, even more pleased than I had been only a few minutes earlier. She wanted my opinion on more than just my own area of expertise.

And maybe after giving my opinion, she’d let me take her to dinner.

Eleven

# Freedom

The dinner invitation came as a pleasant surprise, but my own response had been what shocked me the most. I'd told him that I'd only accept if we had room service back at his hotel. The way his eyes had darkened to a stormy ocean blue-green had told me that he'd understood that I wanted more than food.

I looked at my reflection with a critical eye. Brody and I weren't going out in public, really. Just to the hotel. No one would have any expectations about my appearance. Brody didn't seem to care that I was dressed for business instead of in something meant to attract him.

Because I hadn't chosen my outfit based on how I thought he'd like it.

No, I'd picked my favorite sweaterdress because today was cool enough for me to wear it, and the weather didn't allow for it very often. I like the way it flattered my figure, not hiding or hugging anything. The deep blue color looked good with my skin tone and made my eyes almost glow. The dress also wore well, meaning I didn't look like I'd spent nine hours in it already. I reapplied my deodorant and freshened my makeup, then undid my hair, letting it fall over my shoulders and ease the ache in my scalp.

Hopefully, Brody would ease other aches soon enough.

I only had one more thing to do before I went back out to Brody. I picked up my phone and tapped out a message to my sister.

*I have some things to finish up for the exhibit so I can have the weekend free. I might be home late, or I might not come home at all tonight. Unless you need me.*

Yes, I was stretching the truth, but I didn't share details of my sex life with her at any point in time. I wasn't about to start with this. It wasn't as if I intended to bring Brody home to meet the family, anyway. She didn't need to know about him, just that I might not be home. I'd worked late before,

sometimes even staying at Dr. Ipres's house, so I didn't risk waking Aline up by coming in late.

Her reply came back quickly. *Don't work too hard or worry about me. I'm finishing up my first draft of my paper and then am going to have an early night. I'll see you in the morning either way.*

Now that I could put Aline out of my mind, I was ready to focus on the drop-dead gorgeous man waiting for me. Any relaxing I did this weekend would only help me focus more easily on Monday. Brody could accomplish in a few hours what two days with hot baths and binging comedies from the late eighties couldn't do.

A thrill went through me at the memories of his talented hands, but the first thing I wanted to feel on me when we got to his room was his tongue. More than once since we'd last been together, I'd dreamed of him going down on me, and I needed to know if the reality was as good as the fantasy.

Yes, *needed*.

I had to admit that as I walked toward him, desire twisting my stomach and sending my pulse racing with each step. It was beyond *want*. I could walk away from *want* without much of a problem. I had a feeling that it wouldn't be as easy to deny *need*.

"I'm at the same hotel as before," Brody said, "but I drove this time. Do you want to meet me there?"

Just as I'd appreciated him not having issues with me driving before, I appreciated him not assuming that I'd ride with him simply because he'd driven here. It was a lot less awkward to answer his question than it would've been to explain that I wanted my car available so I could leave whenever I wanted after we were done.

We arrived at the hotel within a couple minutes of each other and made our way through the lobby, up the elevator, and into his room – a different one than before, but still nice – with little dialogue. We didn't even touch, and for that, I was grateful. If he'd so much as taken my hand, I didn't know if I would've been able to stop myself from going further than I should have in a public place.

The door barely clicked closed before his mouth was on mine. He buried his fingers in my hair, his touch as hungry as his kiss. I pushed his jacket off his shoulders and then went for the buttons on his shirt, making it halfway before giving in to the urge to slide my hands inside. The feel of his skin under my fingertips, against my palms, made me sigh, as if I'd been needing that touch and only just now realized it.

He moved us across the room, and I let him lead, confident that he'd get me where I wanted to go. When I felt something against the back of my calves, he gave me a gentle push, and I dropped onto the seat of the armchair. When he went to his knees in front of me, a shiver went through my every cell. We'd obviously been thinking along the same lines.

I kicked off my shoes and spread my legs, the movement pulling the skirt of my dress almost high enough to flash my dark blue panties. Eager to see more of him, I kept my eyes on him as he took off his tie.

He didn't finish what I'd started with his shirt, however. Instead, he put his hands on my ankles and slid upward, the twin caresses leaving matching trails of heat. Over my knees and then on the outsides of my thighs until he reached my hips. His gaze met mine, and his fingers curled around the waistband of my panties.

I nodded, my mouth dry and my pulse pounding. I wanted to urge him to hurry up, but my gut told me that he'd make it worth the wait if I let him set the pace.

My underwear ended up on the floor with his tie, and then his hands pulled me closer to the edge of the chair, and anticipation chased everything else away. His cheeks brushed the insides of my thighs, causing the slightest hint of burn from his five o'clock shadow, and I made a soft sound that could have been a moan or a gasp or something halfway between.

He looked up at me, a smirk on his lips, as if he already knew just how much I was going to enjoy myself, and then his tongue ran up my slit, a touch so light that I almost couldn't feel it. When I tried to move, his hands clamped down on my hips, holding me in place.

"I'm driving."

Before I could decide if I even wanted to argue with that statement, he dove in, nothing light or timid about it. My mind tried to follow what he was doing, categorize it, label it, find some way to process the waves of pleasure rolling over me.

I wanted the release of tension that came with an orgasm, but this felt more like a total loss of control, like letting go of something I hadn't been aware I'd held back. Now that I knew it existed, I gripped it, held it, used it to keep me grounded, even as I desperately wanted relief.

Then he slid two fingers into my pussy and curled them, the tips searching for that spot that most men couldn't find. My hips jerked, my body pushing toward his mouth and hand, but he held me in place. He worked his fingers inside me, his mouth on my clit until I came, a wordless cry falling from my lips as I allowed myself those few blissful moments of pure, mindless pleasure.

When I opened my eyes, Brody was still on his knees, looking rather pleased with himself.

"Well done," I said a bit breathlessly. "I'll return the favor as soon as I can use my legs."

Twelve

## Brody

I tore the condom wrapper open and smiled down at Freedom. Her skin was flushed, her lips swollen, and her eyes dark. After she'd practically tortured me with the best blow job of my life, we'd ordered obscenely expensive room service and then started making out on the sofa.

We'd shed our clothes on our way to the bedroom, and now, I was enjoying seeing every inch of her stretched out in front of me. Flawless skin. Amazing curves. A thin bit of curls at the place where her legs met. Breasts that were the perfect size and shape. Light tan nipples that I'd sucked until they were tight and just begging for more attention.

I'd get back to them in a moment.

I let out a hiss as I rolled the condom on, my cock almost too sensitive. It wouldn't stop me from being inside her, though. I needed that, even if it hurt a little. In all honesty, I'd never minded a bit of pain with my pleasure.

"I don't think I've said this yet." Freedom's voice drew my attention back to her face. "But you're absolutely gorgeous."

If another woman had said it, I might've added clarifiers in my head. I knew I was good-looking, but once the clothes came off, I had some...imperfections. In the form of scar tissue in patches pretty much all over the right side of my body. Thigh. Ribcage. Arm. Shoulder. Chest. Back.

Most of the patches were around quarter-sized, some smaller, some bigger. I didn't really think about them much, not even when I had sex. I never wanted to talk to the women I screwed about the scars, but I'd always gotten the impression that girls didn't want to talk about them either. They'd just wanted to fuck.

Freedom saw all of me. I could see it in her eyes. She looked at every inch of me, and she meant it when she said I was gorgeous.

“Are you going to do something or just stare at me?” She smiled as she trailed a finger between her breasts and then down her stomach.

I watched her hand move between her legs, and I licked my lips, remembering the taste of her. As she brushed her finger over her clit, her entire body shuddered, and a small moan escaped. I leaned over her, holding myself so that our bodies were barely touching. My lips pressed to hers, and her nipples brushed against my chest. When I reached between us and lifted her hand, she whimpered and squirmed.

“I’ve got you,” I murmured against her mouth. “I’ve got you.”

I didn’t know why I said it. Nothing about my interactions with her suggested she’d wanted to hear something that intimate, but it just felt right. Like this strong, independent woman needed to know that it was okay to let me take care of her. I’d take care of her the way I knew she wanted. Something that was beyond desire twisted my stomach, and it took more than I liked to push it aside.

“Fuck.” The word was half-growl, half-groan as I slid inside her. She was wet enough to prevent uncomfortable friction, but I still needed to push through as her pussy tightened around me. I was aware of small bites of pain in my forearms and knew her nails had left a mark. I didn’t mind. A part of me even liked it.

“More.” She raised her hips as if she could take me deeper, but we were already joined as closely as two people could be.

I nipped her earlobe, her jaw, careful not to leave any marks where people could see them. I had left a small bruise-like circle on her breast, but she hadn’t seemed to mind that. In fact, she appeared to enjoy when I used my teeth.

“Harder,” she urged. “Make me feel it.”

I raised my head so I could meet her eyes, make sure we understood each other. She dug her nails into my shoulders, a wicked smile curving those tempting lips of hers.

“Harder.”



I pulled back and then drove forward in a single thrust. She let out a breath and nodded.

“Fuck. Yes.”

We urged each other on, bodies coming together with bruising force. The muscles in her thighs flexed against my sides, reminders of how strong this woman was. She could take everything and give it back to me the same.

My focus narrowed down to her. Her body. The way we moved together. The way she made me feel.

I'd never been as aware of another person as I was of her at that moment. Every breath, every heartbeat. How we fit together. The wet heat of her wrapped around my cock. The pink flush across her chest that signaled how aroused she was. The small noises she made that turned into curses and cries of pleasure.

I watched her face twist into that familiar expression that I knew meant she was getting ready to come. Even if I hadn't seen it on her face, I would've felt it in her body. Muscles contracting. Rhythm faltering.

“Come for me,” I said as I felt my own control slipping. “Please, angel, come.”

The endearment slipped out, and I didn't know if she really registered it or not, but it just felt right. I didn't think much about it, though, because she was coming, and I fucked her through it, determined to prolong her pleasure as much as possible before I followed her over the edge.

As we collapsed into a sweaty tangle of limbs, she made a contented sound that did as much for me as her cries of pleasure. I had enough presence of mind to remove the condom, but that was as far as I made it before sleep claimed me, and I went under, Freedom still wrapped in my arms.

Thirteen

# Freedom

I was hot.

Like I was sleeping next to a heater. And covered by a heavy electric blanket.

None of which made any sense.

Aline and I did have the heat up at night, but never this high.

That was when my brain woke up enough to register that I could hear someone breathing.

Shit.

Everything came flooding back, and my eyes flew open.

Sure enough, I had a muscular arm around me and a hand resting on my breast. I didn't need to see the small spots of scar tissue to recognize that Brody was the man in bed with me. Besides the fact that I now remembered every amazing second from the moment I'd stepped into his hotel room, I'd never had another lover who'd left my body with such a pleasurable ache in every part of me.

Lover.

No.

That wasn't a word I used because, to me, it implied some semblance of a relationship. Someone that was more than a one-night stand.

Except that's what Brody was because I'd fucked him three times.

Well, spent three different nights with him. Two nights and an afternoon. And the second one barely counted because it'd been just a quickie in a car. Or maybe it just evened out with the amount of time we'd spent fucking last night.

I was spiraling. Not into a depression, but the bunny trail chasing thing that my brain did when I didn't want to face something so my mind just focused on nitpicking details on which to fixate.

I needed to leave.

Right now.

Holding my breath, I managed to roll out from under his arm without waking him. I moved as quietly as I could as I picked up my clothes and headed into the bathroom. I wasn't going to spend much time cleaning up, but I didn't want to look like I was doing the walk of shame, even though that was exactly what I was doing.

And I hated myself a little for it.

Then I hated myself more *because* I hated myself for it.

Dammit.

I'd never been ashamed of my sexual habits, and I'd always told myself that I'd never let anyone shame me either. Men could fuck whoever they wanted, whenever they wanted, and it rarely reflected negatively on them.

People's opinions regarding women were better than they had been even five or ten years ago, but a woman walking through a hotel lobby early in the morning while wearing the same outfit she'd worn the night before still received disapproving looks, especially in a nice hotel like this.

"Fuck them if they can't handle it," I muttered to myself as I smoothed down my hair.

Butterflies fluttered in my stomach as I opened the bathroom door, half-expecting Brody to be awake and asking why I was leaving so early. Except he was still dead to the world. I was tempted to linger in the dimly lit room, let myself have a last look at the gorgeous man sprawled out on the bed. Sheet bunched around his hips so I could see the bare skin of his back, but only the swell of his ass under the fabric.

He had a really nice butt.

He shifted on the bed, and I hurried out of the room before he could wake up and see me. We hadn't talked about whether or not I was staying the night, but I was fairly certain neither of us had planned on sharing a bed until morning. I knew I sure as hell hadn't.

At least I'd driven, I thought as I stepped out of the elevator. I kept my gaze focused on the door, my expression as blank as I could make it. The valet who went to get my car didn't say a word other than "good morning" and then ran off at a good enough clip that I went into my purse to pull out a bigger tip than I usually gave out for non-restaurant services.

The sun came up as I drove, the sky turning from that dull blue-gray of a pre-dawn sky into the brilliant orange and pink that took over everything for those minutes before the sun was up and a new day began. If I had been coming from anything else, I would've enjoyed it more.

The times I'd stayed at Dr. Ipres's house and had driven home early enough to see a sunrise, I'd always loved seeing the colors and the different ways they spread out depending on cloud cover and even pollution. Today, I only registered it in the vaguest of ways, my senses caught up with the sensations my brain was trying to identify.

Bruises on my hips where he'd held me tight. Brush burns on the insides of my thighs from his stubble when he'd gone down on me. Throbbing on one of my breasts where he'd bitten me hard enough to leave a mark. The force with which we'd come together left the entire area between my legs aching. My bra chafed my nipples.

"Dammit!"

I smacked my steering wheel, surprising myself. I liked to think I was self-aware, understanding both my positive and negative qualities, but that caught me off-guard. I wasn't laid-back by any stretch of the imagination, but I wasn't a person who lost control either. I kept a tight rein on my emotions, prided myself on my self-control. Every reaction was careful. Deliberate.

I'd spent my entire life building this professional person who never lost her cool. I could work with the most frustrating people, put up with the most boring conversations, receive the best or worst news, all with minimal response. While I enjoyed sex and could be enthused when it was good, even

then, I held back parts of me from every man I'd ever been with.

And then I'd let a good-looking man with a cocky attitude kiss me at midnight, and nothing had felt right since.

Plenty had felt *good*. Great, even. And most of that had come from Brody.

Maybe that was why I was so unsettled.

I'd always counted on myself. Independent for as long as I could remember, with every year I aged, I took care of myself more and more. It didn't come from neglect or being ignored or unloved. I had enough basic understanding of psychology and sociology to know that everyone's personalities came from a combination of nature and nurture, and I'd never felt the need to take a more analytical approach. I just was who I was.

And being with Brody had messed with that, made me feel as if I couldn't count on myself.

"Dammit." The word came out as a sigh this time.

I'd hoped to sneak into the apartment before Aline woke up so I could shower and get some coffee in me, but as soon as I walked into the apartment, I smelled coffee and bacon. She was already up. On the positive side, though, that meant I didn't have to wait for the coffee to brew.

"Hey!" Aline said brightly from the kitchen. "Help yourself. I made plenty."

"Thanks." I kicked off my shoes, set down my purse, and then went straight for the delicious caffeine.

"You stayed at Dr. Ipres's house in that?" Aline asked as she glanced my way. "I thought you kept a change of clothes in your car so you weren't relegated to sleeping in a dress."

Right. I'd forgotten about that when I'd gotten to the hotel last night. I'd been more concerned with getting Brody naked than I had been about bringing in something to wear home.

I shrugged. "I forgot."

I'd let her decide if I'd forgotten about the clothes or if I'd forgotten to put new ones in the car. If I was really lucky, maybe she'd just let it go completely.

I didn't want to flat-out lie to her, but I also wasn't going to discuss my sex life with my baby sister. It was the one thing I kept for myself.

Fourteen

# Brody

Making alcohol for a living wasn't easy, regardless of the type. Wine, beer, whiskey, tequila...all of it required work.

Grapes needed certain growing conditions. A single night of frost could ruin an entire vineyard. One particular vineyard my parents had always liked had, in the course of a year or so, experienced a string of disasters from fire to vandalism.

Corn, rye, wheat, barley, and hops all had specific needs to grow properly. Water. Sun. Fertilizer. Then there were all sorts of things that could destroy crops. Insects. Drought. Storms.

Nature playing nice didn't guarantee success, though. Everything had to be harvested and processed, procedures that took manpower and machinery. Distilling came next, and that had its own unique difficulties, especially for those looking to make quality products and build a brand.

I loved what I did, but I hated that a lot of people assumed I was just some bored rich kid who liked to party and drink. Granted, I did enjoy a good drink – I was a Scot, after all – but I hadn't simply hired a bunch of people who did all the work while I threw money around and looked pretty. I'd studied and experimented with beer as well as whiskey, using different bases, different processes. I'd taken advice from the best and learned what not to do from the worst.

I knew my shit, and I worked my ass off.

Some people might've delegated things like inspections and management to the point where they were able to spend all their time in an office. That was okay for those who preferred to spend their time that way. I respected people who knew their weak areas and then hired people who had the skills to do the work. I tried to do that too, which was why I'd hired the woman next to me.

Adela Rucker and I had been together from the beginning.

When I'd put together a business plan for Shannon's, I'd discovered that I actually hated having to make business plans. I could do it and come up with something competent, but competent wasn't good enough for me then, and it still wasn't good enough now. I also despised the paperwork part of the business, as well as the bookkeeping and organization.

I'd never done well with computer work, especially the typing part of things, so I'd known that I'd need someone to do that for me. With me, actually. I didn't need investors, and I wasn't looking for a partner to go into business with, but I needed someone I could trust.

So, I'd asked around. It'd taken me three weeks before I'd found the right fit, and technically, it wasn't even me who'd found her. It had been my mother, actually.

Theresa had been visiting Austin in San Jose when she'd overheard an argument while she was waiting for him in the lobby of CarideoTech, the business that her first husband had built. I'd never heard what the argument was about, only that Adela's then-boyfriend had grabbed Adela's arm, and Mom had come to the rescue.

She'd hit the man's arm with her umbrella and then threatened to, "Use the mental tip to impale his testicles" – Mom's exact wording – if he didn't leave. Then Austin had shown up, and the man had been escorted off the premises. By the time Mom came home a week later, she'd convinced Adela to come to San Ramon with her and talk to me about a job.

I'd had one conversation with Adela and hired her with the condition that her hiring bonus – which she'd tried to say she didn't need – be a twenty-five percent share in the company. She'd said it was too much, but after nearly a decade together, she'd proven herself worth far more than that.

A few years ago, I'd asked if she'd be interested in additional shares for her annual Christmas bonus since she'd tried to tell me that she didn't need the bonus. She'd refused, saying she preferred to keep her quarter stake in the company along with the ability to go on vacation without feeling like she was slacking off.

Now, I gave her tickets to the destination of her choice and paid for her hotel.



A poke in the arm came a moment before her voice. “You haven’t heard a single word I’ve said, have you?”

I looked down at the pretty blonde standing next to me. She had her arms crossed and one pale eyebrow raised. With her blue eyes and fair skin, she looked like a china doll. Not the creepy kind that gave me nightmares. One of the pretty ones. But behind that face was a brilliant mind and a spine of steel. Outside of my siblings, she was probably my closest friend.

And that’s all she was. In all the years we’d known each other, there’d never been even a hint of attraction between us, not even the times we’d pretended to be together to discourage people who didn’t know how to take no for an answer without there being someone else involved.

She snapped her fingers in front of my face and sighed. “Brody, get your head out of your ass.”

“Sorry.” I smiled in apology. “What were you saying?”

“Before or after I realized you weren’t listening?”

I laughed. “Let’s go with after for now.”

“I said whatever you were doing this weekend must’ve been fun because you were out of it yesterday too.”

Even though she and I talked about our personal lives sometimes, this was definitely not the time or place to say that it hadn’t been a *something* but a *someone* that had been distracting me.

Freedom had been gone when I’d woken up, but I still hadn’t decided if I was relieved or disappointed. Either way, the night we’d spent together had been playing through my mind ever since. The best I’d been able to do was keep myself from getting an erection at an inappropriate time, and I’d barely been able to do that.

“All right.” I scratched the tip of my nose to hide my embarrassment. “What did you say *before* that?”

She chuckled and shook her head. “I said that Dewey saw a couple rats out by the dumpster, but the exterminator can’t get here until Friday, so Dewey

wants to know if he can bring in a stray cat that's been hanging out around his house."

"Seriously?"

She shrugged. "The guy's scared of rats."

"Is anyone here allergic to cats?"

That wasn't a question I never thought I'd ask, but it honestly wasn't the strangest thing I'd had to address either. That had happened six years ago when we'd found articles of clothing in a small pile in the middle of the distillery floor and no one to claim them.

When no one had answered my inquiry about the random shirts and pants, I'd asked the head of security to watch the video feeds. Unfortunately, those hadn't shown anything because, as it turned out, the culprit had *been* my head of security, something I'd discovered when I'd stayed overnight and caught him drunkenly stripping down to his birthday suit.

He'd apparently been a recovering alcoholic who'd made the poor decision to apply for work at a distillery. Our applications asked about issues with drugs or alcohol, of course, but he'd lied. He'd lasted two months sober before he'd started 'sampling.' Never enough someone to notice right away, but it would've taken longer for me to figure it out if he hadn't been the sort of drunk who did crazy shit while blacked-out. I'd gotten him into rehab, and once he was out, I'd helped him get work as a day guard at a hotel.

Now, it was cats.

"I'll tell Dewey to ask around," Adela said. "If no one's allergic, can he bring the cat?"

I didn't take the time to think everything through. "The rats are only outside?"

"Do you think we'd be open if they'd gotten in?"

I deserved every bit of annoyance in her voice. "No, that was a stupid question. I know you would've closed us down until the problem was taken care of. Just tell Dewey to make sure the cat doesn't get in here either. The

last thing we need is a health inspector to see cat shit next to a barrel.”

We went down the stairs to the main floor, and I went from talking to Adela to greeting each of the men and women working the early shift. I’d make another pass through when the afternoon shift came in, and then come in early tomorrow to catch the night crew as they left.

While traveling kept me from being able to make a specific schedule for this sort of thing, I did try to make the rounds to talk to my employees at least once a month. It was getting harder and harder to do, though, as my business grew. If I was able to get into all of the universities I was pitching to, I would probably need to open an entire second distillery or move to a much bigger one here.

Something else Adela and I were going to talk about this year.

“Good to see you, Heath,” I said to the first man. “How were your holidays?”

“Great, Mr. McCrae.” He enthusiastically shook my hand. “We went to see my folks in Colorado, did some skiing.”

“No broken legs?”

Heath shook his head. “Just a few bruised backsides.”

“Glad you had a good time with family.” I shook his outstretched hand again. “Have a good rest of your day.”

“I will, Mr. McCrae.”

The next man wasn’t a handshake kind of guy, so I just went straight to ask how his holidays had been. Adela followed along, sometimes joining in the conversation, but mostly just going with me. I could’ve had her remind me of who each person was and tell me something about them, but I was still able to get them all on my own.

That might change with expansion, but I’d do my best as long as I could. Even if I hired someone to take over more of the day-to-day business, I never wanted to be the boss no one saw, the one who knew nothing about his people.

Shannon’s was family, and I intended to work my ass off to keep it that way.

Fifteen

# Freedom

“Dammit!”

The curse slipped out before I could stop it, but my finger throbbed badly enough that I didn’t care if someone heard me. I glared at the hammer as if the tool itself was responsible for my clumsiness. In my defense, I’d rarely had the need to use a hammer, and the one I had in the apartment for whatever hammer emergencies happened to come up was much smaller than this one.

Perhaps I should make a note to bring up the subject to a member of the maintenance crew. Surely, they weren’t all comfortable with this monstrosity. And if they were, I supposed it didn’t really matter as I didn’t plan to find myself in similar circumstances at any point in the near future. My final January at Stanford was almost over. Unless, of course, I decided against—

Stop.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, held it, and then let it out slowly. I needed to focus on the task at hand. I repeated the breathing exercise four more times and then opened my eyes. No more distractions. No more bunny trails.

I was a twenty-five-year-old graduate student in a promising field with myriad opportunities ahead of me. My mind needed to calm the fuck down and stay on task.

First thing: fix the damn shelf.

The nail remained a half-inch out, mocking me, but it wouldn’t be doing that for long. I put my left hand in a different place than it had been the last time I’d swung. My balance wasn’t quite as good, but at least I wouldn’t hit my finger if the head of the hammer slid off the nail like it had before. I also wasn’t going to be stupid enough to swing like I had before. No more *Karate Kid* attempts.

A minute later, the nail was in place, the shelf was secure, and I took a moment to examine my finger. It still hurt, but I didn't see any marks on it. Fortunately, I'd decided to forgo a manicure just in case something happened to chip my polish or a nail prior to the event. My fingernails being bare would be far better than a chip I couldn't fix.

"Ms. Mercier?"

Isabelle Killroy was the representative from the distributor I'd used for the wine, even though she barely looked old enough to buy it. Every other time I'd seen her, she'd been smiling, so the frown she wore now made my stomach flip.

"Yes?"

"It seems that one of the men unloading the wine was careless and dropped a crate. It's a total loss."

I wasn't sure if I wanted to curse or panic. Instead, I winced and let her go on.

"Under normal circumstances, we would replace the crate completely at no extra charge and add an additional bottle for any inconvenience."

That didn't sound good for me at all.

"Unfortunately, those were our last bottles of that particular wine. The vineyard that made them no longer exists, something that you should have been told at the time of your order."

I opened my mouth to tell Isabelle that I hadn't known anything about that, but she hurried to speak again.

"That was an error on our part. It seems the system we use to keep track of inventory malfunctioned. We only just realized it when I called about the replacement."

I really hoped this wasn't indicative of how the entire night was going to go. Smashing my finger with a hammer and then having an entire case of wine suddenly gone.

“We have options,” Isabelle continued. “We can provide a case and a half of any wine from our inventory as a replacement, regardless of the price difference. Or we can take double the cost of the case off your bill.”

I rubbed my forehead. While I’d estimated high for the number of guests who would most likely drink the wine, I didn’t think I could take the loss of an entire case. The problem was, I didn’t know what other wines were available, and while I occasionally enjoyed a glass or two, I didn’t know enough about wine to know an appropriate replacement for the one Dr. Ipres had put on the list.

I needed time but didn’t have it. Dr. Ipres was busy, and I couldn’t think of anyone else who’d know enough to help. Then it hit me. Mom.

The fact that I hadn’t immediately thought of her spoke volumes about my state of mind. She served on the boards of numerous charities and planned this sort of thing all the time. I loathed asking for help, but at least I didn’t need to interrupt Dr. Ipres to admit that I couldn’t take care of this on my own.

“I need to make a call,” I said. “I’ll be right back.”

I didn’t have an office I could use for privacy, but since the only people here at the moment were all involved in setting things up, I headed for the back of the space where a few storage and supply closets offered me a place to make my call without anyone overhearing.

Mom picked up on the second ring and answered my question without asking any of her own. She did, however, give me the name of an app that would help me with future orders and told me that she often used it to keep up-to-date on trends, new vineyards, that type of thing. My mother and I were both the kind of people who didn’t do well with asking for help, so I knew this was her way of letting me know that even she needed some assistance from time to time.

I thanked her, and my gratitude was sincere, but that didn’t mean I was any less tense as I went back to the main space and found Isabelle. Once I gave her my replacement choice and she confirmed that it was available, she went off to take care of that while I went back to the newly built bar to continue checking for any possible blemishes or weaknesses.

After I'd decided to go with a bartender – two actually – to allow for better control over the distribution, I'd been faced with the question of how that would actually work since there wasn't anything already in the room I could use as a bar. It'd taken a couple visits with professors in the architecture, engineering, and art departments, but I managed to get a few students to create an attractive and portable bar, complete with shelves.

They received some sort of work credit for it, and it would be usable for any gatherings that needed it, so everyone was pleased with the arrangement. The end result had been perfect, but between last night and this morning, someone had dropped something heavy on one of the shelves, which was why I'd been hammering that nail. Now, I needed to make sure nothing else had been messed up. I refused to leave anything to chance.

I ran my fingers over every inch of wood until I was satisfied that nothing else was out of place. The last thing I wanted was to have something I'd suggested turn out to detract from the beauty of the exhibits. I needed this evening to be perfect. I needed it to be something that would reflect well on me, a good final impression that would carry over for any referral or recommendations.

When I straightened, my knees popped, and I grimaced. My back protested too, and I had a feeling my entire body was going to be unhappy with me before the night was over. I had my outfit and other things in my car, so I could change before the exhibit started, but even my most comfortable shoes couldn't stop the effects of being on my feet all day. I was okay now, but I had a feeling my feet would be hurting before I even put on my heels.

“Freedom, are you okay?”

I froze for a split second as the words reverberated through me. No, not the words so much as the voice. That rich baritone with just a hint of an accent.

Damn.

“I'm fine,” I said as I put on my professional smile and turned to face him. “And you're right on time.”

Brody was dressed similarly to me, with jeans and a t-shirt, though his was black and tight enough to show off those broad shoulders and his muscled

chest. Judging by the way he was looking at me, he liked how my shirt fit too, but this wasn't the time or place to be ogling each other.

"You can bring your cases here." I gestured to the space behind the bar. "I have two bartenders coming in an hour before the exhibit opens, so if you want to leave any instructions, you can do that here, or you can speak with them when they arrive."

"If they're professionals, they shouldn't need anything from me." His tone was casual, but the heat in his eyes was definitely not.

I could almost feel that gaze on my skin, and I had to resist the urge to rub my hands over my arms, as if the electricity that sent my cells humming was a tangible thing. I needed to get away from him, get my head back on straight. I had too much to do to be distracted by him.

"If you need any help bringing things in, there are student volunteers all around. They have nametags so just look for one and tell them what you need them to do." I looked at my watch – carting my phone around right now wasn't really an option – and added, "I have to go. I'm sure I'll see you around."

If I hadn't been so determined to look busy, I might've thought that I'd sounded like an idiot, but I did have things to do.

Somewhere.

Fortunately, I'd only gone a few feet when one of the volunteers came up to me with a problem they really did need me to solve. And once I was done with that one, another came forward. And then I had to explain to someone why a sculpture needed moved.

The next time I looked at my watch, an hour had passed, and my entire body felt stretched tight enough to snap. My stomach was churning, and I felt a tension headache starting to form.

"Have you eaten anything today?"

Brody's voice in my ear made me jump. I glared at him but didn't answer his question. It wasn't any of his business. I didn't need someone looking out for me, taking care of me. I could do it myself.



“Hey, I’m not asking for your birthday and social security number.” His tone was teasing but gentle, as if he’d realized why I was annoyed with him.

That didn’t make it better.

“I don’t need to eat,” I snapped.

He gave me a hard look, and then I saw a determined light come into his eyes. Before I could figure out what it meant, he leaned closer to me and pitched his voice low.

“No. You need something else.” The back of his knuckles brushed my upper arm, sending a shiver through me. “Show me where.”

I didn’t ask for clarification. I knew what he wanted because I wanted it too. It was stupid and impulsive and extremely selfish...but it didn’t change what I was going to do.

“This way.”

I set off at a brisk pace, not looking behind to see if he was following because I knew he was. He wouldn’t have made the proposition if he didn’t intend to follow through.

The supply closet where I’d made my call to my mother was small, but since this wasn’t going to be some long, leisurely sex marathon, it’d do. The door closed, and he pushed me back against it, his mouth hungry on mine. The kiss was harsh, bruising, and blew everything else out of my mind.

He managed to undo my pants with one hand while the other hand was under my shirt, squeezing my breast. He raised his lips from mine long enough to speak.

“Let yourself go. I’ve got you.”

He plunged his tongue into my mouth while his fingers found their way into my panties. I gasped as he found my clit, and I felt him smile. As his fingers played over me with brisk strokes, I closed my eyes and just let myself feel. Lost myself in the pleasure.

It didn’t take long for all of the pressure inside me to explode into sweet release.

And it would've been perfect...except just as my brain started working again, a voice came from the other side of the door.

“Freedom? I need to speak to you.”

Karina.

Shit.

## Brody

The moment I heard a woman's voice calling for Freedom, I knew I'd fucked up. We might've had the privacy of a closed door, but we were still in a public place, at an event she was running. We'd been careless.

*I had been careless.*

I'd wanted to take care of her, and for a brief moment when she'd come apart in my arms, I felt like I'd done just that. But then the other woman called Freedom's name, and Freedom's entire body went stiff. She pulled away, and not just physically. If the circumstances had been different, I would've talked to her, tried to apologize for getting carried away.

Then again, if circumstances had been different, what we'd done wouldn't have been a problem in the first place.

I backed up and let Freedom fix her clothing. The fact that she wasn't looking at me made me think she wouldn't want me to try to help her, and the last thing I wanted was to make matters worse.

"I'm here, Karina." Freedom's voice was steady, without a hint of anything to indicate that she'd just come on my fingers. "Go back to the main room, and I'll be there in a minute. I have to check something else in here."

"Do you need help?" Karina had an accent I thought might be Spanish, though exactly what sort of Spanish, I couldn't tell.

"No." The word was a little sharper than necessary, and the wince on Freedom's face told me she hadn't intended it to be that way. "Thank you for the offer, but I've got it."

"Yes, Freedom."

Freedom shot me a quick look before shifting her gaze to just over my shoulder. "I can't look like...I have to go...I need—"

“I’ll wait a few minutes before I leave.”

“Thank you.”

She sounded more grudging than appreciative, but it was a weird situation, and I wasn’t about to be insulted by her tone. When she left, I leaned against a big, unmarked box and sighed.

“Good job, asshole,” I muttered to myself.

I liked to have fun, and some of the things I liked to do were on the dangerous side – though definitely not as many now as when I’d been younger – but I always tried to be smart about whatever I was doing. While not exactly dangerous, this had definitely *not* been smart.

I’d always kept things fun and casual with women, and while there had been some women I’d enjoyed being with enough to casually date, none of them had ever gotten under my skin like this one did. I couldn’t even say exactly why she was different, only that I couldn’t stop thinking about her.

About five minutes after Freedom had left, I stepped out of the supply closet and headed for the front of the building. I’d already brought in everything and set it out for the bartenders, which meant I didn’t actually have anything else to do until the exhibit began.

Technically, I didn’t even need to be there, but I’d accepted the invitation when Freedom had extended it last week. At the time, I’d told myself that it would be a perfect place to network with people connected to Stanford but not employed there.

I’d lied.

I didn’t look for Freedom as I made my way outside to my truck, but not because I didn’t want to see her. The last thing I wanted to do was get people gossiping about us. I knew enough women in male-dominated fields to know how much damage something like this could do to her reputation and her career.

A surge of guilt made my gut churn. I never should have put her at risk like this. As I drove back to my hotel, I seriously debated whether or not I should even come back, but I thought it’d look more suspicious if I stayed away.

With that in mind, I decided I'd just make a point of pretending that I didn't know what Freedom looked like when she came.

I had a bad feeling that'd be easier said than done.

The New Year Eve's party had been a black-tie event. While I assumed several people who'd attended that would also be coming to the exhibit – especially the invitation-only part – the rest of the event would allow students and guests, many of whom I guessed probably wouldn't be quite as dressed up. I'd had no idea how to find a happy medium between the two, so I'd called my brother Carson and asked him for help.

When in doubt, go to the fashion designer sibling with the degree from the Fashion Institute of Technology.

The VIP part of the exhibit was just beginning when I pulled into the parking lot, and I recognized a few of the people heading toward the entrance. Some of the men were wearing tuxes, but others were in suits like mine, high quality but not quite as formal.

As I showed my ID to the security guard, I smiled and greeted some of the people I knew, slipping into my professional persona, the one with the charming grin and the firm handshakes. I hoped this would help me be able to convincingly interact with Freedom the same way. I didn't want to have to stay away from her all night, especially since it might make me look like an asshole avoiding the person who'd put all this together.

Plus, I just didn't want to stay away from her, even if being near her was a bad idea.

I waited twenty minutes before letting my gaze scan the room for Freedom. I spotted her almost immediately as if I was drawn to her. Like a magnetic pull or something. Then the few people between us moved, and I was able to see what she was wearing.

A jolt of lust hit me, a visceral reaction that almost knocked the wind out of me. Something else was there too, but I pushed that away. This wasn't the time or place for analysis.

I could, however, take a minute to appreciate the shimmery dark gray dress she wore. I had no idea what that kind of dress was called, but I didn't need a

name to know that she looked amazing, and I wasn't the only one in the room who noticed.

I was halfway to her before I realized what I was doing and had to check my expression. I couldn't do what I wanted to do. I wanted to claim her, make sure every other man in the room knew that she was taken. But aside from the fact that this was the middle of a business function, I had no right to claim her. We'd had sex a couple times. That was all.

Movement at her side drew my attention away from her, and I thought it was a good idea to focus on that rather than her. I couldn't afford to appear to be too interested, not without risking someone thinking that either Freedom or I had given the other special treatment regarding Shannon's being served at an event she'd planned.

The movement came from a young woman next to her. The girl was about average height and slender, delicate. Cornsilk blonde hair, light green eyes, she looked too young to be in college, but the resemblance to Freedom gave me an idea of who the stranger was.

"Hello." I smiled at both of them. "Ms. Mercier, things seem to be going well."

"Good evening." Her voice was icy enough to surprise me. She looked at the girl next to her. "This is the man who supplied the whiskey for tonight's event."

*This is the man?*

I really hoped I didn't look like I'd just been punched in the stomach because that was how I felt.

*This is the man.*

She hadn't even said my name. Not my first name. Not Mr. McCrae. I'd used her last name to keep things professional, but she hadn't even given me that same courtesy.

Before my reeling brain could put together a response, Freedom spoke again, "Aline, we really should get those pictures."

And the two of them walked away.

Damn.

Now I was really glad I'd invited someone along as my plus one. She'd be here soon, and I'd never needed a distraction more.

# Freedom

What the hell had he been thinking, coming up to Aline and me like that? Granted, he hadn't approached me first thing. He'd talked to other guests, but he should have just stayed away.

The last thing I wanted was someone to notice us talking and start to put things together, especially since he and I had kissed at the New Year's Eve party. That'd been a stupid move on my part, but once I'd left his hotel, I hadn't planned on ever seeing him again, and certainly not at a school function. And while I could explain away the New Year's Eve kiss and his presence here now to anyone who might ask, I had a more difficult time explaining the remainder of my actions to myself.

One night of fun had been all I'd expected. The second time we'd hooked up, I'd written it off as convenient since I'd needed some stress relief, and he'd been right there. What had happened since then, however, had been pure foolishness. I was smarter than that.

"Whiskey isn't usually the sort of thing served at art exhibits," Aline said as we walked. "What made you decide to include it?"

"Dr. Ipres gave me a list of what alcohol she wanted, and Shannon's was on the list."

"His name is Shannon?" Aline took her phone from her purse. "I know that can be a man's name too, but it's not a common one."

I shook my head. "Shannon's is the name of the brand."

I didn't offer what his name actually was. Aline had no reason to need it, and I didn't see the point of continuing the discussion about him.

"I'm surprised Mom and Dad didn't come up for the exhibit," Aline said as she took a picture of the sculpture. "Especially since Mom's thinking about having one back home. She could have seen all of it in person."



“It didn’t make sense for them to drive all the way up here for only a few hours when she could talk to me and look at pictures.” I was tempted to take the phone from Aline and take the pictures myself, just to have something to do with my hands, but since I was responsible for much of what was going on this evening, I didn’t want to appear preoccupied with anything else. I certainly didn’t want to appear to be one of those rude people who were always focused on their phones.

“You planned most of this,” Aline said as she turned her phone toward another piece. “They wouldn’t just be coming up for a random event.”

I shrugged. “They offered to come, but I told them to stay home. It’s not as if this is what I plan to do with my life or that it’s a big deal that I helped Dr. Ipres with it.”

Aline shook her head. “You really shouldn’t downplay what you accomplished. A lot of hard work went into making this event successful.”

I had to admit, I was a little surprised that she’d noticed. My little sister wasn’t self-centered or arrogant, but she could be clueless about things going on around her, especially when she had her schoolwork to focus on.

“Thank you.” I smiled at her. “It is going well, isn’t it?”

“Of course it is.” She gave me a brilliant smile, filled with pride. “You planned it.”

I smiled back and then turned toward the figure I saw coming from my left. Dr. Ipres beamed at me and reached out with both hands to grasp my right hand.

“Everything is wonderful. As always, you’ve exceeded my expectations.”

My cheeks heated, but I let myself enjoy the praise. Despite the incident with Brody, tonight was turning out to be a good night. All I had to do was put him out of my mind, and I could focus only on the positive.

Except I couldn’t quite stop myself from looking for him. It wasn’t really a conscious action on my part. Just every so often, I’d find myself suddenly watching him. Admiring the way he moved, the cut of his suit. I hadn’t been surprised that he hadn’t worn a tuxedo since this wasn’t a strictly black-tie

event, but I was a little surprised that his suit had clearly been tailored for him. I couldn't tell if it'd been made for him or if he'd had an already existing suit adjusted, but either way, it would've been expensive. Shannon's was apparently more lucrative than I'd realized.

A few times over the next hour, I thought I felt him watching me, but I never caught him. He didn't catch me either, so that was good. At least I thought it was. I didn't want to give him any ideas. If today had taught me anything, it was that I'd already spent too much time with him. Tonight needed to be the last time we saw each other. And we definitely didn't need to have sex again.

I'd given myself a hundred and one reasons why walking away was the best thing for everyone concerned, but it didn't stop me from turning when I heard a woman say his name.

My eyes found him just as a beautiful dark-haired woman threw herself into his arms. A curvy body in a cute little dress that was as black as the thick hair falling in waves nearly to her waist. As if I needed any other confirmation that she was gorgeous, at least half of the men – and a few women – checked out her ass as Brody lifted her for a hug.

Jealousy hit me like a punch to the gut. I'd never thought of myself as an envious person, not about money or power or sex or love or anything. I appreciated what I'd been given as well as what I'd earned. I'd always known who I was and never wished to be anyone else, or have anything else, for that matter. And I'd never cared about any one man enough to pay much attention to whether or not I had their interest.

If a man didn't want me, I'd move on to another who could give me what I needed. Since I was never looking for anything more than a single night, my expectations didn't need to be very high.

The thought that Brody was different irked me.

Because he wasn't. Not to me. And I wasn't different for him. We'd had great sex, and that was all.

Which meant it didn't matter that he had another woman hanging on his arm less than five hours since he'd brought me to climax in the supply closet.

I turned back to the history professor I'd been talking to and tried to resume the conversation without showing that anything had changed. Because it hadn't. Absolutely nothing had changed.

"Cicily mentioned that you might be available to share your expertise regarding this collection," Professor Sackoff said. "I plan to bring two of my classes here on Tuesday afternoon. Would that fit with your schedule?"

"Um." I paused, trying to get my mind back on track. Tuesday afternoon. "Yes, I only have morning classes on Tuesday."

"Great!" Professor Sackoff smiled. "My students will be thrilled. First, lectures from an archeologist and then a private showing of this exhibit. Such wonderful opportunities."

"I haven't heard about an archeologist visiting." My interest would have been greater if I hadn't been trying to simultaneously listen for anything Brody and the woman were talking about and trying to ignore him. I was honestly surprised I managed to get out a competent statement.

"What do you know, she's here." Professor Sackoff's gaze was focused on something behind me. "I hadn't realized she was coming tonight."

I turned to follow where he was looking and found myself staring right at the dark-haired woman talking with Brody.

"Her?" I reminded myself that I didn't know this woman. If she and Brody were involved in any way, it was all on him. I refused to be one of those women who blamed everything on the other woman.

Shit.

If they had some sort of understanding, that meant *I* was the other woman.

"Paris Carideo."

I looked at Sackoff. "Pardon?"

"That's Paris Carideo, one of the youngest field archeologists out there. Graduated from Yale."

Despite myself, I was impressed, and then I realized that meant Brody had a type even though the archeologist and I looked nothing alike. I just sincerely hoped that I hadn't helped him cheat on whoever she was. If she'd just been his date for the night, that wouldn't be great, but it'd be something I could just brush off. But, if she was his girlfriend, I was going to be pissed.

I should've known better than to fuck a guy like him more than once.

Eighteen

## Brody

“Is this the newest one?” Paris held up a bottle. “Because I don’t remember seeing this one before.”

I shook my head. “You tried that at Christmas two years ago, remember?”

Paris squinted at the bottle. “Is this the one that knocked me on my ass?”

I laughed. “Yes, that’s the one.”

“Right.” With an overly exaggerated shudder, Paris put the half-empty bottle into the crate. “I’ll stay away from that.”

“We’ll take it to Fury. He likes it.” I fake scowled at her. “And he handles his liquor better than you do.”

“I refuse to respond to that on the grounds that it’s true.” Paris grinned at me, dark eyes glinting with humor.

I loved all of my siblings equally, but Paris and I shared a love of adventure that had always given us a lot to talk about, especially after Eoin – the brother closest to her age – enlisted in the army. And even he hadn’t been into some of the crazier things Paris and I had both tried over the years. He was more of the rebellious thrill-seeker. Paris and I just loved adrenaline.

“Thanks for coming tonight,” I said as I reached for one of the empty bottles that had been left on the bar. Most of the others were back in the case as I’d requested, but it looked like the bartenders had slacked off a bit at the end of the night.

Considering how beat they’d looked the last time I’d seen them, I didn’t mind the bit of extra on my part. Educators and wealthy art patrons could drink fraternities under the table, and young bartenders sometimes underestimated groups that they weren’t a part of. I had a feeling that was what happened here.

I refused to acknowledge that part of my reason for staying after had to do with being able to linger without actually looking like I was waiting for someone.

“Thanks for coming tonight,” I said. “I know you just got to town this morning.”

“Glad to do it.” She looked around the room one more time. “It’s a great exhibit, and it’ll make my lectures on Monday even better.”

“Lectures?”

She rolled her eyes. “Really, Brody? You have no idea why I’m here?”

I could’ve pretended to think hard, but I didn’t think it’d be convincing since I knew I had no idea what she was talking about. I’d had some other things on my mind for the past couple weeks.

Or, rather, one person on my mind.

Besides, Paris had always been able to see right through my bullshit.

She took pity on me and didn’t make me ask. “I’m lecturing in a couple history classes on Monday.”

“I’ll never understand why you like doing those,” I said as I checked the crate to make sure everything was packed tight. Even if the bottles were empty, I didn’t want them to break, if for no other reason than it’d be a pain in the ass to clean up.

“I love you,” Paris said, “but it doesn’t surprise me that you don’t get it.”

I gave her a puzzled look.

“Do you remember how everyone reacted when you said you wanted to make whiskey for a living?”

I nodded, still not understanding where this was going. “Nobody thought I’d stick with it. Not even Da and Mom.”

“But then you showed them your business plan. You laid out everything you were going to do, step-by-step.”

“They still thought I’d quit,” I reminded her. “For the first year or so, anyway.”

“Why was that, do you think?”

I shrugged. “Probably because the only thing I’d ever really taken seriously before that was surfing.”

“So, it’d be fair to say that past behavior was the reason behind their concern.”

“That sounds right,” I agreed. “I’m still not seeing what this has to do with you giving lectures.”

“In the fifteen years or so since you decided this was what you wanted to do with your life, has anyone ever doubted your ability or how you’ve accomplished what you have based solely on what’s between your legs?” She leaned against the bar, a serious expression on her face. “Have you ever had someone say to your face that you’ve only succeeded because you’ve fucked your way to the top?”

I felt my jaw drop.

She gave me a bitter half-smile. “Or what about ‘why don’t you take care of the food, honey, so you don’t get your pretty little hands dirty.’ Or complain about your presence at a difficult dig because you’ll ‘just slow everyone down.’”

My hands curled into fists as shock gave way to anger. “Who talked to you like that?”

Her smile softened. “You can’t beat up every person who’s ever said something like that to me. There are too many to count. Our parents might not have been skeptical of my dedication to this particular career, but outside of our family, my support was mostly non-existent. I had to work twice as hard, be twice as good, just to get what men with half my brains had handed to them.”

I wasn’t an idiot. No matter how far women’s rights had come or how much better things were now than they had been even a decade ago when Paris graduated high school, things still needed to improve. I didn’t, however,

realize just how much my own sisters might have had to put up with in their respective fields. Call it privilege; call it naivety. However it was labeled, it meant the same thing.

I needed to make more of an effort to be aware, become an active ally rather than a passive spectator, and I needed to start in my own business.

Right now, however, I needed to listen to what my sister had to say.

“I like speaking to students of all ages about what I do to show them all what women are capable of. Tell the girls and women not to listen to any assholes. Tell the boys and men not to *be* those assholes.” She straightened and reached for the purse she’d set on the bar. “I like seeing that one kid whose eyes light up the moment they realize they can do things they’ve been told aren’t for them just because of who they are or where they’re from.”

When people looked at my sister, they saw how pretty she was, the way she dressed, but a lot of them missed the intelligence and even more overlooked her fierce strength.

And now, I realized that I’d actually been one of those who’d misjudged her, though, I hoped, not as badly. I vowed it would never happen again.

“You are a remarkable woman.” I reached out and took her hand, squeezing it. Before the moment became too serious, I added, “A right canny lass.” I purposefully made my accent ridiculously thick, beyond Da’s, beyond most Scots I’d ever met too. It’d always been my favorite way to make my family laugh, and laughter was always my go-to way to deflect anything before it became too somber.

Paris rolled her eyes and kissed my cheek. “One of these days, you’re going to find yourself in a situation where you can’t subvert your emotions.”

“Aye, but not right now.” I grinned as I picked up the crate, switching back to my normal voice as I asked, “Ready to go?”

Paris was a great distraction, but even she hadn’t been able to keep me from noticing Freedom watching me on and off all night. Now, as Paris and I walked toward the door, I wondered if this would be the last chance I’d have to see her.



I didn't like that idea, but I also knew it would be best for both of us if we never saw each other again. As good as we'd been together, it was clear Freedom was the kind of woman who was either extremely simple to be with – sex and leave, one time only – or extremely complicated – a quickie in a car but no acknowledgment of even knowing each other's first names in public.

I didn't do complicated, and I wouldn't be satisfied with simple, not with her.

I reminded myself of both of those things as I left. A clean break was the best for all involved. It'd be the only way we could work together on future events without it being awkward.

Well, more awkward.

As I drove Paris back to Fury's place, she kept up a steady stream of chatter about how amazing the exhibit was and how she was going to work some of the pieces into her lectures. I enjoyed listening to her talk about the things she loved, and I was glad she was home for a while, but my mind still kept wandering back to Freedom.

I had a bad feeling that forgetting Freedom wasn't going to be as easy as I would've liked.

“All right, Brody, spill it.”

I glanced at her. “What?”

“Something's been off with you all night. I know you, Brody, and you've got something on your mind.” Paris gave me a hard look. “What's going on?”

I managed a smile that wouldn't have fooled her if it hadn't been dark, and I wasn't even sure she believed it as it was. “Just tired. I handled most of this myself.”

“You really need to learn to delegate.”

“Says the woman who fell asleep on the last video chat with Mom because she'd insisted on inventorying all of the site tools herself.”

Paris glared at me. “Mom's been telling tales.”

“That she has,” I said. “You should really talk to her about that.”

My sister laughed. "I'm not that brave."

And then she was off again, telling me about why she'd had to be the one to check the tools from that particular site.

My personal life was no longer a topic of conversation, and that was more than fine with me.

Nineteen

# Freedom

I really hoped Dr. Ipres didn't have any other events like this that she wanted me to handle because they were exhausting. I'd done a little for her with the New Year's Eve party, but that had mostly been me just checking with people in the department about whether or not they planned to attend.

This exhibit had required more attention than I'd thought it would, though, and I'd discovered that whatever path I decided that I wanted my career to take, I *didn't* want a position that would require me to do this sort of thing on a regular basis.

I also had a newfound respect for everything that my mom did for the charities she headed.

Thanks to some misinformation given to the maintenance crew by one of the student volunteers, they'd scheduled their clean-up to begin at nine o'clock this morning rather than nine o'clock last night. While I hadn't been able to find out who, exactly, had provided the incorrect information, I suspected it had been my happy little helper, Karina.

Apparently, the email I'd sent with the times had been accidentally deleted by a maintenance worker who'd been using the computer to play some online game. That worker had then called the Cantor Arts Center and spoke to 'someone' who'd told them nine in the morning.

I'd asked the group of student workers who'd still been in the building after the exhibit, but no one had stepped forward. I hadn't bothered to ask her directly, though. It wasn't worth the discussion that would almost surely follow where Karina would claim a language misunderstanding, even though she'd never had any issues knowing morning from night when it came to any of the fun things she wanted to do.

Telling Dr. Ipres about the mix-up would most likely have reflected poorly on me as I was in charge not only of the arrangements but of Karina herself. I

decided to take care of things myself and negate the need for anyone else to be involved.

I'd arrived home last night a little before midnight after spending more than an hour checking for anything that couldn't wait until morning. Then I'd gotten up at eight o'clock and spent the day supervising the cleaning crew since I didn't trust anyone except myself to make certain that everything that needed to be done was done, especially after the previous 'miscommunication.'

The Arts Center was back to looking great – better with the new paint job, in my opinion – and I planned to reward myself with a slow morning tomorrow before I started work on another paper.

But first, a hot shower.

I pulled off my shirt and pants and was reaching behind me for my bra when my phone rang. I was tempted to leave it since I knew Aline was already asleep and my parents went to bed early, but the responsible adult couldn't just let it go.

I groaned as I saw Karina's name on the screen, but I answered it anyway. The last thing I needed was her using me not answering the phone as an excuse for some poor life decision.

"Hello?" Not wanting to wake Aline, I kept my voice down.

"Freedom!"

I winced and pulled my phone away from my ear. This didn't bode well for my relaxing shower and climbing into bed.

"Do you need something, Karina?" I asked, struggling to keep most of my irritation out of my voice.

"Yes. I need a ride."

I closed my eyes. "You need a ride."

"Sí. A ride."

I wanted to tell her to call a cab. I knew she had the money to do it because, two days after she found out that I had an apartment, her parents had wired her the money for a deposit on an apartment in one of the nicest buildings in that area. She didn't have a car since she hadn't wanted to go through the process of getting a California license, but transportation wasn't difficult to find.

A blast of loud music and shouting suddenly came through the phone, and Karina yelled something in Spanish that I couldn't quite make out thanks to the cacophony behind her.

When she came back to the phone, she was giggling. "I drink a lot. Please get me."

Shit.

I sighed. I didn't want her to get in a taxi if she was drunk. The majority of the time, a driver would get her where she needed to be without any issues, but I couldn't take a risk. I wouldn't have suggested it to any eighteen-year-old woman in her position, but I would've probably referred her to someone else. Except Karina was like Aline. My responsibility.

"Where are you?"

She giggled again. "Party."

"Yes, I can hear that. I need to know *what* party."

"Loud one. Lots of boys."

I mentally cursed and pinched the bridge of my nose. "Find someone who's sober and give them your phone."

"My phone."

"Yes, Karina, I know that it's your phone." I stopped, something occurring to me. I repeated my instructions in Spanish, and a few seconds later, a different female voice spoke, telling me that I'd at least managed to get Karina to understand something.

"Hello? This girl just gave me a phone and said something in Spanish, I think."

“Hi. Yes. The girl who gave you the phone is named Karina, and she’s drunk. I’m going to come pick her up, but I need to know where you are.”

“Oh.” The girl shouted something that sounded like she was asking yet another person for their location.

I shook my head. I understood people who wanted to socialize at college but to knowingly go somewhere that would be serving alcohol without ensuring that you knew where you were was simply foolish. Taking advantage of inebriated women was fairly easy to begin with, especially if no one had been designated to stay sober or if they went to parties alone, but adding in the inability to call for a ride made them even more vulnerable.

“We’re at the Theta Delta Chi house.”

“Thank you,” I said. “You can give Karina her phone back now.”

A moment later, Karina came back on the line. “Freedom?”

I switched back to Spanish as I told her that I was on my way and to stay where she was. She gave me what sounded like an agreement and then hung up.

I reached for the same clothes I’d just discarded and quickly re-dressed. My exhaustion had shifted to the sort of bone-weary tired that came with having to force myself to do what was necessary when I only wanted to sleep. But I would go because that was what I did. I honored my responsibilities, and right now, that was Karina.

Besides, it wasn’t like this was the first time I’d had to put my duty to another person above what I wanted or needed. That came with being a big sister, especially when the little sister was so delicate.

Karina, however, wasn’t delicate or a relative, so my obligation to her wasn’t nearly as extensive. I’d still go pick her up to prevent her from being assaulted or doing something stupid like getting in the car with someone who was drunk, but I wasn’t planning to be nice about it.

My frustration and annoyance grew as I made my way through the streets to the fraternity. Even though I’d been here for the last seven years, I hadn’t spent much time on this part of the campus, but I didn’t worry about getting

lost. Partially because the directions were easy, but also because I knew I'd see partygoers in all stages of inebriation.

Sure enough, a man wearing a beer hat and a woman with a glow sticks necklace stumbled in front of my car, causing me to slam on my brakes and nearly hit my face on the steering wheel. I cursed but waved them through. I doubted they'd remember this in the morning, so anything I would yell at them would most likely be lost in an alcoholic haze.

I parked across the street to hopefully avoid getting blocked in because I wanted to make this as quick as possible. I'd never been the type of person who enjoyed parties like this, but not because I was a pretentious snob who only wanted to attend events that offered wine and caviar. Rather, I was the kind of person who preferred to spend time with a select few people rather than a crowd. My preference for one-night stands was pretty much the only time I liked interacting with strangers.

I pushed those thoughts aside, not wanting to take the road that would inevitably lead me to...*him*. When I stepped inside, the smell hit me like a punch to the gut. Beer. Pot. Lots of cologne and body spray. And body odor.

It was not a good combination.

I took a step to the side to get out of the doorway and then scanned the crowd, looking for a familiar tipsy teenager. I recognized a couple of the partygoers, but it took me a few minutes to finally spot the one I was looking for. She was dancing with a tall, dark-haired man I thought I'd seen around the sociology department.

I was halfway to her when she saw me, and she waved enthusiastically, bouncing up and down, a wide smile on her face. "Freedom!"

The man with her gave me one of those up-and-down looks that meant he was probably imagining what I looked like naked. Not that he'd ever know. If I wanted to get laid, I looked outside the student body. The last thing I needed to worry about if I decided to pursue an academic career at Stanford was a former tryst showing up in a class. The chances would be thin, but I'd had yet to meet a man who'd be worth the risk.

"Let's go." I leaned close to her but still had to shout into her ear.

She shouted something in Spanish and grabbed my hand. I couldn't quite tell what she'd said, but I got the impression she wanted me to dance. I shook my head and switched our hands so that I had ahold of hers. I pulled her closer and spoke in Spanish.

“Time to go.”

She pouted but didn't try to get away as I led her toward the door. I could handle her complaining, but if she decided to be stubborn and plant her feet, I'd have to decide if it would be worth it to force her to leave. I was leaning toward washing my hands of her if that was the case. I wasn't her babysitter.

Dr. Ipres was great, and I wasn't upset with her for asking me to look out for Karina. I could have said no without risking her displeasure. She would have found someone else and never thought ill of me for declining. But I would've felt guilty, and so I'd accepted.

I didn't regret having taken on the responsibility, but I was definitely looking forward to never having to even consider taking on this type of thing again.

Only a few months until graduation.



Twenty

## Brody

New York City on the second day of February was cold as hell, and even with the freezing rain clinging to my hair and eyelashes, I was glad to be here. I was pretty much as far from home as I could get and still be in the country, and I'd never been happier to step out of the airport and greet my younger brother Carson.

Maggie and London lived here too, but neither of my sisters had cars, so Carson had offered to come get me. Even though I was staying at a hotel, I'd accepted his offer of a ride. While I was here for business, I planned on spending some time with my siblings and doing whatever I could to forget about the last month, but I also didn't want to bother them with the hours I'd be keeping due to the business I was here to visit.

"How was the flight?" Carson asked as he opened the trunk of his car.

"A little bumpy once we crossed the Mississippi," I said, "but otherwise fine."

Carson and Cory – the older of the two sets of twins in my family – were fraternal with slightly different shades of red and brown in their hair, one with blue eyes and one with green, and about an inch of difference in height. Their features, however, were similar enough that they could sometimes be confused if they weren't standing side-by-side. At the moment, though, they weren't even in the same time zone.

"At least the rain didn't start until just before you landed," he said as he started the car. "Later flights will probably be delayed or canceled. It's supposed to go on like this all day."

"Damn." I grimaced as I looked up at the sky. "I don't get how you can live with this weather."

He laughed. "Just because you're a stereotypical California surfer doesn't mean the rest of us can't handle the cold."

“This isn’t cold,” I countered. “I like the cold. It means I can go skiing and snowboarding. This is slush and ice falling from the sky.”

As he drove me to my hotel, we debated the merits of living in the heat and sun versus ice and gray skies. Carson and I had always been the most alike in personality, even though our interests had been polar opposites. Whenever we happened to get together, I was always reminded of how much I enjoyed spending time with him.

Which was exactly what I needed right now.

I’d been to the city a few times, usually on vacation, but New York had so many things to see and do that I hadn’t even come close to going through them all yet. Carson loved playing tour guide, so I wasn’t surprised when he announced that before we went back to his loft for dinner with our sisters, we’d be going to the Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum. I’d wanted to see it the last time I was in the city but hadn’t been able to make the time.

By the time we made it through the museum, the dinner Carson had ordered was ready, and we swung by to pick it up before going back to his loft. While all of our siblings had money from trust funds and shares in various family businesses, none of the three New Yorkers had spent any of their money on massive places to live.

London had a small apartment in the same building as several of her actor friends, even though it wasn’t in the best neighborhood. She didn’t, however, have roommates because she’d managed to keep small, low-paying jobs in the theater industry instead of working insanely long hours at shitty jobs in the food industry or retail.

Maggie lived with her boyfriend, Dale, and they were in a decent neighborhood, from what I remembered her saying. I’d never been there, and I didn’t think anyone else had been either.

Dale was kind of a dick.

Which reminded me...

“Please tell me Dale isn’t coming to dinner,” I said as I pulled two beers out of the fridge. “I want to see Maggie, but I really don’t like that guy.”

“None of us do,” Carson said as he took the bottle I held out. “Not that any of us really know him.”

I sighed. “Yeah, there’s that.”

He took a long drink before answering my non-question question. “And no, Dale isn’t coming. He’s working late.”

“I thought he played for the Philharmonic too.” At least I thought that was right. “Wouldn’t he and Maggie be working at the same time?”

Carson shrugged. “You’d think.”

We were quiet for a couple minutes, and I wondered if he was thinking the same thing I was. Maybe someone needed to talk to Maggie about Dale. She was our only full biological sister, and she’d been a baby when our mother had died, so we’d all been protective of her when she was growing up.

Things changed when Da and Theresa married, and after that, Theresa’s biological niece and nephews had also joined the family. It hadn’t made us any less protective, though. It’d been nearly impossible for any of my sisters to go on dates when we’d been growing up.

Honestly, I’d always suspected that Maggie had been glad when she’d realized that her musical talent could take her to the other side of the country and out from under the watchful eyes of her big brothers. London must’ve had the same idea because she’d come here as soon as she’d been able as well. Not that I blamed her. She was the youngest of all of us, the only daughter of Da and Theresa, so she’d gotten the worst of it.

Speaking of...

“Is London dating anyone?”

“Not as far as I know,” Carson said. “I doubt it, though. She’s always talking about how dumb it is to date people you work with and how many hours she’s working.”

“What about you?” I made the question more casual than when I’d asked about our sisters.

Carson didn't really talk about his relationships. In fact, he'd never mentioned dating anyone. Ever, as far as I was aware. Granted, he could've dated people after he'd moved to New York, and none of them had been serious enough to take home to the family. Hell, I'd had some casual relationships and hadn't ever brought any of those women home.

"Work is going well," he said before finishing his beer. He didn't look at me as he went to throw the bottle into his recycling bin. "I have a few new designs I'm working on."

"I heard a rumor you were hired to design a wedding dress for some big-shot actress."

Carson gave me a sideways look. "I didn't know you followed celebrity gossip."

"Paris is home for a couple weeks."

"Ah," he said with a smile. "That makes more sense."

A buzz interrupted our conversation, and he went to let our sisters into the loft. I followed him, and a minute later, Maggie and London were coming in with ice on their hair and smiles on their faces.

Maggie was first, and I caught a glimpse of a shadow in her turquoise eyes before we hugged. By the time she stepped back, whatever I'd seen was gone, and only her normal content expression remained. Then London was embracing me and already talking about how much she'd missed me.

She and Maggie shared some of Da's features, but while Maggie's hair was honey-blonde, London's was strawberry blonde and curly. London was also the only one of us to have brandy-colored eyes, standing out from the rest of us. I actually didn't think I'd ever seen anyone else with that particular shade and had no idea where it'd come from.

"Please tell me you went to that great Italian place." London hung up her coat and shook the water from her hair. "Because I have been craving that all day."

"Of course," Carson said. "I *am* your favorite brother, right?"

“Sometimes,” London joked as she practically skipped to the kitchen.  
“Depends on what you got for dessert.”

As Maggie and I followed the other two, I asked her, “Are we still on for tomorrow?”

She nodded and smiled. “I’ve been looking forward to it all week.”

I put my arm around her shoulder and pulled her to my side. “Me too.”

# Freedom

I drummed my hands on the wheel as I looked for an opening in the traffic. When Dr. Ipres had asked me to pick someone up from the San Jose International Airport, I'd initially imagined another Karina, but then she'd said my passenger would be a guest lecturer, Dr. Korbin Worthington III. That information alone had made me agree with more enthusiasm than I'd shown for any of the other things I'd done so far this year. After conducting a quick search of his name, I was now officially thrilled.

Dr. Worthington had a doctorate in International Development from Oxford and came from a wealthy and prestigious family in Boston. I had no doubt that if I asked my mother, she'd know of the family. The thing that really had me interested, though, was that Dr. Worthington's uncle was Alistair Worthington, U.S. Ambassador to Greece. Apparently, the Ambassador and Dr. Ipres's father, Cyril Calimeris, were friends.

While Dr. Ipres would be a great reference if I wanted to apply for a position with the Greek Ambassador, being able to speak to Dr. Worthington about his uncle would not only give me another connection point, but he might be able to also provide some practical insight about the type of things that went on in the ambassador's day-to-day work. Anything I could offer that would set me apart from dozens of other candidates with similar educations was something I needed.

I pulled into the parking lot and found a spot. After checking the flight on my phone, I sent a text to Dr. Ipres, letting her know that the plane was arriving on time. I got out of my car to wait, since I didn't know if Dr. Ipres had told Dr. Worthington who would be picking him up or if she had given him a description of me or my car.

All she'd told me was that he'd been instructed to come to the cell phone parking lot, so when I'd looked up information about him, I'd also made it a point to find a recent picture. Based on what I'd seen, I didn't think I'd have any problems locating him.

Around six feet tall, tanned, chiseled jaw, dimple in his chin, his features alone would've been striking. Add to that chestnut brown hair that was just a little unruly, as well as electric blue eyes, and the man was beyond simply good-looking.

Fortunately, I wasn't a woman who swooned over a pretty face. I could be objective and admit that he was gorgeous while not experiencing any attraction to him. It had nothing to do with the fact that I still couldn't stop thinking about Brody. No, the last thing I needed in my life right now was another stupid decision about sex.

I shivered as a gust of wind caught me off-guard, and then I reached into my car for my jacket. The skies were overcast and darker than they had been when I'd left home, but the rain predicted for today hadn't started yet, and I hoped it'd hold off just a little longer. I didn't have Dr. Worthington's phone number to call and arrange a different place to meet him, which meant he'd end up walking with all of his luggage in the rain.

Why hadn't I suggested to Dr. Ipres that I park in one of the hourly lots?

I reminded myself that I hadn't been responsible for setting any of this trip up. I was just the driver, following the directions given to me. If Dr. Worthington complained, I'd politely tell him that I'd make sure to let Dr. Ipres know his concerns. Not passing the blame, but letting him know that this shouldn't reflect poorly on me.

My head throbbed, and I rubbed my temples. Burnout among graduate students wasn't uncommon, and by the end of the fall semester, I'd felt stretched too thin. I'd thought that the holidays and then preparing for my last semester would leave me invigorated, ready, and eager to finally achieve what I'd been working for these past seven years.

Now, I wondered if my focus should perhaps be shifted to merely finishing so I could move on to the next stage of my life.

My phone went off, and I jumped. It was a text from Dr. Ipres.

*Dr. Worthington is requesting you pick him up at Terminal 1.*

I sighed and tapped out a quick reply. *On my way.*

By the time I reached the terminal, Dr. Worthington was easy to spot since he was one of only a handful of people who were still waiting for their pick-ups. His handsome face was twisted into a scowl, and I felt my opportunity for a positive connection to the ambassador start to slip away.

No.

I could fix this. I was an intelligent, educated woman who excelled at communication in myriad languages. I had the entire ride from here to his hotel to show him who I truly was.

I pulled up in front of him and popped the trunk before getting out of the car.

“Good afternoon, Dr. Worthington.” I gave him a practiced smile that I knew reflected professionalism and just enough warmth to not come across as cold, and well, bitchy. Most men had absolutely no idea how fine a line women had to walk to show competence and skill without being labeled arrogant. To be polite but firm. Assertive enough to take charge but not too much so.

“You’re Cicily’s assistant?”

I came around the car to assist with his luggage and felt his gaze moving down my body and then back up again. I chose to answer his question rather than comment on his behavior. “She’s my advisor. I’m a graduate student.”

“You didn’t tell me your name.”

His tone had completely changed, and I didn’t need to be a genius to know why.

“I’m Freedom Mercier.” I held out my hand.

He took my hand, and I immediately regretted offering it. He didn’t shake it. Instead, he did something I’d only ever seen in movies. He kissed my knuckles and then gave my hand a squeeze, holding it just a few seconds longer than was polite.

“Let’s get your things in the trunk, and we can get going before the storm hits.” I resisted the urge to wipe my hand on my pants.

And I was also suddenly glad that I’d chosen to wear dress slacks and a blouse rather than a skirt or dress.



“I can drive us if you’re uncomfortable driving in the rain.”

I told myself that he wasn’t being patronizing. Anyone could have taken my statement to mean that I was nervous about driving in bad weather.

“Thank you, but that’s all right.” I lifted his suitcase into the trunk and then stepped away so that he could add his carry-on without us touching. “Shall we?”

He settled in the passenger’s seat, the expression on his face clearly saying that he wasn’t a fan of my vehicle. That didn’t really surprise me. While our families were probably evenly matched financially, he was old money, which meant he probably still would’ve looked down his nose at me even if he knew how much money my family had. I’d known his type before. They thought of themselves as being above everyone else and judged people by how they spent their money.

My car wasn’t cheap, but it also wasn’t flashy. The fact that it didn’t impress him wasn’t surprising. I didn’t only know people like him, I’d grown up with them.

They were assholes.

“So, you’re a grad student?”

I glanced at him and then turned my attention back to the road. “I am. Political Science with a minor in International Relations.”

“Well then, aren’t you in luck?”

I saw his smarmy grin out of the corner of my eye, but I could hear it in his voice too.

Like I said. Assholes.

“Dr. Ipres told me that your uncle is the U.S. Ambassador to Greece.” I wasn’t going to be rude, but I’d be damned if I was going to pretend that his slick act worked on me. I had a brain in my head and knew how to use it. Being polite was one thing. Pretending I was stupid was something else.

“He is. Good old Uncle Alistair.” Dr. Worthington shifted in his seat so that he could see me better. “You want to be an ambassador? Having the right

connections can make that happen.”

“Actually, Dr. Worthington, I haven’t quite decided on a specific field. I just like to be well-informed before making life decisions.”

“Call me Korbin, please.” He ran his hand through his hair in a way that I assumed was supposed to look casual but just made me add *douche* to the *asshole* label. “Are you interested in Greece?”

“It’s a beautiful country. My family went there a few years ago for summer vacation.” I was glad that I had to focus on the road. “Dr. Ipres gave us a list of places to go, and I was able to use the Greek I’d learned from her.”

“So, when someone says that it’s all Greek to them, you know what they mean?”

I wanted to ask him if women thought that sort of thing was humorous, but I was afraid that the answer would be yes and that he’d feel obligated to tell me details.

“It is one of the languages I speak,” I said instead.

“One of them?” He sounded impressed, but I doubted it was genuine.

“I speak half a dozen or so.” I hoped I didn’t sound smug. I didn’t need to kiss up to him, but I didn’t need to be a bitch either. I didn’t expect praise but wouldn’t downplay my accomplishments.

“Wow, you really are something special.”

He really wasn’t taking the hint that I didn’t appreciate his ‘compliments.’

“Thank you.” The words were flat. I needed to get his mind off me and onto something else. Fortunately, I knew how to deal with guys like him. “I understand you’ll be lecturing on International Development. Would you mind giving me a preview of what you’ll be sharing?”

“I wouldn’t want to spoil it for you.”

“I’m not sure how many lectures I’ll be able to get to.” At least that was the truth. “My last semester has me fairly busy. I’d still like to hear what you’re going to speak about.”

“Of course.” He seemed pleased by my request, which told me I’d judged him correctly. The best way to get him to stop hitting on me was to get him to talk about himself.

The rest of the twenty-five-minute drive was full of him doing just that. He did include some information that could be useful, but everything always came back to him. Tedious and boring, yes, but definitely better than him flirting with me the entire time.

As I pulled up in front of the hotel, I breathed a sigh of relief that I didn’t have to spend one more minute with this guy. He hadn’t done or even said anything inappropriate, but he was clearly a man who was used to women falling all over him. Sure, he was good-looking and rich, but his personality was a huge turn-off. It was possible to be attractive and not be so full of himself. After all, Brody was just as hot, maybe even more—

No.

I only thought of him because this was the same hotel he’d stayed at. No other reason.

“Well, thank you for picking me up,” Korbin said, flashing a smile that probably cost more than my car. “Why don’t you join me in my room for lunch? We can continue our discussion there.”

I kept my own smile pleasant. “No, but thank you for the invitation.” I rolled down the passenger window and spoke to the young man who’d come over to the car. “His luggage is in the trunk.”

When it became clear that I wasn’t even going to get out of the car, Korbin’s smile faltered, and a hint of annoyance flashed across his face. He didn’t, however, try to pressure me or even insult me. Instead, he just said that he’d see me at some point and to have a nice day.

What did it say about society when a woman actually had to be concerned about a man’s reaction to her rejection? Yes, things were getting better, but I shouldn’t have needed to worry at all.

I would say this for Brody McCrae...despite how things ended between us, I’d never felt unsafe with him.

Twenty-Two

## Brody

The last time Maggie and I had done something with just the two of us had been a while, and even though it might've been longer since I'd spent time with some of my other siblings, it was different missing that time with Maggie.

The five-year age difference between the two of us had meant that we'd been at very different places in our lives growing up. By the time she was out of diapers, I was climbing trees and learning to surf. When she hit her teens, I was on my way to adulthood. And even though I'd stayed in San Ramon after I graduated from high school, I'd constantly been on the move.

Every year until recently, however, we'd had one day a year where we did something together. Her birthday.

She'd barely been one when Ma died, and while I only remembered bits and pieces from that time of my life, one of my clearest memories was Maggie's second birthday. I'd tried to make her a chocolate cake and had nearly burned down the kitchen.

After Da had put out the fire, and I'd told him what I'd wanted to do, he'd taken me to a bakery to pick out a cake for Maggie. Every year after, I found something special to give her or something for us to do. I'd even made a point to come see her after she moved to New York.

A month before she turned twenty-four, though, she'd called to cancel our plans, saying her new boyfriend was taking her somewhere special. Last year, she'd said that she'd been swamped with learning new music for an upcoming concert.

This year, I'd told her that we'd make it work, no matter how I had to juggle my schedule. I didn't know what had gone into her being able to spend yesterday evening at Carson's or today with me, but I was glad she'd made it happen, especially since I had a great surprise for her.

“You’re really not going to tell me where we’re going?” she asked. “You do realize I’ve lived here for almost eight years, right?”

“Let me have my fun.” I put my arm around her and gave her a hug as we left the diner where we’d just had lunch.

“That doesn’t seem very fair since it’s my birthday,” she countered. “Shouldn’t I be the one having the fun?”

“Well, you don’t have to wait long to find out,” I said as I flagged down a taxi. “I do have to tell the driver where to go.”

A minute or so later, I watched Maggie’s face as I told the cabbie to take us to Radio City Music Hall. She smiled, but I saw a bit of confusion on her face. Obviously, she’d been there before, which I’d already assumed. What she didn’t know, however, was that we were getting a special, private viewing of a brand-new addition to the usual tour, which wouldn’t even be announced until tomorrow morning. The only reason I even knew about it was Britt Winder.

Britt and I had met at a club in L.A., when she was a senior at UCLA, and I’d been in the city making some connections with clubs around the college. At the time, I’d been working on my first whiskey while brewing and selling Shannon’s Beer to bars and clubs in several California cities.

We’d had a fun couple weeks before parting ways on good terms when I went back to San Ramon, and she headed to New York for her new job at Radio City Music Hall. We’d hooked up a half dozen times for the next few years, but when she started seriously dating the guy she was now engaged to, we’d transitioned to being strictly friends.

I still had lunch or dinner with her and her fiancé whenever I was in the city. A few months ago, I’d asked her to keep an eye out for anything that would be good for a gift for Maggie, and a couple weeks ago, she’d given me a call. It’d been perfect timing.

“So, what’s Dale doing this afternoon?” I asked Maggie, hoping my question sounded casual. I’d been trying to find out more about her boyfriend, but the answers I’d gotten had been brief before she changed the subject. This was one of the few things I hadn’t brought up yet.

“He’s visiting his parents.” She pushed a stray piece of hair behind her ear. “They live in Queens, so we usually see them at least once each weekend, but they’ve been on a cruise for the past two weeks. He wanted to stay for lunch and dinner, which would have meant I’d have needed to cancel plans with you *and* work on my new piece tonight. Not going with him meant I can spend the day with you and then practice while he’s gone.”

I thought that was a much longer explanation than was necessary, especially since I hadn’t really asked for a reason why she hadn’t gone. If Dale hadn’t been the reason Maggie and I had missed her birthday the last couple years, I would’ve assumed that she’d simply told him she couldn’t go with him because she and I had plans.

As we pulled up to Radio City, I pushed my concerns aside. Maggie was an adult, and if she wanted to keep some things private, who was I to argue? Our family was tight-knit, and while we tried to mind our own business, it wasn’t always easy to keep our thoughts to ourselves. Especially with the younger ones, and even more so with my sisters.

Today wasn’t the day, though. Today was about Maggie and me spending time together and celebrating her birthday. Before I dropped her off at her place, I’d make sure that she knew she could come to me with anything.

Britt was waiting at the door, and as soon as Maggie and I stepped inside, she held out her hand and offered Maggie a brilliant smile.

“Happy birthday.”

“Thanks.” Maggie glanced at me, curiosity replacing confusion.

“We have something very special to show you today,” Britt said. “In fact, you’re the first members of the public to be shown the latest addition to our tour.” She held out a tri-fold brochure, and then she and I waited while Maggie read it.

It took about thirty seconds for her to understand why we were here, and her entire face lit up.

“Seriously? This is original sheet music?”

Britt nodded.

Maggie turned and threw her arms around me. “Thank you!”

I hugged her back and mouthed *thank you* to Britt. This was better than I’d imagined. Definitely a birthday to remember.

Twenty-Three

# Freedom

My last semester was not going the way I'd thought it would. I was supposed to be sitting in class right now, but instead, I was on my way to pick up Karina from her apartment and take her to hear Dr. Worthington's first lecture.

After his 'lunch' invitation the other day, I'd gone back to calling him by his title rather than his first name.

I tried telling myself that the lecture could be interesting. I hadn't gotten much real information when I'd asked him to tell me about his presentation, so most of it would be new. And it wouldn't be difficult to pay attention, since the entire reason I was going was to translate anything for Karina that she didn't understand.

By the time Karina opened the door, my patience had already worn thin. She wasn't a student in the class he was lecturing, and I had no idea why she wanted to go. I just knew that my own schedule had been disrupted, and she didn't even have the consideration to be ready on time.

"*Hola,*" she said brightly as she stepped out into the hallway.

My eyebrows went up. I'd never been a student who'd worn pajamas to classes like others did, but even on the days when I'd been more dressed up than casual, I'd never worn anything like this. She looked more like she was going to a club. Skintight and sparkling, I doubted she'd be able to sit in that dress without flashing her panties. If she was even wearing any.

But she was an adult who wasn't my child or my sister, which meant it was none of my business, and I was glad for it. If she wanted to put fashion over common sense, that was on her.

"It's fairly windy," I said. "Do you want to get a jacket?"



“A jacket would completely ruin my look.” She ran her hand down her side and hip, as if she was smoothing the dress down. Not that the outfit had any room to wrinkle.

“All right.” I barely refrained from rolling my eyes. “Let’s go.”

“Have you met Dr. Worthington?” Karina asked as we made our way to the lecture hall.

“I picked him up at the airport,” I said, glancing at her as a suspicion popped into my mind. “Did one of your professors recommend the lecture?”

Based on what I knew of her class schedule, I doubted it, but professors sometimes brought up lectures and events that weren’t necessarily connected to their own areas of study.

She shook her head. “Felicity said we needed to go because Dr. Worthington is,” Karina frowned, “*caliente?*”

“Hot.” I swallowed a sigh. I’d hoped I was wrong.

“Yes.” She waved a hand in front of her face. “Hot. Is this true?”

I had no idea how I was supposed to respond to that. An honest response would be that he was physically attractive, but that would probably lead to some awkwardness, especially after we’d had the same sort of conversation about Brody.

“He’s a guest speaker in his thirties,” I finally said. “His appearance doesn’t matter.”

Another quick glance at her showed that she was pouting.

Oh, this was going to be fun.

\* \* \*

The lecture had been mildly interesting, and even I had to admit that Dr.

Worthington had a very charismatic way of delivering information that could have otherwise been dry and dull. Still, I hadn't liked the way Karina stared at him. Not that she'd been the only one.

I didn't really have a problem with the age difference, or even the fact that she was a student here and he was a guest of the university. I honestly didn't even know if she was his type, though I suspected any attractive woman who hung on his every word was his type. Either way, I planned on keeping a close eye on her when she was around him.

She wasn't unintelligent, but the incident at the party the other night had proven my estimation of her maturity had been accurate. She didn't have the emotional maturity to be involved with someone like Dr. Worthington.

As the lecture ended, female students queued up to speak to him, and I turned to Karina to ask if she wanted to go back to her apartment to get lunch before her next class or if she preferred to eat on campus. Except she wasn't there.

In the few seconds it had taken me to pick up my purse, she'd managed to get down to the front of the lecture hall and maneuver her way to Dr. Worthington's side. Judging by the expressions on some of the other girls' faces, Karina hadn't cared who'd she cut in front of to get there either.

"Dammit," I muttered as I made my way down the steps.

I'd been hoping to make it out without Dr. Worthington knowing I was here. After telling him that I probably wouldn't be attending any of his lectures due to my class schedule and workload, here I was at the first one he'd given. The way his eyes lit up when he saw me join the crowd of his admirers annoyed me.

I didn't want him to think that I was playing hard to get instead of simply not being interested in him. I'd already gotten the impression that women didn't turn him down often, so I doubted he'd have to work hard at deluding himself about my intentions.

"Karina, if you want to have time for lunch before your next class, we should go." I spoke in Spanish so she couldn't misunderstand me.

"My professor canceled classes for today," she replied in her native tongue, "so any of us who wanted to attend the lecture could."

That didn't mesh with what she'd told me about not having been recommended to the lecture by a professor, but I really didn't want to get into a debate with her, so I let it go. If she wanted to get in trouble for missing class, that was on her. My only responsibility was to show up when she requested language assistance.

"Freedom, I'm so glad to see you." Dr. Worthington had finally managed to pull himself away from his fan club. "I'd thought you wouldn't be able to make it."

Lovely.

"Dr. Worthington." Even though he'd used my first name, I wanted to keep the distance between us. Before I could say anything else, he took my hand and kissed my knuckles.

I was pretty sure I heard twenty girls swoon.

"It's Korbin," he said with a smile. "Let me take you to lunch. It'll make up for the other day when you weren't able to join me."

I almost told him that I hadn't been 'unable' but rather 'unwilling,' but that didn't seem like the best idea at this time and place.

"Thank you for the invitation," I took a step back, "but Karina needs to—"

"I would love to go for lunch." She smiled up at Dr. Worthington.

Dammit, Karina.

I couldn't leave her here with him, not when I didn't know if he'd offer to take her alone. Or what that offer would entail. I didn't know him well enough to know his habits. She may have thought she was a "worldly woman," but I knew she was naïve enough to believe a man like him if he got it into his mind that she was what he wanted. I, however, could handle him.

And chew him up and spit him out if necessary.

A thought occurred to me, and I smiled. "Karina and I would be happy to join you."

He didn't look happy about my having included her, but she was thrilled. If I played this right and kept him talking about the things that his uncle did in Greece, it could be beneficial in several ways. I'd get the information I wanted, and he'd hopefully understand that my only interest in him was academic. Even better, Karina would most likely be bored by the discussion and not want to have anything else to do with him.

Perfect.

Twenty-Four

## Brody

Before I'd done research into New York clubs, I'd never heard of this particular one. In fact, it'd been nearly two months into my general research before I'd first heard the name Club Privé.

The city was big enough that it wasn't a surprise that I'd still been finding new names after eight weeks. While I intended to offer my product exclusively to a few of the top clubs in the city – everyone liked to say they had something only offered in a couple places – I knew I needed to have a longer list than I intended to use. Just in case the first ones either weren't receptive, or after meeting with the owners, I decided they wouldn't be a good fit for Shannon's.

Once I knew the name, it wasn't difficult to find out more, especially since it'd been in the news a lot several years ago when a huge human trafficking scandal had nearly destroyed it. From what I'd read, the current owners had been responsible for busting said trafficking ring and had then built the club back up with a good, clean reputation.

Well, I wasn't sure how many people would consider a BDSM club 'clean' or 'good,' but from a legal standpoint, they were well above board, and there hadn't been any claims made against the Mannings. It seemed that the power couple actually worked with law enforcement to ensure that all of their members and workers were there of their own free will and weren't using the club as a place to scout for victims. There were also rumors that they'd established a safe house of sorts for victims of trafficking where they helped survivors find work, covered treatments that ranged from medical to psychological, provided education, and more.

So far, my interactions with Gavin Manning had been professional, if a bit stiff, but I'd dealt with enough people to know that a person's manner on the phone and in emails wasn't necessarily who they were in real life, especially if the context was business. It was one of the reasons I always met people in person before I signed a contract.

Working that way took more time and a lot of travel, but I felt that a personal connection only strengthened the business relationships. Not everyone I worked with became a friend, but I wouldn't work with anyone I didn't trust or respect.

I wasn't one of those people who thought the lines between business and friendship needed to be clear and unbreakable, but I also didn't think I needed to be buddies with everyone. Dr. Josephs was a prime example of that. We'd never be friends, but I could honestly say that I liked him.

As I walked to the employee entrance of Club Privé, I felt the familiar sense of curiosity I got whenever I was about to meet new people, venture into a new potential partnership.

And I'd have been lying if I said I wasn't a little extra curious because of the type of club this was. I'd been to plenty of strip clubs, had private lap dances that sometimes got a little friendlier than was advertised, but I wasn't one of those guys who got off on being with women who didn't really have the choice to say no. I just hoped this place was as clean as the reviews said.

I pressed the buzzer next to the door and waited. A minute later, the door opened, and I found myself looking up at a dark-haired man who was at least a good four inches taller than me.

"Brody McCrae?" When I nodded, he held out his hand. "I'm Gavin Manning. Nice to meet you in person."

"You too."

He stepped to the side and gestured for me to come in. "My wife's in the office. She hasn't been feeling well the last couple days." He frowned, but I could see that it was the sort of frown that came when people were exasperated by someone they loved. "I told her she didn't need to come today, but she insisted. Stubborn woman." He grumbled the last two words, but the love in his voice was evident.

"I'm not married, but I have sisters," I said as we made our way up a set of stairs. "Every single one of them hard-headed and strong-willed. And I wouldn't have them any other way." I laughed, and he joined me.

“You said you’re not married. Are you with someone?” Gavin stopped at the first door on the left.

Immediately, a face flashed through my mind. Light blonde hair, clear blue eyes. A pretty face and kiss-swollen lips. The sound of her coming echoed in my head, and I had to shove her out of my mind, think about math, and doing my taxes so I wouldn’t get an erection just in time to meet Mrs. Manning. I definitely didn’t want her husband to get the wrong idea. Fortunately, I was able to clear my head by the time I followed Gavin into the office.

“Brody, it’s good to meet you.” An attractive blonde stood up and came around the desk to shake my hand. She was pale and had dark smudges under her eyes, but if Gavin hadn’t said that she hadn’t been feeling well, I wouldn’t have even noticed because she looked as sharp and intelligent as anyone I’d ever met.

“Have a seat,” Gavin said as he went to his wife and kissed the top of her head. “You need anything?”

The first was directed at me, the second at Carrie. The two of them shared a look that I’d seen before. Da and Theresa looked at each other that way too. A sharp pang went through me, and for the first time in my life, I wondered what it would be like to feel that way about someone.

And then I remembered what it had done to my family when my mother died. I remembered seeing my father cry and how long it had taken him to smile again. I’d been a kid, but I remembered.

No, it was better not to have that connection. I could always find someone to spend time with if that was what I wanted. I already had my family, who I loved deeply. I didn’t need to add a woman, or worse, kids.

I shoved all of that aside and took a seat in a chair while Gavin and Carrie went to a small sofa across from me. My personal life had always taken a back seat to business, and that was another reason why I didn’t want what these two had. In my life, Shannon’s came second only to my family, and that was a different responsibility than I’d have had with a wife or kids.

“You mentioned that you do business with a few other clubs in the city,” Gavin began. “Does that mean this isn’t your first time here?”

“I’ve been here several times on business and visiting family,” I said. “Two of my sisters and one of my brothers live here.”

“Are they involved with Shannon’s too?” Carrie asked.

I shook my head. “Carson’s a designer. Maggie’s a violinist with the Philharmonic, and London is an actress.”

“Wow.” Carrie looked impressed. Then she tilted her head, as if a thought had just occurred to her. “Carson McCrae? That’s your brother?”

I chuckled. “Yes, that’s him. I thought you might have heard of at least one of them.”

Carrie looked over at her husband. “He’s the one who designed Bryne’s wedding dress.”

Gavin started to nod but frowned before the movement was complete. “Wait, didn’t she get the recommendation from someone on one of her shows?” He looked at me. “You said your one sister is an actress?”

“Yes. London McCrae,” I said. “She’s been in a few off-Broadway shows and did some guest spots on some TV shows. She hasn’t had any main parts yet, but she’s worked pretty steadily in the theater since she moved here two years ago.”

I definitely sounded like a bragging brother, but I’d never apologize for being proud of my family. The way the Mannings smiled made me think they were the same way.

“Bryne is Gavin’s niece,” Carrie explained.

A memory suddenly came forward. “Bryne Dawkins?”

“Yes,” Gavin said. “She kept her last name after she got married.”

“I remember London telling me about her.” I forced my mind back to those memories. “When London was a freshman in college, she and a few of her friends came to New York and saw a show where the lead was this woman named Bryne Dawkins. London loved her. She said that Bryne was only a year or two older than her and was such an amazing actress already.”



“Was it *Collide*?” Carrie asked.

I thought for a minute and nodded. “That sounds right.”

“That was Bryne’s first leading role,” Gavin said.

“And one hell of an opening night.” The wry tone of Carrie’s voice and the look she and Gavin exchanged made me think there was a story there.

If this went as well as I thought it would, maybe I’d get to hear it.

“Anyway,” Carrie turned back to me, “your brother worked a miracle. The shop holding Bryne’s original dress had a fire, and her dress was ruined. London heard about it and told Bryne to see Carson. He made her an entirely original dress in only a few months, and if you’d have seen it, you’d know just how big of an accomplishment it was.”

I chuckled and smiled, another surge of pride at my family going through me. “That sounds like him.”

“Bryne and Dax had nothing but good things to say about him,” Gavin said. “Talented family you have there.”

“You have no idea.” I chuckled. “Ever heard of MIRI? Or CarideoTech?”

“Both, actually,” Gavin said. “I’ve dabbled in some tech.”

“He designed a couple apps before that was really a common thing.” Carrie beamed with pride. “He’s brilliant.”

“And my wife is overstating.” Gavin put his arm around her and pulled her against his side. “Yes, I made a couple apps, but that’s nothing compared to what CarideoTech has done.” He narrowed his eyes. “MIRI, I understand, obviously. McCrae International Research Institute. Founded in Scotland, but it’s also on the West Coast too.”

“My father is Patrick McCrae,” I said. “I was actually born in Scotland.”

“How are you connected to CarideoTech?” Gavin asked.

“My stepbrother is Austin Carideo. We’re also involved in real estate, marketing, and investment, motivational speaking. Another brother is a Professor of Education at John Hopkins, and one more plays football in

England. Sorry, soccer. One step-sister works in art restoration, and the other is an architect.”

“That’s a lot.” Carrie was slowly shaking her head. “Do you mind if I ask—”

“Sixteen.” I laughed. “You were going to ask how many of us there were, right?”

Gavin looked at Carrie. “Please tell me you don’t want that many. I’m good with the ones we have.”

She laughed, and the warmth between the two of them made me smile. I might not have been looking for what they had, but it was good to know it was out there all the same.

Time passed quickly as we talked, but without any windows in the office, I hadn’t realized just how much. Nearly two hours. Since I didn’t have anything else scheduled on my calendar, when Gavin extended an invitation for me to check out the club itself as it prepared to open for the day, I accepted.

My first thought as I followed the Mannings into the main area was that it didn’t look anything like what I thought a sex club would look like. No leather or chains, for one thing. No matter how high class it was, Club Privé was still a BDSM club.

Except I was starting to think that I didn’t understand what that meant as well as I’d thought I did.

The bar and tables looked like they could be in any of the other high-end clubs I’d gone to over the past few years, but there were also obvious differences too. Screens were set up at different points around the perimeter, and as the Mannings led me around, I noticed a variety of furniture behind the screens. Chaises, armchairs, a wooden bench, a couple things that I hadn’t seen before and had no names for. A closer look revealed some of the furniture had various types of restraints attached.

Despite the lack of a name, I didn’t need much of an imagination to know how those were used.

An image flashed through my mind.

Freedom's wrists above her head as she writhed in pleasure. My fingers and mouth bringing her to climax over and over again. The expression on her face when she came and the knowledge that everyone who heard her would know that I'd done that for her. That she was mine, and no one else would ever see her like that again.

Then I saw the positioning of one of the lights and realized what the screens were for.

"Exhibitionists?" I gestured toward the screens and the lights.

"Sort of," Carrie said. She wrapped her arm around Gavin's waist and leaned against him. "I'm guessing you're not a part of the life."

Her statement held no accusation or defensiveness. In fact, I got the impression that she was simply clarifying so that she understood how much to explain.

I shook my head. "Just bits and pieces, and I'm sure even some of that is wrong."

She smiled. "I didn't know anything about it either until I met Gavin."

"Which is why she's the one who gives new members and new employees the spiel about how it all works." Gavin gave Carrie a quick kiss. "Why don't you fill him in on a few things while I go talk to Emmett about today's security roster?"

Carrie nodded, and as Gavin walked away, she explained what she meant about the whole exhibition thing.

"Most people think that everyone in BDSM is into the exact same thing to the exact same degree, but that's not the case, and one of the reasons we're so successful is that we understand that." She pointed to the far wall. "We have private rooms with doors that can lock for people who want to play without an audience, or if they only want a few people to watch, they can leave it unlocked. Those who like the idea of exhibitionism but don't want the full show can have sex or whatever behind the screens so that people can only see their shadows." Carrie then pointed toward the center of the room. "The hardcore exhibitionists perform on the stage."

“Perform?” I had a feeling I knew what she meant, but I wasn’t going to assume.

“Sometimes, it’s just a bondage scene without any actual sex,” she said. “But sometimes they fuck.”

I’d been right.

“We try to have at least one performance every night, and sometimes our employees will sign up to play either with members or with other employees, but our contracts are very clear that they aren’t being paid for sex and that absolutely nothing is done without consent.” Carrie’s expression became somber. “We take that very seriously.”

“I wouldn’t be doing business with you if I thought otherwise.”

I might’ve said more, but a statuesque redhead came over to us, her miniskirt and halter top showing off her figure without being trashy.

“Yes, Joyce?” Carrie asked, her expression one of polite professionalism.

“Elizabeth called in sick,” Joyce said, “so it’ll be just Dennis and me performing tonight unless I can find a third for our scene.” She glanced at me and then did a double-take. Her eyes ran down my body and then back up again. “Are you a new member?” She practically purred as she turned toward me. “Maybe you’d like to play.”

I should have wanted to, even with my strong suspicion that she was talking about a threesome with another man. I wasn’t attracted to men, but I wasn’t homophobic either. A threesome didn’t freak me out, but I was still going to decline the offer. Because no matter how gorgeous this woman was, I could only think of myself here with one woman.

Dammit.

Twenty-Five

# Freedom

When Dr. Worthington – Korbin, as he insisted I call him – said that he wanted to have lunch with me, I’d foolishly believed that we would go to one of the places on campus. Instead, we ended up at Teléferic Barcelona, a Spanish restaurant in Palo Alto. I hadn’t been here before, but I knew the prices were high.

I wondered if he’d chosen it because, like too many people born into money, he thought the more he paid, the better he looked. Of course, he might have decided on it when he’d met Karina in order to impress her. I honestly didn’t know which one would annoy me the most, but I wouldn’t show it either way.

Karina and I would have lunch and then leave in time for our next classes. The next time Korbin asked me to lunch, I could turn him down without looking like I was blowing him off. If I was very lucky, Karina’s very presence here would prevent him from thinking this was a date.

Or so I’d thought fifteen minutes ago when we’d settled at our table.

“So, she’s not your sister?” he asked before taking a drink of his wine.

“Of course not,” Karina answered for us both. Considering he hadn’t addressed either one of us specifically, I was happy to let her talk. “I am a student, and Freedom helps me with my English when I need it.”

“Are you an early admission?” He gave her a smile that managed to be half-charming and half-smarmy.

It suddenly hit me that he was trying to figure out how old she was.

Shit.

“No.” She smiled at him. “My parents insisted I start at home as I did not turn eighteen until October.”

“Well then, let me give you a belated *happy birthday*.”

Karina giggled and batted her eyelashes.

I’ve never actually seen anyone do that before, and I had no desire to see her do it again, particularly when it was directed at a man in his thirties. If she wanted to flirt with her classmates or even some of the boorish frat boys I’d seen her dancing with the other night, that was one thing. This guy was something else entirely.

“So, Dr. Worthington,” at his look, I corrected myself, “sorry, Korbin. What are you on to next after you’re finished here?”

Best to remind her that he wasn’t sticking around. And if I had to call him by his first name to divert his attention from her, it was a small price to pay. No price, actually, because it didn’t cost me anything. He might’ve thought it meant he was getting to me, and I didn’t actually care what he thought.

“Well, Freedom, I’m going to be devoting a portion of my time here on the west coast to reconnoitering potential business ventures. Los Angeles as well as San Francisco, and at some point, up to wine country. My family is forever considering fresh ways to invest in our burgeoning economy.”

I had a healthy vocabulary and had been accused on more than one occasion of using words I needed to explain. Korbin, however, sounded like he was trying to pick some of the most pretentious words possible in order to make himself appear more intelligent or widely read than he was. It was different enough from how he’d spoken before that I could tell it wasn’t natural.

Well, that and the fact that some of his word choices were just a little off. Like he’d gone through a thesaurus and chosen words at random without bothering to check if they meant what he wanted to say. He also sounded like he was repeating something someone else had written. Something he was supposed to say if he was asked what he was doing so far from home.

It made me wonder if he wasn’t here on a completely voluntary basis. My parents moved in high society circles enough for me to know that a favorite way of dealing with problem children, no matter the age, was to send them away while whatever scandal they’d involved themselves in faded.

I didn't comment on any of that, though. Besides the fact that it wasn't any of my business, he wouldn't be around long enough for it to matter. We were halfway through lunch already, and since Karina had already heard his lecture, it shouldn't be too hard to convince her to stay away during the time he had left here. If he wanted a co-ed in his bed, he wouldn't need to look too hard. There were plenty of female students who'd easily fall for that smile of his. He didn't strike me as the sort of man who actually enjoyed a challenge.

"Will you meet actors in Hollywood?" Karina asked.

When he didn't answer right away, she began to tell him about her favorite actors, a non-stop litany of who she thought was the best looking and the most talented. Non-stop until she suddenly announced that she needed to use the restroom and sauntered away, leaving Korbin and me sitting at the table alone.

He leaned across the table, and I mentally prepared myself for whatever disparaging and condescending comment he was about to make.

What came out of his mouth next, however, was absolutely nothing I could have dreamed up. It was too...bizarre.

"I'm going to call ahead to my hotel to have some champagne sent up to the room. Karina's European, so she can have alcohol even though she's not twenty-one, right?"

I blinked at him, wondering what the hell he was asking. Still, I kept my response polite. "Pardon?"

He grinned and reached out, his fingertips brushing mine. "What do you say the three of us head back to my room and have some fun?"

Hell. No.

He did *not* just suggest a threesome with an intoxicated teenager.

I gritted my teeth and resisted the urge to call him out as a lecherous asshole. "I don't think that's a good idea."

He moved his hand, putting it over mine. "It's all right if you don't want to share me. I can make do with just you."

I yanked my hand away and stuck it under the table, rubbing it on my leg as if that would get rid of the slimy feeling his touch elicited. “I’m not interested in anything you’re offering.”

His expression hardened, and all that charm went right out the window. “I know that’s not true. You want me to put in a good word for you with my uncle. Use my name as a reference. You want all that but don’t want to give anything in return.”

My hands curled into fists, nails digging into my palms, and I kept them under the table so he couldn’t see them. He was looking for a reaction, and I doubted anger was what he wanted to see. I kept my face blank and let him keep talking.

“You need to understand two things about me,” he continued. “The first is that I always get what I want. And the second is that I can be your best friend or your worst enemy.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Karina walking toward us. He must have seen her too because he said one more thing before his expression changed back to the public face he usually wore.

“Something to think about for the next time we meet.”

Just as Karina reached us, he stood up and held out his hand. She took it, and he lifted it to his lips for one of those asinine gestures of his.

“Regretfully, I must depart,” he said to her. “But I’ll be waiting with bated breath to see you once more.”

I had no idea if he’d called a car or spotted a taxi, but I really didn’t care. He wasn’t gone fast enough for me, but it seemed to be too fast for Karina. She let out a sigh and collapsed into her seat. “Such a beautiful man, is he not?”

I glanced toward the parking lot. “Looks aren’t everything, Karina.”

She was young, but she would learn the lesson sooner or later. We all did.



## Brody

I'd purposefully decided to stay in New York a few days after my meeting at Club Privé before leaving from here to go to my next meeting in San Antonio rather than flying home to San Ramon for just a couple days. I'd spent time with Maggie on Sunday and then had gone to a play London was in last night. Today, I planned to spend time with Carson.

He'd had meetings this morning, so I'd done a little exploring on my own. Not living in the city, I could always find something I hadn't seen before. Googling 'unique things to see in New York City' always had interesting results. Today, it was the Brooklyn Superhero Supply Store and the Dead Horse Bay.

On my way from Brooklyn to Carson's studio, I stopped at The Smith and picked up some food for both Carson and me. We might not have spent much time together since he'd moved out here, but I still knew what he liked to eat. Hell, even though I wasn't the oldest, I'd done my fair share of babysitting growing up and could probably remember at least one thing each of my siblings craved most.

Middle kids were often overlooked, and Carson and Cory had gotten it worse than most. They'd been a little over four-years-old when our mom died. Old enough to be out of diapers and able to feed themselves regular food. Eoin and Maggie had needed more done for them.

While Da had done his best, there'd been six of us under nine-years-old, and he'd been grieving the love of his life. Alec and I had helped as much as we'd been able, but the twins had needed less than the younger ones. We'd never been neglected or abused. It had just been...difficult. For all of us.

I pushed the past out of my head and put a smile on my face before going inside. I wanted to have a good time with my brother and reminiscing about that time in our lives wouldn't do it. We could talk about our mother without it being a bad thing, but none of us liked to remember the time right after her

death.

As I opened the door, I saw a trio of women a few feet away. I stepped back and held the door open as they passed. If I hadn't known Carson's approach to fashion, I might not have realized that all three were likely models because they all had completely different body types. One tall and curvy, one petite, and one of average height with wide hips and broad shoulders.

"Good morning, ladies." I gave them my best charming smile, less because I wanted a response and more because if they learned I was Carson's brother, I didn't want to give them any bit negativity that could poorly reflect on him.

It didn't matter that my little brother was almost thirty. He was still my little brother, and I protected him however I could. I just happened to do it more through deflection than intensity.

The women smiled back and greeted me but didn't stop to chat. Another time, I might have considered going after them and getting a number or two, but just as I'd found at Club Privé, I couldn't muster any interest in any of them.

Dammit, Freedom.

Fortunately, getting her out of my head was easier once I spotted Carson.

"I have lunch," I announced as I crossed to the least cluttered table and set down my bag. "I went to The Smith."

"Thanks." Carson stood up and placed a few things onto the table closer to him. "Sorry about the mess. The place always looks like this after a fitting, and I had three this morning."

"I figured that's who those women were," I said as I pulled food from my bag. "That reminds me, I found out we have a mutual connection. Well, sort of."

"Who's that?" He checked out what I had and picked up the grilled chicken sandwich I'd ordered for him.

"Carrie and Gavin Manning." I settled on the barstool and took a huge bite of the Smith Burger. It wasn't the healthiest choice on the menu, but it was

delicious, and I wasn't in New York enough to make it a habit.

"Manning?" He frowned for a moment before it clicked. "Bryne Dawkins. I remember now. London referred her after her wedding dress was destroyed in a fire or something like that. The Mannings paid for it."

"I didn't know that part of the story," I said. "But it doesn't surprise me. They're clearly doing well financially, and Gavin struck me as a man who'd be just as overprotective of his niece as he would be of daughters."

"How do you know them?" Carson asked.

"The meeting I came to the city for was at their club. Club Privé."

Carson's eyebrows shot up, and I didn't need to ask if he'd heard of it, though I did wonder *how* he'd heard of it. He'd never seemed particularly interested in sex, even as a teenager.

"I have several questions," he said, "but the first one is...does anyone else in the family know that you're going to be selling whiskey with our mother's name to a BDSM club?"

I burst out laughing. "That's not exactly something you bring up at a family dinner."

"True." He grinned at me. "Now, for my second question...did you get a tour?"

# Freedom

High fifties and sunny, with a promise of hitting sixty this afternoon, the day was absolutely beautiful. Since the forecast didn't even call for clouds today, I parked near the end of the lot. Neither Aline nor I minded walking, especially since neither of us were in heels. Just our normal Wednesday classes, nothing special. And I really needed some boredom for a while.

After Monday's disastrous lunch, neither Korbin nor Karina had reached out to me, and since Dr. Ipres hadn't said anything, I assumed neither of them had talked to her either. Not that I'd really expected them to, but I was still grateful for their silence. Now, I could focus on Aline and me getting through this last semester and deciding on the next steps for both of us.

"I meant to ask you earlier but forgot." Aline broke the silence between us. "Is that lecturer, Dr. Worthington, extending his stay?"

"What?" That came out sharper than I intended, but I didn't apologize. I was too focused on her question.

Aline shielded her eyes against the sun as we stepped onto the sidewalk and turned east. "Hickson and Margarite were talking yesterday about how they could go hear him now that he'd announced another week of lectures."

I sighed. "I hadn't heard that, but Dr. Ipres did say that every lecture he'd given had packed the room. It makes sense that they'd want him to stay longer."

I really hoped that didn't mean I wouldn't have to deal with him again, though. I—

A loud pop, followed by a second one, jarred me out of my thoughts.

"What the—?"

I heard another, and this time, it was louder. Sharper.

“Gun!” Someone else screamed.

I didn’t think. With a surge of adrenaline, I grabbed Aline’s arm and pulled her after me as I ran for the closest building.

Three more shots, but I couldn’t tell which direction they were coming from or where they were aimed.

I pushed Aline between me and the wall of the building, my mind going a thousand miles an hour without processing any specific bit of information. I needed to think. What building was this? Where was the door? Was it better to stay put here or try to get inside?

Stop.

Focus.

What did I know?

The gunshots didn’t sound like they were coming from inside a building, which meant inside was the safest option.

“Freedom, what’s happening?” Aline grabbed the back of my shirt. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” I said, hating myself for not having an answer for her.

We were too exposed where we were. No shrubbery or trees for us to hide behind. Depending on positioning, we could either be completely safe and out of the line of sight, or we’d made ourselves sitting ducks.

No. *I’d* made us sitting ducks.

If my next choice was wrong, I’d put my sister in even more danger.

“We need to get inside,” I said.

“All right.”

I could feel her practically vibrating with tension. I wanted to reassure her that it would be okay, that I’d protect her, but I wasn’t certain that either of those things were true, and I didn’t know if I’d be able to convince myself of it, much less convince her.

I focused on what I needed to do. I remembered now what building we'd been passing, and even though I hadn't had any classes here since freshman year, I knew where the door was. We'd need to go around the corner, but it'd only be a few steps from there to the door. A few steps, though, with an active shooter, could be a few too many.

An old picture flashed into my head. A teenage boy on the sidewalk near the doors of his school. He'd been holding them open for his classmates to escape when he'd been killed.

Aline and I had grown up in a post-Columbine, post 9/11 world. We'd been in school when the Virginia Tech and Newtown shootings happened. Even with the impressive security at the private school we'd gone to, we'd still had active shooter drills.

I hadn't heard any additional gunshots, but I knew that didn't mean this was over. The buzzing of my phone in my purse reminded me that Stanford had a messaging system to alert students and faculty of any emergencies. Once Aline and I were safely inside, I'd check it. She and I weren't going to leave until we either received the all-clear via message or we were face-to-face with a police officer.

"We're going around the corner and to the door," I said, glancing back at Aline. "You stay between me and the wall, and we're not stopping until we're inside."

She nodded, her eyes wide but not panicked.

"Let's go."

Twenty-Eight

## Brody

My trip to New York was an unmitigated success, both professionally and personally. I'd spent time with my family as a group and one-on-one. Club Privé and the Mannings had been even better than I'd expected, and I looked forward to working with them. If my trip to San Antonio went half as well, I'd still consider it a win.

Until I'd learned about Club Privé, I'd never considered doing business with a sex club, but after seeing what the Mannings had created, I'd decided to do a little research in the cities already on my schedule. Just like with any other business, there would be good ones and bad ones, but I now had a comparison to go by.

I'd also talked to Gavin yesterday evening and gotten his take on the number-one-rated sex club in San Antonio. He'd told me that Black Masque was similar to Club Privé, and he'd only heard good things about them. That had been enough for me to schedule a visit.

I planned on further research during the flight. Keeping busy would prevent my mind from going where it had been wanting to go pretty much every unoccupied moment since New Year's Eve. Each time I'd been with her had just made things worse. More things for me to remember over and over and over...

I sighed. Dammit.

I'd been one of those junior high kids who'd had 'girlfriends' every other month and bragged about stealing kisses under the bleachers. I'd lost my virginity in an embarrassingly short encounter with a sixteen-year-old two months after I'd turned fifteen. I hadn't been a complete player, and I'd always treated women well, but I had slept with a fair number of women. I'd even had a couple threesomes.

But nothing I'd experienced with any other woman or women had ever stuck with me the way Freedom had. Every slightly erotic thought I'd had since that night had featured her.

I needed to get her out of my head. I'd been at Club Privé the other night long enough to have seen several gorgeous women in various states of undress. I'd appreciated the beauty, but that'd been the extent of my interest. Because all I could think of was how it'd felt to be inside Freedom, to hear her sighing my name.

And then I'd started thinking about what it would be like to be at a club like that with Freedom. I'd never really thought about BDSM before, and I didn't think the majority of the lifestyle was for me, but a couple things had stuck with me. Things I might like to try with a partner at some point in the future.

Except, the only partner I could think of at the moment was Freedom.

She was the only one I could picture tying up, playing with, maybe even teasing her in public. I'd never want anyone else to see her naked, but the more I thought about it, the more I liked the idea of making her come in public, of knowing that I controlled her pleasure.

Research.

Right.

I needed to do research into Black Masque. Not because I wanted to think about what it would be like to be with Freedom there. At Club Privé, I'd had an idea about maybe making a whiskey specifically for a BDSM club, something that they could advertise as being exclusive to only a select number of clubs. Even come up with a name that would be related to the BDSM world. Learning about Black Masque could help me figure out where to go with that.

That was where my mind needed to be. Focused on business and the future.

I thanked the cab driver and headed into the airport. My flight didn't leave for more than an hour, but I never knew how quickly I'd get through the lines. At some point, I planned on getting a private plane of my own like my brother Alec, but at the moment, I lived close enough to my parents to use their plane if I couldn't find a flight when I needed one. For these trips, I'd been able to



find the flights I'd needed and all with seats in first class.

Still, it would be nice not to have to go through all the regular security shit when I wanted an early flight. I couldn't cut the drive from my hotels to the airports, but taking an extra hour off my travel time would be nice.

I understood the need for security. I'd been young on 9/11, but I remembered it. The first time my dad had gotten on a plane after that day, I'd freaked out. It was only after he'd assured me that he personally knew everyone who'd be on the family's plane that I'd calmed down. Still, I remembered staying awake until he called to tell us he'd landed safely.

"Dammit," I muttered as I moved to the side, out of the path of anyone else coming in. I closed my eyes and ran a hand over my face.

I wasn't a nervous flier, but those were not the memories I wanted in my head before I got on a flight. I needed a plan I could focus on and follow one step at a time to keep my mind from going back there.

Once I went through security, I'd pick up some coffee to drink while I waited for the plane to start boarding. I'd take care of my email first and then start looking into Black Masque once I was on the plane. Whenever I didn't fly privately, I made sure my seat was always in a place where nothing that I worked on could be seen by anyone around me.

Usually, it was because I could be working on proprietary information, but now, I was even more grateful that I'd booked my seats that way. The last thing I needed was some kid accidentally seeing BDSM pictures on my screen. Granted, I'd try to avoid all visuals, but crazy shit happened when doing internet searches.

I was halfway through the security line when I noticed that people all around me were looking at their phones, talking to each other, their expressions making it clear that something was wrong. Even as I opened an app for the news, my phone buzzed with a text message from my brother Cory. A group message, actually.

*If you haven't seen the news, there's something going down at Stanford. Fury and I are fine. We don't know a lot, but the university is locked down.*

My immediate relief that my family was safe quickly became concern as my brain made the association to someone else.

Shit.

Freedom was there.

I sent back a quick *glad you're okay* and then went to CNN's website to find out what the hell was going on back in California.

Twenty-Nine

# Freedom

I wanted to take the blanket from around my shoulders and wrap Aline up completely, but I had a feeling that if I didn't cooperate with the paramedics, neither would my sister. We weren't hurt, either one of us, but EMTs had been handing out those shiny emergency 'blankets' to anyone who'd been outside during the shooting.

I wondered if they were using the blankets to determine who'd been checked out and who they still needed to see, but I didn't ask. I didn't need to. I'd been trying to keep my mind busy while I waited for the police officer to get to Aline and me, and now a pair of them were coming our way.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," the female cop said as she stopped in front of us. "I'm Officer Lapland, and this is my partner, Officer Feretti."

"I'm Freedom Mercier," I said. "This is Aline."

Officer Lapland looked back and forth between the two of us. "Sisters?"

"Yes," Aline answered. "I suppose you'll want to speak to us separately?"

Her voice was steady, and I felt a surge of pride at how well she was handling the situation.

"If that's all right," Officer Feretti said. When I nodded, he gestured for me to follow him, flipping to the next page in his notebook as we went. "All right, Ms. Mercier. In your own words, tell me what happened."

I'd had nearly forty minutes to put everything into order in my head, so my story was matter-of-fact and succinct. I'd been petrified at the time, scared that I couldn't protect my sister, but the fear had faded enough that I was able to get through the recitation without a quiver in my voice.

Whatever had happened seemed to be over, and we were in a safe place. I wouldn't be completely at ease, however, until I knew exactly what had occurred and that it wouldn't happen again.

“You didn’t see anyone with a gun?” Officer Feretti asked.

I shook my head and tried not to be impatient. I’d explained everything that’d happened, including the fact that I’d only heard the shots, but I understood that asking for confirmation didn’t always mean a person wasn’t listening or didn’t believe me. These officers had taken numerous statements today, and they needed to ensure that they had all their ducks in a row.

Right now, I was a duck.

I finished before Aline, and that was when I noticed the reporters. We didn’t have any police tape up, but the cops had set up what appeared to be a perimeter with their cars and campus security, so none of the reporters were close enough to bother Aline or me. But reporters meant cameras which meant news which meant—

Shit.

I scrambled to get my phone out of my purse. Aline and I hadn’t needed to wait for the all-clear message from the school, so I hadn’t checked my phone after seeing the initial alert right after we’d gotten into the building. That had been almost an hour ago now.

Just like I’d thought, there were multiple missed calls, voicemails, and text messages from both my parents. I didn’t bother reading or listening to any of the messages since I knew what they’d all say. Instead, I called my mother back.

She answered immediately. “Freedom?”

“We’re okay, Mom.” I went for the important part first, knowing that she needed to hear that before anything else.

“Why didn’t you answer your phone?” Dad’s voice told me that the phone was on speaker so that they could both listen and speak.

I closed my eyes and reminded myself that he was just worried. They both were. “I turned the ringer off before I left home,” I explained. “Just like I do every day I have class.”

“And you didn’t think to call us immediately? We had to see it on the news?” Mom sounded angry, but I knew her well enough to know that was how she reacted when she was scared. She needed information, not an emotional reaction from me.

“Aline and I were on our way to our first classes when we heard the shots. We hid, first next to a building and then inside. Since we didn’t know what was happening or if we needed to stay quiet, neither Aline nor I made any noise until we saw the police coming around, telling us that it was safe. After that, they needed our statements.”

“Do you know what happened?” Dad asked.

“No, they’re not saying anything,” I said as Aline came over to me. “I’m sure they’re trying to keep things under wraps before making an official statement. The last thing they’ll want is to start a panic because ‘someone in the police department’ said something they shouldn’t have.”

“Mom and Dad?” She mouthed the words.

I nodded.

“Is Aline okay?” Mom asked.

For a split second, I was tempted to make some sort of sarcastic reply, as if that wouldn’t have been the first thing out of my mouth if Aline had been hurt. As if she wouldn’t have been my main priority from moment one.

But I restrained myself, because I wasn’t the only person dealing with what had happened. I had to think about how I would’ve reacted if I’d been in their position. If it had been my children caught in an unknown situation. A sudden, sharp fear grabbed me. The fear that, one day, I would know what it was like to have my child or children in danger and that it would be only then that I could truly understand what they were going through.

Talk about an argument against having kids.

“She’s fine, Mom. In fact, she’s standing right beside me.” I could have just given the first bit of information, but I had a feeling our parents wouldn’t be satisfied until they saw or heard her themselves.

Aline held out her hand before Mom responded to my statement, and I gladly passed my phone off. While she talked to our parents, I scanned our surroundings. I hadn't thought to ask Officer Feretti if Aline and I were free to go. She was okay, but I didn't think it would be good for either of us to stick around here now that we'd done what we needed to do.

She and I needed to go back to our apartment and wait for the university and the police to make their announcements. I had little doubt that the remainder of today's classes would be canceled, but if they weren't, our professors would surely excuse our absences once we stated that we'd been close enough to what had happened to require us to provide the police with statements.

It only took me a minute to spot the closest officer who appeared the least occupied. A few quick steps and I was near enough to ask if Aline and I could leave. When I told him that we'd given our statements and informed the two officers how we could be reached, he said we could go.

The police might have declared the area to be safe enough for people to be out and about, but I wouldn't truly feel safe until Aline and I were at home, behind a locked door, where no one could reach us.

Thirty

## Brody

I'd spent the entire flight pretending to focus on my research into Black Masque while trying to resist the urge to check numerous news sources about what was happening at Stanford University. I hadn't succeeded as much as I would have liked. I'd learned a few things about the San Antonio BDSM club, but not as much as I would have if I hadn't kept looking for breaking news.

But I reminded myself as the plane prepared to land, if I'd stuck with my business research, I wouldn't have been arriving in Texas with answers about what had really happened back home.

Stupid freshmen doing stupid things.

The Palo Alto police had made the official announcement about thirty minutes ago.

Three freshmen guys had been wandering around the campus, drunk enough to believe that every thought that came into their heads was a good idea. No one had said whether the guys had still been drunk from the night before or if they'd had alcohol with their breakfast, but either way, they'd still all been well over the legal limit at the time of their arrests.

They hadn't, however, decided to start shooting up their school. No, these three geniuses had decided to "shoot a movie." While I thought it was reasonable to assume that the film – and I used that word *very* loosely – would all eventually make its way onto the internet, the part that had been released already had been enough to make me want to strangle those idiots with my bare hands for causing a panic.

For some reason, they'd come to the conclusion that a major shoot-out was exactly what their movie needed but had enough sense to know that none of them had the skills to do the special effects they wanted. Instead of putting the idea aside until they could talk to someone in either the theater or

computer departments, they remembered that they'd overheard someone they knew bragging about some guns that he'd inherited from a family member.

The geniuses then 'visited' and 'borrowed' the guns, eventually making their way to a parking garage on the edge of campus. It had been scheduled for demolition, so at least they'd done one thing right. One single thing, because once they got to the garage, the stupidity had taken over again.

They'd shot at the garage.

And recorded themselves doing it.

They'd run out of ammo, and for some reason or another, had sat down to talk about how awesome they'd been. Two had passed out, and the third had been close to doing the same when they were arrested. The first two had been taken by ambulance to a hospital where they could be examined to ensure that they weren't in any physical danger from however much they'd drank. A few enterprising journalism majors had managed to follow the police and get a video of how things had played out. Thanks to them, the third young man's arrest had already gone viral, mostly because, as he'd leaned against the police car to be patted down, he'd thrown up.

On the hood of the car.

And on the windshield.

The arresting officers' responses were also everywhere. The police department had embraced the publicity, first because it'd given the media something to focus on instead of constantly badgering the department about the investigation, and second because it showed their people in a positive light.

The cops had done some creative cursing, but they hadn't retaliated in any way. Two white officers arresting a person of color in a professional manner even after he'd helped terrorize a prestigious university and then threw up on their car was the sort of thing that offered a positive example of how to do the job the right way.

For once, something that could have turned into a tragedy in a lot of different ways actually had an optimistic outlook. So far, no real injuries had been reported, just some scrapes and bruises from people who'd been trying to get



under cover when they'd first heard the shots.

Still, I kept seeing Freedom in my head. Her and Aline both, but I focused on her – and felt damn guilty for caring more about her than her sister. Even my concern about Aline was based on how it would hurt Freedom, which made me feel even more like an asshole. It didn't, however, make my worry go away.

And that was why I was standing in the middle of the San Antonio airport and trying to decide if I wanted to find a flight home rather than staying in Texas. It might've been possible to get one if I wasn't picky about seating or flying stand-by, but I had to admit that I didn't know exactly what I'd do once I got back to San Ramon. It wasn't as if I'd have another reason to drive to Stanford. While Cory and Fury lived in the area, I already knew that they hadn't been near the campus.

Based on our last interaction, I didn't think Freedom would want to see me, especially if it meant she'd have to acknowledge to her sister that we'd done more than simply worked on that event together, but that didn't mean I couldn't express concern.

Right?

“Man up,” I muttered to myself as I went to my contact information. I'd saved her number while we'd been talking about the exhibit, and I hadn't been able to bring myself to delete it. Now I was glad I hadn't.

*I just saw the news and wanted to check in, make sure you were okay.*

That looked casual enough, I decided. But before I sent it, I realized that she might not have kept my number. Feeling like an idiot, I added to the end of the message.

*This is Brody, by the way.*

I hit send before I could change my mind and then made my way to the car rental place where I picked up the sedan I'd reserved. By the time I reached my hotel, I had a reply.

*Yes, we're fine.*

I sighed and pushed down my frustration. She'd answered my question, after all, and hadn't told me to fuck off, which I supposed was something.

What exactly it was, however, I had no idea.

Perfect.

# Freedom

I remembered hearing once that those first few years before school shootings had become shockingly normal, the schools would close for weeks after one happened. Columbine had actually sent their students to a neighboring school to finish out the school year, and the shooting had happened in April. Now, students could be back the following week. If there weren't any deaths or property destructions, they could return the next day.

Since the incident had taken place on a Wednesday and the media had descended on the campus like vultures, many seemed determined to make it out to be more than what it was. Before the end of the day, the university had canceled classes for the rest of the week, hoping that the frenzy would die down as the police finished their investigation and everyone saw that it had only been three idiots doing stupid things while drunk. They'd also sent out a campus-wide message, encouraging students to avoid the press, especially those of us who had been in the area and given statements to the police.

Aline and I were two of those students, but we weren't in Palo Alto at the moment. Having a four-day weekend ahead of us and knowing how concerned our parents had been, we'd left this morning for L.A. The drive would've been too long for us to have just come for a regular weekend, so our parents hadn't asked it of us, but as soon as I'd heard we wouldn't have our Thursday or Friday classes, I'd suggested to Aline that we take a trip.

I honestly did want to be away from the university until things died down and give our parents the reassurance that we were all right, but there was another reason I wanted to be elsewhere.

A reason named Brody McCrae.

I'd been shocked to get his text yesterday. I hadn't realized he'd kept my number, but he apparently didn't seem to think I'd kept his because he'd said his name at the end of the text. His fairly abrupt and impersonal text.

*I just saw the news and wanted to check in, make sure you were okay.*

Maybe not entirely impersonal since he'd said he wanted to make sure I was okay, but it lacked...something.

And it was this that consumed my mind as I drove the familiar route home. Why did I feel like there should have been more to his text? What, exactly, did I feel that 'more' should have been?

Had I been harboring expectations of him, even unconsciously? I'd rebuffed him at the art exhibit, deliberately and with the intent of pushing him away. He'd crossed the line when he'd attempted to put himself into my personal life by introducing himself to Aline.

So then why couldn't I stop being aggravated by what he'd said...and what he *hadn't* said?

I reached over to the radio and turned it up. Aline was deep into whatever book she was currently reading and didn't even acknowledge the increase in volume. That wasn't surprising. She had always been able to lose herself in a book. I enjoyed reading from time to time, but Aline was the avid reader in the family. Whenever we took trips, she had either a physical book or her e-reader with her to pass the time.

Normally, I didn't mind if she read or if she wanted to talk while we traveled, but today, I wished that she would have preferred conversation. Even driving couldn't completely contain all of my attention, and I hated it. This was yet another reason why I'd never liked the idea of actually dating anyone.

Distraction.

Guys just fucked everything up. If you let them, they got in your head, kept you from focusing on the things that really mattered. Like how I was dissecting a text message from a guy I'd blown off. A guy I'd told myself that I didn't actually want to see again because I'd already spent too much time with him. Let him too close.

The word *close* immediately brought images flashing through my mind, bringing with them the memories of the sensations I'd experienced with each one.

*His hand on the small of my back, burning through me.*

*The first time he filled me, making it hard for me to breathe.*

*The weight of his body on me.*

*His fingers playing me like a fine instrument.*

My stomach clenched in near-painful arousal. Dammit. I gritted my teeth. I didn't want to still be turned on by him. Didn't want to picture him in my head with those dimples and sparkling blue-green eyes.

I had a bad feeling that even a weekend at home with my parents wouldn't be enough to get that hot Scot out of my head.

\* \* \*

I loved my parents, but I couldn't deny that I was looking forward to going home tomorrow. They'd fawned over and spoiled both Aline and me from the moment we'd stepped in the door, but being here felt almost like being in some sort of bubble. We didn't watch the news or spend much time on social media, so it was easy to ignore what had happened once we'd gotten past the initial discussion when we'd first arrived.

None of us had brought up anything serious just yet, but I knew my parents well enough to know that it was coming. Since we were leaving tomorrow morning, I wasn't surprised when they had their serious faces on when we sat down to Saturday brunch.

At least they waited until I'd eaten most of my crepe.

"Have you two met with your advisors regarding your post-graduation plans?" Mom asked.

"We'll probably do that after mid-terms," I answered for both of us since Aline had a mouthful of food. "Both of our advisors thought it better to wait until then so that we'd have a better idea of whether or not we'll be able to

graduate.”

Both sets of eyebrows went up, and I quickly explained.

“No, they don’t think either of us will fail our last few classes, but the world is full of unexpected things.” I didn’t bother pointing out that the very reason Aline and I were here instead of at Stanford was because of one of those unexpected things.

“Our advisors talked to us about their preferred way of scheduling meetings when we started our master’s programs.” Aline took a sip of her juice. “Freedom and I both agreed.”

“That would also leave you open to deciding whether or not you want to pursue a doctorate right away,” Dad said. “Is that something either of you are considering?”

And there it was. The subject they’d danced around during the holidays. This extended weekend visit must’ve seemed like a gift. The perfect time to bring it up. Nothing had actually happened, so they didn’t fear encouraging us to stay in school, and it gave them the perfect opportunity to address it without spoiling a holiday.

“While I haven’t set anything in motion, I’ve been thinking that I want to have real-world experience before moving on to a doctorate,” Aline said. “I think it’s a mistake to rely on the academic approach too much. We need hands-on experience to really understand what our students need.”

I loved hearing her talk about teaching. She was so passionate about it, so determined to change the world. So sure that she could do it too. While I did worry about some of the practicalities about wanting to teach upper elementary students, I didn’t believe that she was wasting her time or aiming low.

Teachers played a vital role in the shaping of a young person’s mind, and a great teacher could change the world. Aline would be a great teacher, and I had no doubt that the students who were under her care would go to places like Yale and Stanford and Harvard, Columbia, and Brown. They would be the lawyers and doctors and public servants of generations to come.

Our parents didn't exactly share that high-minded sentiment. They felt that she needed to aim higher. At the very least, she should complete a doctorate and become a professor somewhere like Stanford, taking a tenured track that could eventually lead to her becoming a Dean or something along those lines. While Aline hadn't come out and stated that she wasn't at all interested in being a professor, I wondered if she'd dismissed it in her mind and hadn't wanted to tell our parents.

I couldn't say that I blamed her, but I did think that she sometimes saw the world through rose-colored glasses. Most of the time, actually. I knew that was in part due to how much our parents and I had always protected her, but danger came with being a genius, with graduating early from high school and being in college when she was still much younger than her classmates.

The world was full of unscrupulous people who were eager to take advantage of someone like her. Someone who'd already had the habit of seeing only the good in people while being placed in situations above her maturity level. One of the main reasons I'd acquired an off-campus apartment before she'd come to Stanford had been to remove her from some of the situations she would have found herself in if she'd lived in a dorm.

Maybe our parents were right that she should move straight to a doctorate. It would give her more time before going out into the 'real world.' If she went that route, she'd also have more time to decide if higher education would be preferable to working with elementary students.

It wasn't as if she had no experience, though. She'd done her student teaching and had received rave reviews from the teacher she'd worked with. The kids had loved her too. Neither was surprising. People loved her. She was warm and genuine, always eager to help. Being smart and organized meant she was good at anything that required an academic approach.

She was just too damn innocent.

"What about you, Freedom?" Mom turned her attention to me, and Dad followed. "Have you given any further consideration to staying at Stanford to pursue a doctorate?"

"I haven't ruled it out," I said honestly. "A doctorate would be beneficial if I decided to pursue a professorship here, especially when it came time to look

into tenure, but it would also give me an edge over the competition for any other positions I might want.”

“Does that mean you haven’t already been inquiring about possible positions?” Mom asked. “You’d mentioned something about finding work with an ambassador or some sort of foreign field office. Is that still something you’re considering?”

“Yes, that’s also a possibility.” My meal soured a little in my stomach as I prepared my next sentence. “In fact, I recently spoke with the nephew of the U.S. Ambassador to Greece.”

I didn’t mention that said nephew had tried to recruit me and an eighteen-year-old co-ed into a threesome. Not exactly ‘brunch’ conversation.

“Dr. Korbin Worthington III,” Aline announced. “Fancy name but not as smart as he thinks he is.”

“You went to one of his lectures?” I didn’t like the idea that she’d attended a lecture without telling me, but the alternative was worse since it would’ve meant that she’d have met him outside the classroom.

As much as I didn’t want Korbin near Karina, I wanted him near Aline even less.

“One of my classes was canceled, and I was already in the building. I thought it might be something we could enjoy talking about.” She shook her head. “But then I realized that the reason you hadn’t encouraged me to attend a lecture was because it was essentially a waste of time.”

“It doesn’t sound as if this man will be much of a help for you,” Dad said. “I hope you asked for a way to contact his uncle without going through him.”

“And you’ll want to check out his uncle, make sure that he’s not the same sort as his nephew,” Mom added.

Because I didn’t have the common sense to figure that out on my own.

I exhaled a long breath while moving a piece of egg around my plate with a fork. Why did I have the sinking suspicion that Aline’s and my last day with our parents was going to be the longest one of all?



Thirty-Two

# Brody

I should've been in a great mood. The rental car had been ready as soon as I'd reached the counter, and the traffic had been almost non-existent. The hotel had upgraded my room from their second-best suite to their best one after a pipe had burst in my room, and the woman who'd had the best suite had checked-out a day early.

The whiskey I'd shipped here had arrived on time and undamaged. I'd met with the owners of Black Masque on Thursday afternoon and then had gone back yesterday with my whiskey. All that was left was to work out the contract details. The owners had also surprised me with a VIP pass for this evening.

Everything had gone even better than I'd hoped, and I should've been on cloud nine.

Except I couldn't stop my mind from wandering back to Palo Alto and what had happened at Stanford. I knew that Freedom was safe, but a part of me felt like I needed to see for myself that she was unharmed, be there for her. It didn't matter that she'd never actually been in danger. A person's psyche couldn't go back in time and reverse what was experienced. She still had to process the trauma.

As I dressed, I found myself more aware of the scars on my body than I usually was. Honestly, I didn't really think about them now unless someone pointed them out, but the thought of what Freedom must've been going through over the past few days brought my own ordeal back to mind.

She wouldn't have any visible reminders, but there would be other things that triggered her. The backfiring of a car. Something being dropped. Hopefully, because this hadn't been the kind of incident where people died or had even been injured, it'd be easier for her to get past it, but it was impossible to know how someone responded to this type of stress until they actually went through it.

I pushed aside the memories of my own experience and focused on tonight. Technically, this wasn't a business meeting, but I had no doubt that the owners and the employees I'd met would be watching me. Carrie and Gavin had prepared me for the guardedness that came with going to a BDSM club without being in the life. Any club owner, to protect their members, their business, and themselves, would be cautious.

Even though parts of society were far more accepting than they had been in the past, plenty of people were still hateful and judgmental. Doug and Diana Meyer had been pleased with my product and the terms I'd offered, but I knew tonight would be my real test.

Similar to Club Privé, Black Masque was a members-only club with a sponsorship requirement for anyone interested in becoming a member. I'd been given the same sort of guest pass, but since I didn't have a member to escort me through the regular entrance, I'd been told to go to the back-alley door where a staff member would let me inside. Apparently, some of the club's more prominent members would enter and exit this way to avoid any paparazzi that may or may not have decided that a big sex scandal would be the best way to advance their career.

I pitied anyone who was stupid enough to try that at Club Privé. Besides the fact that Gavin had the build and presence that could've intimidated most people, Carrie was a kick-ass lawyer. I'd heard that a few of her friends who were also members were lawyers too. I had no doubt anyone who tried to use the club to sensationalize a story would find themselves facing some serious consequences.

Yesterday, I'd eaten at the restaurant above the club and had been impressed, both by the food and the ambiance. I had no idea if the club's location was commonly known but not discussed or if that was the sort of information that was only passed on by word of mouth to certain people. Either way, the restaurant had held no hints that the things happening below had nothing to do with fine dining.

The woman at the back door was probably only an inch or two over five feet tall and had delicate features that probably made pretty much everyone underestimate her. I, however, had enough female members of my family who would have kicked my ass if I judged a woman to be safe based solely

on her size. If the Meyers trusted her here, that was more than enough for me to assume she could do her job.

“Good evening.” I gave her my most charming smile and handed over the card I’d been given.

“ID, please.” She held out her hand, the hard expression on her face not showing a single crack.

Some men might’ve been assholes and told her to smile. I gave her my ID and waited in silence while she examined it. The fact that there was no way in hell that she thought I was under twenty-one spoke of someone who took her job seriously, and that definitely reflected well on the club.

I never worked with any bar or club that had been in trouble for serving underage patrons. That had actually been one of the things I’d been the most worried about regarding universities. Granted, whiskey wasn’t usually the drink of choice for frat parties, but that didn’t mean I wanted it easily accessible.

“You have a one-time guest pass,” she said as she handed the ID back. “If you leave the club, you won’t be allowed back in. If you have to smoke, there’s a private area clearly marked. While a guest, you are held to the standards of safe and consensual for all acts.”

The way she rattled off the impressive spiel told me she either had to say it a lot or was just damn good at her job. Considering how exclusive this place was, my bet was on both.

“Understood,” I said seriously.

Her eyes narrowed. “You makin’ fun of me?”

I shook my head. “Not at all, ma’am. Between my sisters and my mother, I’d get my ass kicked if I was anything less than respectful of a woman in a position of authority.”

She didn’t look suspicious anymore, but she didn’t smile either. She jerked her head toward the door, and I took that to mean I’d passed whatever test she’d given me.

So far, so good.

The staircase down was well-lit, and I could feel the pulse of the music behind the curtain at the bottom. I didn't recognize the song, but it had the same flavor to it as what I'd heard in most other clubs around the country. Something meant to warm the blood and encourage people to come together.

And not in a platonic "let's sit around a campfire and sing songs" sort of warmth and coming together.

I pushed between the curtains, surprised at how heavy and soft the fabric was. After stepping into the main room of Black Masque, however, it made sense.

Everything was black and red, silk and velvet. Sensual. A bar along one side, and I suspected, doors to private rooms on the other. Booths and tables surrounded what looked like a dance floor, and in the very center of that floor, a large circular stage.

"Welcome." A tall, curvy woman smiled at me. Her dress was tight, red, and I could see the tiny thong and fancy black bra she wore underneath the shimmery, sheer material. "New member or guest?"

"Guest," I said. "Brody McCrae."

"I was told to expect you." She returned the smile I sent her way, and I caught a glimpse of some extra heat in her eyes as she looked me up and down. "I'm Amberlyn, tonight's hostess."

She was gorgeous, and unless I was mistaken, interested. I told myself that if she hadn't been working, I would've maybe taken some time to get to know her, but a little voice in the back of my head told me that I was lying to myself.

I shoved that little voice into a box and told it to shut up.

"You're welcome to explore every amenity Black Masque has to offer." She made a wide, sweeping gesture. "Visit our private rooms. Enjoy the music. A show will begin on center stage shortly."

A show.

That sounded...promising.

As she moved away to greet other people, I walked toward the bar, taking in as much as I could about everything and everyone around me. Men and women in slinky dresses and lingerie, leather and full suits. Some had piercings and tattoos. Others looked like they'd just stepped out of the board room. All walks of life.

By the time I took a seat at the bar, the music had been turned down, and an excited anticipation thrummed through the room. I turned on the stool and watched as two dark-haired men and a petite brunette woman walked up onto the stage.

One of the men wore a full three-piece suit, and the other was only in a pair of faded blue jeans and a studded collar. The woman was in a corset, boy shorts, and thigh-high stockings. She held the leash that went with the collar on the jeans-wearing man, and in her other hand was a riding crop.

Apparently, it was time for the show.

Thirty-Three

# Freedom

I was twenty-five years old and had been living in my own place for more than five years, but every time I walked into my childhood bedroom, I felt like I was a kid all over again. It didn't help that Aline and I had both left things in our respective rooms so that we didn't need to pack much for trips back to L.A.

While neither room really felt like they were lived in, they also didn't have the absent atmosphere that lingered in abandoned spaces. I wondered if, at some point, our parents would finally convert both of our rooms into additional guestrooms. Honestly, I suspected they wouldn't do it until Aline or I had kids, arguing that even if we were in a relationship, our rooms had private bathrooms and king-sized beds, perfect to share with anyone we brought home.

I stared up at the ceiling and sighed. I really just wanted to go to sleep. A deep, dreamless sleep that would shut off my brain for a few precious hours so that I wasn't completely obsessing over whatever my mind decided to bring up next. My last semester. My plans after graduation. Aline's plans. How things would change. *If* things would change.

The information came in a nonstop cycle, another thought popping up as soon as I'd managed to push the current one aside.

Like right now, my ruminations about my bedroom had brought up something else. Would graduating prompt Aline to start dating? She'd been so focused on her classes that there'd been little time for socializing, something for which my parents and I were grateful since Aline had always been years younger than her classmates. By the time she'd been old enough that the age gap hadn't mattered, she'd had a comfortable routine that neither of us had wanted to alter.

Now, she'd be in a different environment, with different people. More opportunities to meet new men. To find someone who made her stomach

twist and her heart pound. Someone who invaded her thoughts, even when she didn't want him to. Someone she'd find herself looking for at the strangest times and places.

"Dammit, Brody." I pressed the heels of my hands against my eyes.

Desperate, I began to count sheep, first in English and then in Spanish. Russian. Japanese...

\* \* \*

*The sun was warm on my naked skin, almost as soft as the caress of my lover's hands. I kept my eyes closed as I arched my back, wanting more. He squeezed my breasts, teased my nipples with his fingers. Little prickles of pleasure bit at my nerve endings, and I shuddered.*

*"Salty and sweet." His voice was like molasses.*

*No, melted caramel. Lighter and sweeter than molasses. But just as...tasty.*

*His lips made their way along my collarbone and then down to my aching breasts. His tongue dipped into the hollow between them to catch a drop of sweat, then traced a path down to my naval. I laughed and felt him smile against my belly.*

*"Ticklish." He scraped his teeth over my soft flesh. "I do love to see you squirm."*

*I buried my hands in his thick, sun-warmed hair, and he made a pleased sound. I liked that sound. I wanted to hear it again. And I wanted to hear it when he was inside me.*

*I flipped us over, straddled his waist. His cock was hard beneath me, and I rocked on it. Cursing, he grabbed my hips, his eyes heated.*

*"Is there something you want?" I asked. Slick skin slipped and slid, a different sort of friction that sent a shiver up my spine.*

*“You,” he growled. “Want you.”*

*I smiled and ground down on him, making him curse, that insanely sexy Scottish accent growing thicker with each word. Damn if it didn’t just make me wetter.*

*“Freedom...”*

*My name was a warning, and a thrill of excitement went through me at the danger I heard there. So much of my life was safe. Even when I was protecting Aline, I wasn’t really in any danger. Brody was dangerous in ways that should have terrified me.*

*Would have terrified me if any of this had been real.*

*But it wasn’t real.*

*I suddenly realized this was a dream. Relief and disappointment flooded me. I didn’t let it linger, though. This might not have been real, but I could still come, and at least this way wouldn’t have to deal with the fall-out.*

*I let the knowledge of reality fade away before it could wake me up and turned my attention to the body beneath me. I had no doubt I’d remembered him perfectly, including his scars, though I still didn’t know how he’d gotten them. I leaned over and kissed each one even as I rubbed myself against him.*

*The texture of the scar tissue against my tongue was different than the rest of his skin. Not bad, just different. The way the light dusting of hair on his chest was rougher than the hair on his head. The way the skin on his cock and balls was so much softer and more delicate feeling than anywhere else on his body.*

*I took him in my hand, stroking him from base to tip with a touch too light to give him the friction he’d need to come. A frustrated groan made me smile, and I flicked my tongue against the tip. Peering up at him from under my lashes, I leisurely licked him, reveling in every sound he made, every twitch of his cock. When I took him into my mouth, his hips jerked up, forcing him deeper than I’d intended.*

*But it was my dream, so I took it all, let the top couple inches into my throat. He cursed, hands grabbing at me, desperate to regain control. I grabbed his hips, dug my nails into his flesh, a reminder of who was in charge. I*



*swallowed, and he cried out my name. He came but was still hard when I released him from my mouth.*

*A perk of this being a dream was that he could go as many times or as long as I wanted him to. And I was just getting started.*

Thirty-Four

## Brody

*I'd never seen anyone as sexy as Freedom in a red and black lace corset, panties, and thigh-high leather boots. The heels made her only an inch shorter than me and made her legs look even more amazing than usual. Then there was that leather collar around her neck and the crop in her hand.*

*She walked up the stairs to join me on the stage and held out the crop for me to take it from her. After I did, she went over to the bench and bent over it, showing off her perfect ass. A murmur of appreciation went through the unseen crowd, and I felt a surge of pride that no matter how attractive, powerful, or rich the people in the audience were, they didn't have her. She was mine. Only mine.*

*I ran my hand down her back and over her ass, giving each bared section of cheek a light slap. She made a pleased sound, then drew a shaky breath when I ran my finger over the damp material between her legs.*

*"Does this turn you on?" The slap to her left cheek was harder than the previous one, and it made her moan. "Knowing that you have eyes on you? That men and women are staring at this sweet ass of yours, wanting you, wanting to be you."*

*She shifted and pressed her thighs together, the movement small enough that the audience couldn't see, but I could.*

*"They want to touch you," I continued as I slid my hand around her ribcage to the corset strings that held her top together. With a quick tug, her laces came undone, freeing her breasts. I pinched and rolled a nipple between my finger and thumb. "Would you like them to touch you? Play with your pretty nipples?"*

*She shook her head. "No."*

*I slapped her breast, and she made a surprised sound. "No, what?"*

*“No, sir.”*

*“Good girl.” I squeezed her breast. “Now, tell me why you don’t want them to touch you?”*

*“Only you, sir.” She gasped as I flicked her nipple. “I don’t want anyone but you touching me like this.”*

*The admission went straight to my cock, and I winced as my erection pressed painfully against my zipper. I’d gone commando to make it easier to play the scene, but I hadn’t taken the flesh-on-metal factor into consideration.*

*“That’s good,” I said. “Because I don’t want anyone else touching you either. They can watch and wish, but only I get to know what you taste like, what it feels like inside you. They can imagine, but they’ll never be able to know the truth.”*

*I didn’t mean just now. Not only tonight during this scene, and not only for as long as we were together. Always. She was mine, and I didn’t want anyone else to ever have her. It didn’t matter who we’d had before, just that there’d never be anyone from here on out.*

*Not too long ago, the idea of a lifelong commitment would have scared the shit out of me, but not now. Now, all I wanted to make sure everyone knew she was mine. I wanted her to know it too. All mine.*

*A good way to start making that impression was to show it on her skin.*

*I tapped the crop against one perfect cheek to alert her to what was coming next. The crack of hard leather against flesh cut through the air, and she flinched but didn’t make a sound. Each strike brought blood to the surface of her fair skin, turning her ass a bright shade of pink. Heat radiated off both cheeks, and when I touched them, her muscles twitched.*

*“So sensitive.” I pulled aside the crotch of her panties. “Let’s see where else you’re sensitive.”*

*I slipped a finger inside her, and she whimpered. A second finger sent a shiver through her, and I smiled as I twisted my fingers, searching. Her fingers dug into the fabric of the bench, and her head fell forward. She didn’t pull away as I drove my fingers into her, but the tension in her body grew*

*with each thrust. My cock throbbed with the need to be inside her, but I controlled myself. I wanted her to come on my fingers, and then I'd push her boundaries a bit before I finally sank into that wet heat.*

*The muscles in my arm flexed, and I wrapped her ponytail around my hand, yanking her head up. Using the leverage I now had, I finger fucked her until she writhed and squirmed, fighting off her orgasm until, finally, I gave her permission to come.*

*She was just starting to come down from her climax when I took my now soaked fingers out of her pussy and traced a line up between her cheeks. She stiffened when I rubbed the tip of my finger over her anus. She gasped as I applied pressure but didn't ask me to stop. She wanted this as much as I did.*

*When the tip of my finger was inside her, I paused and waited for her to get used to the unfamiliar sensation. The muscles fluttered around my finger, and I couldn't help but imagine what it would feel like around my cock.*

*I tugged on her hair until she cried out, and then I worked my finger into her ass until she was pushing back against my hand.*

*"Touch yourself," I ordered, my voice rough. "Play with your clit. I want you to come with my finger in your ass. When you do, then I'll give you what you want. Because I know what you want, don't I? I know what my woman needs, don't I?"*

*"Yes, sir." The words cracked as she moved to obey.*

*I could tell the moment she found her clit because a shudder went through her entire body. I set a brutal pace, each twist and thrust of my finger driving her toward a stronger, more explosive orgasm than she'd had before.*

*She screamed my name, and a surge of possessiveness went through me. That was what I'd wanted. Everyone to know that she was mine and mine alone. She belonged to me.*

*And I belonged to her.*

*I jerked upright, pulse in my throat, body covered with sweat. My cock was hard and aching, my hands clenched into fists. The arousal flooding me was unnerving because it wasn't only made up of lust. There was more to it, and I*

wasn't sure I wanted to take a closer look.

I threw aside the sheets and climbed out of bed. The light in the bathroom was bright enough to make me squint as I stepped into the shower. I turned on the water and closed my eyes, bracing myself for the shock of cold water. It would suck, but it was the easiest way to guarantee I could get thoughts of Freedom out of my head.

At least, I hoped so because I had no other ideas of how to do it.

Thirty-Five

# Freedom

I hated Valentine's Day, but not for the reasons most people would've assumed. People thought that any single person – particularly single women – must dislike the holiday because they were alone. Some people played the whole “commercialized holiday made up by retailers to make money” card, but that was often people in relationships who wanted to avoid spending money on their significant other.

Me, I disliked it because single men used it as an excuse to be complete assholes to any woman they spotted who wasn't with another person. After all, if a woman was by herself on Valentine's Day, it must mean she was so desperate for male companionship that all a guy needed to do to get laid was be ready and waiting. I'd purposefully never hooked up with anyone on Valentine's Day because I refused to risk misreading a man and being labeled one of those “desperate” women.

Ever since Aline had joined me at Stanford, at least, it'd been easy to find other things to do without looking “pathetic” and inviting annoyance, especially since Aline didn't really care about the day either. I'd always wondered when she would finally decide to go out with friends or even on a date, but year after year passed, and she'd never expressed any interest in parties or dating. Honestly, I'd begun to think that she might be both asexual and aromantic, not interested in either sex or romance.

With as shitty as most men could be, I wasn't sure if that would be a bad thing for her. I had to admit, a part of me hadn't minded that she might never be interested in pursuing a relationship. I didn't relish the idea of worrying about her going out on dates, and since our parents were hours away, it would have been my responsibility to ensure she wasn't in any danger, arrived home safely, those sorts of things.

But, for now, our plans remained the same as they'd been every other Valentine's Day. For us, that meant working. Instead of staying in our apartment, however, we were at the university library. Some of the books we

needed for research were ones that couldn't be removed from the building, and I'd suggested coming here at a time when a lot of other students would have different plans. Aline had agreed with me, so we'd taken a late lunch after our last classes of the day, then come straight here.

It was logical and routine, exactly what I needed after the last month and a half of discordance brought about by a certain man who I was definitely *not* thinking about today of all days.

"How many parties do you think are going on tonight?" Aline asked, keeping her voice low, even though the other tables around us were empty. "I counted four flyers on the way here."

"Probably twice as many, at least." Aside from the faculty one I knew about, I'd seen signs for at least that many more on the short trip, but it didn't surprise me that she hadn't. She was usually lost in that brilliant mind of hers. "Any reason that's on your mind?"

Maybe I'd been too hasty in thinking that she was happy with us doing pretty much the same thing we'd done every year since she started at Stanford. Maybe I'd completely missed her showing interest in someone. I hadn't thought I'd been that distracted.

"I was just wondering."

Aline's attempt at nonchalance didn't fool me, but I let her go back to the book she was reading, and for several minutes, the only sounds were the scratching of our pens on paper, the whisper of pages turning.

"Do you turn down dates for Valentine's Day because you think I'd mind spending the day alone?" The notion seemed to bother her more than I would've thought.

"No, not at all." I shook my head. "Why would you think that?" I wasn't annoyed, just genuinely curious.

She shrugged. "We've been sharing an apartment for nearly six years, and you've spent every Valentine's Day with me."

"Maybe I just dislike the holiday." I half-turned toward her, the conversation easier to focus on than what I'd been reading.

“Do you?” She tapped the tip of her pen on the table. “Because you’ve never said anything to indicate that was the case, so how would I know?”

She didn’t sound like she was accusing me of anything, but there was a hint of something in the question, something I couldn’t quite identify. It wasn’t annoyance. Maybe frustration? Even if I didn’t know specifically what it was, I could at least address the statement itself.

“Fair enough.” I took in a deep breath. “The truth is, I don’t like the assumptions made about a single woman sitting by themselves or going to a party alone. Both by men and women.”

“Does that mean you and past boyfriends never did anything special?”

Her curiosity was easy to see. “Past boyfriends?” I raised an eyebrow.

She grinned at me, a hint of mischief in her eyes, chasing away whatever had prompted the original question in the first place. “Girlfriends?”

“With as much work as I’ve put in over the past eight years, I’m lucky I’ve even had the time to learn the names of our neighbors or the other graduate students in my field.”

That was the truth, though it wasn’t really an answer to her question, either what she’d said or what she’d meant. For the first time I could remember, she was asking about my dating life. It wasn’t that she’d made assumptions about me. More like it just had never really registered with her until now that she hadn’t seen me with anyone.

“Seriously, though, Freedom, no one’s saying you have to have and hold, but plenty of people casually date while going through graduate school.”

The concern on her face surprised me. I wasn’t used to being on the receiving end of that. I hadn’t realized that she’d paid that much attention to what I was or wasn’t doing.

Yes, I always knew where she was and what she was doing, but that was typical of older siblings. We protected our younger brothers and sisters as much as we could, and we never thought about it happening in reverse. Granted, asking questions about my love life wasn’t exactly “protecting,” but it was because she was worried about me.



And it also confirmed that I'd been as discreet about my activities as I'd hoped.

"I know it's possible," I said. "But it seems like a lot of work with very little reward, and I haven't met a man who was worth even a fraction of the trouble."

Brody's face flashed into my mind, but I pushed the image aside. Not even the mind-blowing sex we'd had was worth how caught up I'd let myself become. If anything, what had happened between him and I was confirmation that my no-dating, sex-only way of life was best. Scratch an itch and move on. At least with the art exhibit over, and no other events Dr. Ipres would be hosting in the near future, my interactions with Brody McCrae were over.

Concerned text aside.

"You don't even want to do something like go out to the movies and relax?" Aline pressed the issue. "Have dinner with someone who isn't me or for something other than your classes?"

I wondered what had prompted this sudden interest, but I had a feeling that if I asked her, it'd only encourage her to dig deeper. I definitely didn't want to tell her that I didn't actually want to spend time with a guy for any longer than it took for him to get me off.

Honestly, I didn't want to have that conversation with anyone because I knew I'd get the kind of disapproval that came from people who claimed they wanted men and women treated equally but who never saw casual sex with different partners as being the same for women as for men. That was a headache I didn't need.

Even if Aline didn't respond that way, I didn't know if she'd keep the information to herself. Not that she'd "tattle" to our parents, but rather that she'd say something when the subject of dating was brought up. I could've asked her to not mention it to anyone, and I fully believed that she'd intend to keep that promise, but she could be absent-minded, and there'd always be a risk of her accidentally slipping up.

I'd learned that lesson years ago after I'd taken her Christmas shopping with me when she was twelve and I was sixteen. She'd been so excited about

everything we'd bought for our parents that she hadn't paid attention to the details of what she was saying and her "we found all sorts of great things" became "we bought a new mixer for family cooking and matching fuzzy slippers" and so on. Granted, she wasn't twelve anymore, but I still rarely shared with her what I bought our parents for Christmas or birthdays.

"I'm happy with my life the way it is," I said. "Maybe someday in the future, that'll change, and I'll want to start thinking about marriage and a family, but right now, my career needs my entire focus."

The look she gave me said that she didn't quite believe me, but since she dropped the subject and went back to her books, I had no problem leaving it there. The answer I'd given was true – more or less – but if I had to pick at it, all the things I'd been trying to convince myself of for the last six weeks would crumble. And it wasn't just my having met Brody, no matter how much I wanted to consider that the catalyst for this change in thinking.

Maybe *change* wasn't even the right word, because I wasn't sure that I'd actually been thinking one way and had recently decided that I no longer thought or felt the same way. Yes, I'd made a clear decision years ago regarding my relationships while I was in college, and I still considered all my reasoning behind that choice to be sound. The part that had me thinking far harder than I liked was that I'd told Aline I was happy with my life the way it was.

Was that a deliberate lie or one that I hadn't understood to be false until I'd actually said it out loud? When had it changed, or had I ever even really been content with my sole focus being my career?

Except, now that my doubts had forced me to take a closer look at my internal thoughts, could I really even say that my focus was only on my career? The answer to that was easier than the answer to whether or not I was happy.

No. I'd never made my education my top priority, no matter how it looked on the outside. It'd always been Aline first. My choice of university, though it had been mine, had been made with her in mind. My living arrangements. How I spent my time. Even how finding sexual release despite not dating had always been done in ways that worked around what she needed from me. So

if I ever did decide that I wanted something more – and I wasn't ready to give that particular idea a hard look – Aline's well-being would, of course, be a major factor. It'd always been that way.

And now I wasn't sure how I felt about it.

Before I could get too far into my own head, Aline closed her book. "I have a headache."

"I have some ibuprofen in my purse," I said as I reached for the bag hanging on the back of my chair.

"No, I think I just want to go back home and lay down." She stacked her books into a neat pile for the librarians. "Do you mind?"

Concern twisted in my gut. "Of course not." My books joined hers as I stood. "Let's go."

At least I'd gotten most of my important work done and what I hadn't yet accomplished wasn't due for two weeks. Once Aline was feeling better, I'd ask how much she finished, and we'd discuss when would be the best time for us to return. Maybe I'd even take the rest of tonight to stay in and relax instead of finding more work to do.

That would be a hell of a lot more appealing than any alternatives I could think of.

Thirty-Six

## Brody

I hated Valentine's Day, but not for the reason a lot of people would think. In my opinion, if a person didn't want to buy their significant other a present on February 14<sup>th</sup>, then they shouldn't have a significant other. Or, at least, not one who expected gifts on Valentine's Day.

That was one reason I never asked a woman out on or around gift-giving holidays. Hell, I didn't even hook up with women around Christmas or Valentine's Day just to make sure there were no misunderstandings. In fact, I avoided pretty much any place there'd be single women when it came to the day of love.

So why, then, was I walking into a party, today of all days, with a half dozen bottles of my best whiskey? Because Dr. Josephs had called in an order for a Valentine's Day party that the political science, communication, and English departments were throwing, and it'd be good for my business to give faculty members another taste of my product. Besides, he was paying full price like any other customer. The only difference between this order and others was that I was the one delivering it.

The party was being held in the same place where the New Year's Eve party had been held, which meant, as I walked into the room, I had the unpleasant experience of a flashback to the first time I'd seen Freedom. That blonde hair and amazing body. The eyes that I'd caught looking my way every so often. And then that kiss.

I'd intended that moment to be a nice way to kick off the new year, and instead, it'd been like Benjamin Franklin flying his kite in a thunderstorm. Lightning in a bottle. I'd never had another kiss like it.

Except from her.

Every touch from her had been a jolt of electricity straight to my cock, which sounded more painful than it was. Or, rather, it was either the kind of pain

that I liked or a bad case of fucking blue balls. After how things had gone the last time I'd seen her, the memory just resulted in a hard-on I could only take care of when I had a few minutes to myself.

I was just glad we weren't where the art exhibit had taken place. Here, I only had the memory of a kiss. There, I'd remember what it had been like to make her come on my fingers...and the look on her face when I'd dared to speak to her in front of her sister.

My frown was gone in seconds, the memories packed away. I was here for business, not to see Freedom. In fact, I didn't want to see her. Ever. And that was the story I'd keep telling myself until I believed it. I wanted to drop off the whiskey, mingle for a few minutes, then get the hell out before I had to deal with drunken educators hitting on me. It'd happened before.

Like I said, I hated Valentine's Day.

"Mr. McCrae." Dr. Josephs was waiting for me at the door. "I'm surprised you came yourself."

I followed him to the bar, talking as I walked. "I figured I'd give my employees the opportunity to spend the evening with their significant others."

That was the truth, though not all of it.

"You're a good man," Dr. Josephs said. "One of the reasons I helped my friend set up this party was to encourage my colleagues to possibly offer their students the same consideration by not expecting too much work for this coming weekend. I've been told that young love is a beautiful thing."

If anyone else had said it, I might've thought he was being a smart-ass, but Dr. Josephs was the type of man who really meant it. He was a good guy, if a little clueless, especially when it came to women. Or men. Or whoever. I had no idea what his orientation was, but I didn't doubt he'd be clueless no matter what.

"I'm sorry for the last-minute order," Dr. Josephs continued. "My friend and I were just talking about our arrangements for the evening when he mentioned that he'd forgotten some of the harder liquor. Of course, I thought of you immediately."

“I’m flattered,” I said honestly. “I hadn’t realized I’d made that much of an impression.”

“Your product speaks quite eloquently for itself.” He tapped the top of one bottle. “In fact, my father’s birthday is coming up, and I’d like to get him a bottle of your best. Top of the top shelf.”

I nodded. “Let me get this set up, and then we can talk.”

His expression brightened. “I’ll help.”

Thirty minutes later, I was regretting offering to talk to him here and not insisting that I would call him tomorrow. Not because talking to Dr. Josephs bothered me. No, it was because I’d already had two women come over to “ask about” the alcohol, and they’d both stood uncomfortably close to me the entire time.

I hated to think of what they’d be like after drinking, and I *definitely* didn’t want to be here long enough to find out.

But Dr. Josephs just kept talking. And he hadn’t been talking about whiskey for twenty-five minutes. I didn’t mind that he’d gone from whiskey to his dad since a bottle for his father’s birthday had prompted the conversation to begin with, but for the last fifteen minutes, he’d been waxing poetic about a new book he’d been reading. I would’ve said it was all Greek to me, but it would’ve been a little too on the nose since the book he was talking about was actually written *in* Greek.

And he’d been quoting passages in the original language, which meant he’d say something that I didn’t understand and then start commenting on the quote as if I knew what in the hell he was talking about.

I’d basically been standing here, nodding my head as if I completely understood him, when I saw her walk in.

She was wearing a fairly plain dark blue dress that still did amazing things for her body, flattering her figure, including those long legs of hers. The way she carried herself, however, was what drew the attention even more than how she looked. Every time I’d seen her walk into a room, she looked like she knew exactly where she was going and what she planned to do when she got there. Complete confidence in who she was and what she was worth.

Fucking hot.

Mine weren't the only eyes on her, but she didn't look around, apparently already having seen the person she wanted to talk to. I recognized the dark-haired woman as being Dr. Ipres, the woman who'd given my name to Freedom for the art exhibit, and I felt a wave of relief that she hadn't come with a man...or come looking for one.

My relief, however, didn't last long, because less than a couple minutes after she'd started talking to Dr. Ipres, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a man approaching her, someone I hadn't seen before.

Tall, tanned, and carrying himself like every other arrogant asshole I'd ever seen.

But Freedom didn't send him away. In fact, she let him join in her conversation with Dr. Ipres. I couldn't see her face, but I could see his, and lust was written all over it.

Motherfucking bastard.

# Freedom

I suspected Aline hadn't been entirely truthful about her reasons for leaving the library, but I didn't pressure her to share them. I had several reasons for keeping my suspicions to myself, the first and biggest being that when she dug her heels in about something, she couldn't be swayed without an extremely compelling reason.

While I had my opinions in regard to how easy my parents had been on her growing up, she's never been a brat, which meant she didn't choose petty, shallow things to be stubborn about. That didn't, however, make it any less annoying if it was something where her opinion differed from another person's.

My second reason was that I didn't actually want to hear her real thoughts because I suspected that it had to do with the conversation she and I'd had not long before her sudden announcement. I didn't know if she thought I'd be more likely to bare my soul if we were at home where no one could overhear us or if she just thought it'd be 'easier' for me if I wasn't surrounded by flyers reminding me of what today was.

Neither of those things was true, but I'd never be able to convince her of that, and I didn't feel like spending the rest of the evening and into the night with her trying to figure out ways to make me admit "what was really wrong." That, coupled with the restlessness I'd had since the semester began, had led me to leaving the apartment almost immediately after I'd gotten Aline settled, with only a short stop to change clothes.

A couple departments were having a party for their faculty, and I knew Dr. Ipres and her husband, Andrew, would be there. I was one of the few students invited, just as I'd been one of the only ones at the New Year's Eve party, and for the same reason. Dr. Ipres had thought that, for my final semester, I would benefit from mingling with the upper echelon without other students around.



As soon as I stepped into the room, I saw about two dozen people, most of whom had been at the New Year's Eve party which, of course, made me think of the kiss that night. One of the hottest, toe-curling kisses I'd ever experienced, and the only ones hotter were the ones I'd had with the same man in more private settings.

I closed my eyes, inhaled slowly, and then let out the breath even slower. I needed to stop thinking about Brody. No other man had stuck in my head as long or as vividly, and it was driving me nuts. Maybe being here would be good for me, let me get my focus back where it needed to be. Re-establishing and strengthening connections to these departments would be a good way to do it.

One of the mistakes people made when it came to networking was to think that an introduction would always be enough. That was better than nothing, but the best way to utilize connections was to keep them primed, make sure they never faded into "oh, right, what was your name again?" Besides, one always had to account for turnover, and how better to do that and stay up-to-date on the latest information than by making sure even the new people had a flesh-and-blood face to put to a name.

Greeting Dr. Ipres first would be the right initial move, help me get the lay of the land, so to speak, without standing around looking like an idiot who didn't know where to go. People who went to events alone always had to worry about that, looking lost, but for women, it was worse. A woman who looked like she didn't know where to go or what she was doing became a potential target, whether for violence or the simple misogyny that assumed a woman alone must be a woman in need of a man.

Jane Austen knew what she was talking about. That thought would've made me laugh, except the only thing worse than a woman alone at a party was a woman alone and laughing to herself. People took that type of humor to mean that a woman was either cruel or insane. Neither of which would be good for my reputation or my career.

I spotted my advisor and her husband a couple yards away, talking to Professor Nealson, the newest addition to the political science department. He still had that wet-behind-the-ears look to him, and the nervous way he kept putting his hands in his pockets and taking them back out again didn't help

matters. Since he taught only introductory classes, I hadn't sat under him, but I'd heard good things about him so far. He was probably close to my age, and his family name wasn't one bandied about as being powerful or rich, but he was smart, and I had a feeling he'd do well for himself.

It was time to officially meet Professor Nealson.

I made my way toward the trio without actually meeting anyone else's gaze when I smiled at them. Eye contact would give someone the opportunity to attempt to engage me in conversation, making me rude if I chose to keep moving. Not directly meeting someone's eyes gave me an out if someone asked why I hadn't spoken with them, allowing me to simply say that I hadn't seen them.

They'd assume I'd spotted someone just over their shoulder, and they never needed to know that my avoidance had been intentional. I didn't have anyone here I specifically wanted to avoid, but I wanted to be in control over who I talked to and when.

"Freedom." Dr. Ipres didn't try to hide her surprise. "I didn't think you were coming tonight."

"I didn't think so either," I said, giving her a genuine smile. "Aline and I planned to do some work in the library, but she ended up with a headache and wanted to go home."

"I hope she isn't sick," Andrew said.

He and I didn't know each other well, but we'd always been friendly when we'd interacted.

I shook my head and gave them the truth as it had been given to me. "More like the reading material."

"Ah." Dr. Ipres gestured to Professor Nealson. "Have the two of you met?"

"Can't say that we have." He smiled at me with absolutely no flirtation. "Professor Roderick Nealson."

"Freedom Mercier." I put out my hand, and he shook it. A good firm handshake without lingering, and his eyes never dropped from my face.

“Everyone in the department speaks highly of you.”

So far, so good.

“Thank you.” He seemed sincere. “I’ve heard good things about you too.”

Before the conversation could go any further, we were joined by another person. The last one I wanted to see.

“Freedom, I thought that was you.”

“Dr. Worthington.” I kept smiling but felt the expression on my face tighten.  
“Good evening.”

“Now, now.”

I gritted my teeth at his tone and hoped I didn’t look like I was suddenly constipated.

“I told you to call me Korbin.” He looked at Professor Nealson with one of those indulgent looks that made me want to take off his balls with a serrated spoon. “Girls never do know how to listen, do they?”

Professor Nealson crossed his arms, a hard look coming over his youthful face. “I find that *women* will listen when there’s something worth listening to.”

Dr. Ipres made a small choking sound that made me think she was trying not to laugh. I didn’t blame her. I was torn between laughing and cheering myself. Plenty of male professors didn’t act like chauvinistic assholes, but not too many of them would stand up to another man, especially not a man with as much influence and money as Korbin Worthington III, and especially not someone who was only in his first year at a prestigious university.

I *definitely* liked this new professor.

Korbin’s expression tightened just a bit around his eyes, but when he turned to me, his gaze held desire he didn’t even try to disguise.

No, not desire. Lust. And not a healthy type of lust between two people who were mutually attracted to each other. This was the kind where a person was being equated with a thing. An object. Something to be used in any and every

way without regard for consent or what the “object” wanted. I couldn’t say that Korbin would actually force himself on a woman because not all sleazebags were rapists, but I knew I wouldn’t take that chance.

Fortunately, another professor I was acquainted with happened to pass by right at that moment, giving me the perfect opportunity to escape.

“Professor McNamara.” I said her name a little louder than necessary, not wanting to risk her getting away before I could go with her.

Professor McNamara must’ve seen something on my face because she greeted me as if she’d been looking for me too. “Freedom. Let’s get something to drink, shall we?”

I glanced at the three people I didn’t want to alienate. “If you’ll excuse me.” With that, Professor McNamara and I walked toward the bar, with me trying hard not to think about who’d supplied the alcohol tonight. “Thanks for that.”

“Anytime. We women need to stick together when it comes to guys like him.”

I raised an eyebrow, but I wasn’t really surprised that she knew exactly why I’d called out to her and who I was trying to avoid. Professor McNamara was around thirty and had a delicate beauty that made men’s heads turn. I would’ve been shocked if Korbin *hadn’t* flirted with her. I doubted the ring on her finger had meant anything to him.

“I can’t say I’ll be sad to see him go,” she said before turning her attention to the bartender. “Champagne?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He looked at me. “And for you?”

“The same.” One glass wouldn’t cause me any problems driving home, and if I had to deal with Korbin again, I’d need the fortification.

“This is your last semester, right?” Professor McNamara asked before taking a sip of her champagne. “You and your sister both?”

“It is,” I said as the two of us moved away from the bar. I wasn’t surprised that she knew about Aline, even though my sister hadn’t taken any of the professor’s classes. While not Stanford’s youngest entrance, she was still

notable.

“Have the two of you accepted any offers yet?”

“I can’t speak for Aline, but I haven’t settled on a particular position.”

Technically, neither statement was one hundred percent truthful, but they were both more lies of omission than outright deception. I hadn’t heard Aline talk about anything specific, and I assumed that meant she didn’t have anything set up, but I would’ve sounded presumptuous saying it. Plus, there was always the possibility I was mistaken.

While I didn’t have an accepted position anywhere, it wasn’t because I was trying to decide between numerous offers, rather that I hadn’t yet actually pursued anything. That wasn’t something I planned on sharing, and I hated knowing that I was hiding it because a part of me was embarrassed. I’d told my parents and Aline that I was still considering all my options, and while that was factually true, the reasoning behind it was something I didn’t like to admit, even to myself.

I had no idea what I actually wanted to do.

But this wasn’t the time or place to be introspective.

“How have your classes been?” I shifted the topic to her.

“They’re going well,” she said. “One of my students shows a lot of promise, and I expect we’ll be seeing a lot of her, both with on-campus politics and local. I wouldn’t be surprised if she started running for minor positions before she graduates. She reminds me a lot of Cheryl Simms.”

That was a name I knew, even though she’d graduated two years before I started at Stanford. Less than a year after she’d graduated, she’d been elected to the city council in her hometown in Virginia. From there, she’d made it to mayor. In two years, she’d be old enough to run for governor, and she’d already been laying the groundwork to the point where it was common knowledge among people who followed things like that.

“Are you leaning toward political ambitions yourself?” Professor McNamara asked. “Perhaps in an area that would benefit from your being multilingual?”

“I don’t want to run for office.” At least, that, I knew for certain. “Though I am considering working within a politician’s office.”

“Any specific one?” she asked. “Local, state, or federal?”

She was as eager as I’d hoped she’d be, and our conversation continued along the lines of career rather than Korbin or romance. We were joined by Professor Kebno from the justice and law part of the Poli Sci department, and the discussion continued smoothly even as other people moved in and out of our little group. When I finally excused myself to go to the restroom, I was feeling pretty good about how I’d spent my evening.

And then I came out of the bathroom, and everything went to shit.

“I was wondering when I was finally going to get you alone.” Korbin pushed off the wall he’d been leaning on, the movement so smooth that I knew he’d practiced it. Probably while looking at himself in a mirror.

“Well, not all women go to the restroom in groups.” At the moment, I was regretting not following that particular stereotype. “Now, if you’ll—”

He stepped into my personal space. Not touching me, but too close to be professional. “Come now, Miss Mercier. Don’t pretend like you weren’t sneaking looks at me this whole time, begging me to follow you.”

My eyebrows shot up. I’d known he was conceited, but now he sounded delusional. I hadn’t looked at him once since walking away. In fact, I’d been quite determinedly *not* looking anywhere near him because I’d wanted to avoid this exact situation.

I took a step back and held up a hand, palm out in the universal signal to stay away. “No, Dr. Worthington. You read me incorrectly. I’m here for networking. Only.”

“Networking. Right.” He winked. “You’re here at a stuffy faculty party on Valentine’s Day because you’re networking. It’s all right. You don’t need to be embarrassed that you don’t have a date.”

“I’m not.” As soon as the words popped out of my mouth, I regretted saying them. They were true, but said in this context, they sounded defensive.

“Or maybe you chose not to have one,” he continued, shuffling a half-step closer. “Maybe you came here because you knew who you wanted to be with tonight, and this was where you could find him.”

Shit.

If I couldn't reason with him enough for me to walk away unbothered, I'd need to do something drastic that might end any possibility of a decent career in anything that required a good reputation.

I *really* hated Valentine's Day.

“Professor Worthington, I'm afraid you've gotten the wrong impression,” I began.

He shook his head. “I don't think so. I know women. I know what they want.”

Ideas rushed through my mind of all the different ways I could get out of here, but none of them involved being polite and not pissing him off.

“There you are.”

Even with just three words, I knew who had just come up behind me, which was good because he put his arm around my waist and kissed my cheek. If I'd just been grabbed and kissed by a complete stranger – or someone I thought was a stranger – I probably would've done some physical damage. Then again, even though I knew who it was, I was still considering hurting him, just on principle.

But not in front of Korbin. First, I wasn't going to waste a perfectly good lie. Second, no matter how much of a jerk Brody had been, he didn't deserve to be berated in front of an asshole like Korbin. There were degrees of assholes, and those two weren't in the same league.

“If you'll excuse us.” Brody squeezed me and smiled at Korbin. “I need to borrow Freedom. I'm sure you understand.”

“Yes, Dr. Worthington.” I spoke through clenched teeth. “I need to have a conversation with Brody here.”

I grabbed Brody's hand as I turned so that our fingers were linked together, but his arm wasn't around me anymore. Then I started walking, dragging him after me and into...a supply closet.

Just like the one we'd fooled around in before the art exhibit.

Fuck.

I hadn't thought this part through.



Thirty-Eight

## Brody

I hadn't liked the way that guy had looked at Freedom the first time I'd seen him near her, but she'd walked away from him to talk to another woman. I'd told myself that she could clearly take care of herself and stay away from that asshole. He hadn't looked happy, but he hadn't gone after her either. He'd simply found the next woman who caught his attention and gave her the same smarmy smile he'd given Freedom.

I'd gone back to my conversation with Dr. Josephs, not wanting to be rude and leave while he was in the middle of telling me something. That was the entire reason I'd stayed longer than I'd intended. It had nothing to do with keeping an eye on Freedom. It'd only been a coincidence the times I'd glanced around and spotted her with one person or another.

Only keen observation that had noted who she'd been talking to and for how long. And it hadn't been as if I'd counted minutes or anything creepy like that. She was just the only person besides Dr. Josephs that I knew here, so it made sense that my subconscious would seek her out.

I managed to hold on to that reasoning for longer than I'd hoped, but the moment I'd seen her disappear through a far doorway and that grinning idiot follow her, I'd known that I couldn't just observe. It didn't matter how things had been the last time we'd come face-to-face. My gut told me that guy was up to no good, and I'd never have left any woman to handle that on her own.

My sisters and mother would've had my head if I had. Probably my balls too.

By the time I'd managed to get away from Dr. Josephs, make it across the room, and come into the short hallway where the restrooms were, Freedom and the guy were standing less than a foot apart, and she looked pissed.

I heard him say, "I know women. I know what they want," and I didn't need to hear anything else. I just went on instinct.

“There you are.” My arm slid around her waist as if it belonged there, and when I kissed her cheek, the smell of her shampoo made my stomach clench with a jolt of desire so strong that it almost took my breath away. I ignored it and faced the man who was frowning at me, giving Freedom another squeeze as I pasted on a fake smile. “If you’ll excuse us, I need to borrow Freedom. I’m sure you understand.”

“Yes, Dr. Worthington. I need to have a conversation with Brody here.”

Her tone was polite, but I could hear the undercurrent of tension in her words. For a moment, my confidence faltered, and I wondered if I’d misread things between the two of them. Then she grabbed my hand and dragged me down the hall and through a door and into a supply closet.

I was just preparing a smart-ass remark about her returning the favor from the last time we were in a closet like this when I realized that she was glaring up at me rather than getting ready to thank me.

Shit.

“What the hell was that all about?” She didn’t wait for me to answer. “You just see some guy talking to me and go all caveman and claim me? Are you jealous, is that it? You didn’t like seeing me talking to another man, so you just decide to act like I belong to you?”

I opened my mouth to tell her that I’d thought the man had been harassing her, but she didn’t give me a chance to speak. As if she knew what I was thinking, she shifted the focus.

“Or was it more that you thought I was in danger and only you could protect me from the big bad man?” Her eyes narrowed. “That’s what it was, wasn’t it? You wouldn’t be the jealous type because the only thing between us is sex. *Was* sex. Past tense. So you wouldn’t have been bothered by someone flirting with me. No, you’re the hero type, aren’t you? The white knight who has to save the damsel in distress because she’s incapable of doing it herself.”

Shit, this had started bad and was heading straight to worse.

“Well, news flash, you arrogant bastard. I am entirely capable of taking care of myself, even against men like Korbin.”

Korbin.

She'd called him Dr. Worthington to his face, which made me wonder if that'd been for appearances. Maybe she did have a more intimate relationship with that man, and I'd just happened to see the end of some sort of tiff.

Hell, maybe he'd approached her earlier just like I had at the exhibit, and she'd been putting him in his place when I'd interrupted.

It shouldn't have mattered. I shouldn't have gotten involved. Like she'd said, she could've handled the situation herself. And if she'd underestimated him, one scream for help and people would've come running. She hadn't been alone in a dark alley at midnight or at a loud club where no one would have heard her. She was well-known, and from what I'd observed, well-liked.

She hadn't needed me, and it sure as hell looked like she didn't want me.

But I wanted her. As much as I ever had. Maybe more.

Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes flashing. She might've been pissed off, but that looked very similar to when she was turned on, and my own body was just as confused as my mind.

"Okay, so maybe the only way I could've taken care of him would've been to knee him in the balls, and that wouldn't have gone over too well, but I still could've done it."

I suddenly felt the urge to cover my crotch in case she decided that my behavior deserved a shot to the groin.

"Ugh!" She shook her head. "Why is it that men will only believe that a woman isn't interested in them if she has a significant other? A woman should be able to say no and have it mean no. No excuses, no reasons needed. Just an 'I'm not interested.' Why do they have to see that she already has someone? Hell, half the time, even that doesn't work. If she's with a woman, it's because she hasn't met the right man. If she's married, she must be looking for excitement." She pointed her finger at me. "Seriously. What is wrong with your entire gender?"

That was a question far above my pay grade, but she didn't seem to actually want an answer because she kept talking. It was the most I'd ever heard her

say at one time, and I had to admit, I was enjoying it.

Implied threat to my manhood aside.

“And why are you even here in the first place? Are you stalking me? Come to see if I’d sneak away with you again? Get lucky in a bathroom or in your car? Because if that was the case, you’re a complete jerk. And how’d you even know I was here? I hadn’t planned—”

Okay, I took it back. Enough talking.

I closed the distance in one step, wrapping my hand around the back of her neck and yanked her against me, covering her mouth with mine before she could do anything but let out a surprised squeak. Her hands were against my chest, and I waited for her to push me off. Slap me. Tell me to get the hell out. I would’ve apologized and left. Stayed away from the campus until she’d graduated.

But she didn’t push me away. In fact, her hands grabbed the front of my shirt, and her tongue darted out to touch my bottom lip. She rubbed her body against mine and made a hungry sound that broke down any second thoughts I might’ve had.

Damn, if everything hadn’t just flipped completely upside-down.

# Freedom

Everything I'd planned went right out the window the moment his lips touched mine. All the reasons I'd had for being angry at him for acting like I needed rescuing disappeared. All of the logical arguments I'd made about why it was better not to see him anymore vanished. Any thought I might've had about where we were was silenced. The only thing remaining was sensation.

And I wanted more.

I slid my hands under his shirt, and his muscles twitched and flexed under my palms. The rough dips and ridges from his scars, the dusting of coarse hair on his chest, sent a shiver through me as memories from previous trysts came forward. I knew what it felt like to have him pressed against me, how sensitive my skin became from all the places his body came in contact with mine.

His hands moved down my back, creating a path of heat through my dress, and when they stopped just above my ass, I nipped his bottom lip. He took it as the encouragement I intended and dropped his hands lower, squeezing me even as he rocked his hips forward, confirming that I affected him as much as he did me. I ran my hands around his sides, lightly scratching with my nails, and it was his turn to bite, worrying at my bottom lip until it was swollen.

My back hit the door before I realized we'd moved, and a sense of déjà vu washed over me. This time, however, I wouldn't be satisfied with only his fingers. I needed him inside me. He must've been thinking the same because I felt his hands between us and heard the unmistakable rasp of a zipper.

He broke our kiss, hunger making his eyes dark. "Condom."

I shook my head. If he took the time to get one out and on, common sense would return, and this wouldn't happen. Already I could feel it knocking about in my mind, threatening to ruin the moment.

“I have an IUD, and I’m clean.” I didn’t tell him that I hadn’t been with anyone since we’d first hooked up. That might’ve led to questions that would take us back to common sense and no sex.

“Me too. Clean, I mean.” A flash of humor went through his eyes, but it didn’t lessen the tension between us.

That would’ve frightened me if I’d allowed myself to think about it.

Fortunately, I didn’t need to worry about thinking much at all because he was acting, and nothing gets a person’s brain to immediately switch tracks as being lifted off their feet.

I automatically grabbed onto his shoulders and wrapped my legs around his waist. His gaze bored into me as his hands slid up my thighs to squeeze my ass again, this time only a thin layer of cotton and lace between us. He leaned forward, and his cock brushed against the damp fabric keeping him from where we both wanted him to be. With a jerk, he tore my panties off, and I gasped as the friction burned my sensitive skin. It would hurt later, but right now, it fanned the flame building inside me.

Our eyes locked together, and I gave a small nod, appreciating that even in this heightened state, one where we didn’t want to take the time even for a condom, he was confirming my consent. Maybe he wasn’t actually an asshole after all.

With one quick thrust, he was inside me, and I tried to cry out, but his mouth was there. He swallowed each sound I made, muffling his own moans. His strokes were short and fast, hard enough to take the breath from my lungs, and perfectly angled to get the friction on my clit that I needed to push me toward orgasm.

His tongue caressed mine, explored my mouth as if it was our first kiss, something novel and exciting, the almost languid movements at complete odds with the way he drove into me. The contrast had me squirming, my brain and body unable to reconcile the two, and I grabbed his arm, digging my nails in out of sheer desperation, the overwhelming need for some sort of outlet speaking to a primal part of me that I didn’t quite understand.

He hissed in pain, but before I could apologize, he grabbed my hand and pinned it above my head. His fingers threaded between mine, turning what could've been an automatic reaction into something surprisingly intimate. His fingers flexed around mine even as the muscles in his thighs and ass tensed with every thrust, and I was suddenly aware of just how strong this man was. Of how, if he so chose, he could overpower me, use me without a care for my own wishes. Despite that realization, I felt no fear because I knew he wasn't that sort of man.

His rhythm faltered, and he made a sound in the back of his throat. A rush of power mixed with my pleasure. Pride that he had to fight for control over his own body because mine made him feel that good.

“Please tell me you're close.” His voice was hoarse, as if he'd been screaming rather than kissing.

I nodded. “I am. Just a little more.” I was surprised to hear how rough my own voice was.

He shifted his stance, and the movement pushed him deeper than he'd been before, sending a jolt of half pain, half pleasure, racing along my nerves. He tightened his grip on my hand and my hip, grinding himself against me. Unable to fight his body any longer, he came first, his entire body stiffening, but the feel of him pulsing inside me, the way his body shuddered against mine, tipped me over the edge, and I squeezed my eyes shut tight, riding the pleasure, allowing myself those blissful moments of release where nothing mattered but the way he made me feel.

Forty

## Brody

I didn't understand how the earth could move and time could stop at the same time, but that was what it felt like when I was inside her. The irrational part of me wanted to stay here forever, like this, but I knew that wouldn't have been an option, even if we'd been somewhere private.

As it was, I could only let myself linger a few moments longer, and then I straightened, easing Freedom's feet back to the ground. She made a soft sound as my now-soft cock slipped out of her, but when I looked at her face, her expression gave nothing away.

Guilt flooded me. "I didn't...I mean, you aren't...was I too rough?"

At the question, she looked at me, but her eyes only met mine for a split second before darting away. "No, you weren't too rough."

Color rushed back into her cheeks, and I wondered if it was from embarrassment or arousal. I didn't know a subtle way to ask, though, so I kept my thought to myself. Maybe we'd have the chance to talk about it in the near future. Explore more things we both enjoyed, even if they embarrassed us. Visiting Club Privé and Black Masque had definitely opened up my eyes to some things I wouldn't have necessarily thought of before.

But that was for later.

Right now, we needed to clean ourselves up and head back out to the party before anyone figured out that Freedom and I had disappeared together. I didn't regret what we'd done, and I didn't want her to either. Knowing what'd happened when I'd approached her at a public event, I doubted she would want stories going around about what she'd been doing here, true or not. None of those stories would help me with my business relationship here, either.

I didn't regret it, but it definitely hadn't been a smart move.



“Dammit,” Freedom muttered.

I looked up from zipping up my pants and found her holding something in her hand. It took me a moment to realize what she had. Her underwear. The same underwear I’d torn off just a couple minutes ago.

Oops.

I opened my mouth to apologize but closed it again when my phone rang. Each of my siblings had their own ringtones, and “Bad Reputation” was assigned to Paris. All my younger siblings preferred texting, so for Paris to call, it meant something was probably wrong.

I pulled my phone from my pocket, my pulse already picking back up, though this time it wasn’t from physical exertion. “Paris?”

“Hey, big brother.”

My eyes narrowed. Her tone was a familiar one, and it helped ease some of my anxiety. If she was starting things with that familiar phrase, it couldn’t be too bad.

Still, I knew she had a reason for calling. “Are you okay?”

“Technically, yes.”

I closed my eyes and sighed. “You had a reason for calling me, Paris. What’s going on?”

“My date took me paragliding, and we had a little...accident.”

“Paris.”

“The short version is that my left shoulder is dislocated, and I need someone to pick me up from the hospital because I’m not calling that chauvinistic dick after he blamed me for it.”

She sounded more annoyed than anything else, which told me she was okay, or at least as okay as she could be with a dislocated shoulder. I didn’t ask why she’d called me instead of our parents or even one of our other siblings who lived in the area. I knew the answer to that, and it had nothing to do with location. And even though she’d been staying with our parents while she was

between digs, for something like this, she still would've called me first.

Even though Paris and I weren't biologically related, we liked to joke that she'd gotten her love of thrill-seeking from me. After all, I was the one who'd introduced her to surfing when she was a kid. Even now, when she wanted to do something crazy, she came to me to ask how to do it safely if I thought it was something she should avoid.

Like paragliding.

The main two things I always told her were to make sure she followed all safety guidelines, and if a place didn't practice them, leave. As far as I knew, she'd followed those rules every time, but just because she didn't mean other people did too, and it also didn't mean that accidents didn't happen.

She'd called me because she'd known I wouldn't freak out or lecture her about doing something dangerous.

"What hospital are you at?" I asked.

"Kaiser ER in San Leandro."

I looked at my watch. "All right. I'm not familiar with that hospital, but from Stanford to San Leandro should take me about an hour, maybe an hour and a half, depending on traffic."

She didn't ask me why I was in Stanford, and even though I had a completely legitimate business reason, I was relieved that I didn't have to come up with something to say while Freedom was right here. I didn't know what she wanted to call what we'd just done, but if she thought I sounded dismissive, it would hurt her.

"All right. I'm not going anywhere."

As the call ended, I turned around to tell Freedom that I needed to go pick up my sister from the hospital and found that I was alone. I hadn't heard Freedom leave, but she had. It wasn't as if she could've been hiding in here. I double-checked my clothes and stepped out to thank Freedom for giving me some privacy. Except she wasn't waiting in the hall.

Assuming that she'd gone back to the main room so as to prevent anyone from seeing her standing around outside of a supply closet, which would've been hard to explain, I went the same way. I'd take a few seconds to fill her in before I headed out. Paris wasn't in any danger, and if I'd asked her, she would've told me to explain things to Freedom, even if it meant making her wait just a little bit longer.

But a scan around the room as I made my way to the doors showed that Freedom wasn't here. Or at least not visible. Which meant she had to be avoiding me. I supposed that was better than her being pissed at me for us hooking up at an event again.

I wished I had the time to find her and let her know why I had to go, but I had a feeling that if I had to hunt her down, Freedom would want to talk a lot more than just a simple "hey, I have to go." I couldn't make Paris wait *that* long. After Paris was taken care of, I'd reach out to Freedom and tell her what had happened. Right now, though, I had to think about what Paris would want to do since she clearly didn't want our parents to know about her accident. That was where my focus needed to be.

# Freedom

I really hoped that “Bad Reputation” by Joan Jett wasn’t some sort of foreshadowing, but the fact that I was holding my now-unwearable panties, I felt that it didn’t bode well for me.

And then he answered the phone.

“Paris?”

My stomach sank as I remembered the beautiful dark-haired woman who’d come to the art exhibit and given Brody an enthusiastic hug. The fact that he’d answer a call from her only moments after he’d been inside me made me sick.

And furious.

I didn’t want to hear anything else he had to say to her, and I sure as hell wasn’t going to tell him I was leaving. I didn’t slam the door behind me because that would just attract attention, and the last thing I needed right now was someone to see me coming out of a supply closet looking like I’d just been thoroughly fucked.

Fortunately, the way to the restroom was clear, and I was able to duck inside without anyone seeing me. I grabbed a handful of paper towels and went into the bigger stall.

What the hell had I been thinking? Not just having sex in a semi-public place – *again* – while I was supposed to be focusing on my career. I’d had sex with Brody. I’d never wanted to see again after what’d happened at the exhibit.

And then I’d made it so much worse by doing the dumbest thing I’d ever done.

I’d told him it was okay to not use a condom.

I had an IUD, so I wasn't worried about getting pregnant, but after what had just happened, I no longer knew that I could trust his claim that he was clean. He had stopped to bring up protection, so I hoped that meant he hadn't flat-out lied to me when he'd said it was safe for us to go without, but I wasn't so sure anymore that he was a good guy.

After all, he was clearly involved with this Paris Carideo enough that he'd invited her to the exhibit, and he'd taken her call even though I'd been standing right there. The only logical reason I could think of for the latter was that not taking her call would have somehow hurt their relationship. Otherwise, he could have just let her call go to voicemail long enough for us to have had a real conversation, even if it'd just been a short one. The only thing that made sense was that his girlfriend didn't trust him enough for him to miss a call.

For good reason, apparently.

I wasn't angry at her, and I hoped that she wouldn't be angry at me if she found out about me. I'd never thought even for a moment that Brody could have been a deceitful bastard who would fucked me if he'd still been with her, but then again, he had fooled around with me not long before she'd shown up at the exhibit.

Sure, he and I hadn't exactly made any commitments or promises to each other, and I hadn't wanted either of those things. I still didn't want those things. But I didn't know if he and Paris had some sort of arrangement like an open relationship or something like that.

It wasn't any of my business, exactly, but I didn't understand how he could say he knew he was clean if he was with other women without having the chance to be tested. If he fucked Paris tonight – his girlfriend on *Valentine's Day* – would he tell her that it was okay to not use a condom?

I shook my head as I got rid of the paper towels and moved to the sink to wash my hands. I needed to stop thinking about him and his relationships. Who he talked to and who he fucked wasn't any of my business. Not now, anyway. It would've been before we'd had sex, but what was done was done.

No more.

I studied my reflection in the mirror, forcing myself to use a critical eye. I didn't plan on staying at the party, not after Korbin's aggression and Brody's betrayal, but I did need to get to the door, and I refused to look like I was doing a walk of shame.

Even if a part of me did feel a little bit ashamed of what I'd done.

I didn't need to look like it too.

My hair didn't look too bad, so just a quick smoothing down with damp hands was enough to make it presentable. The minimal makeup I'd applied hadn't been smudged, not even my lipstick, which was good since that meant he wasn't wearing any of it. I'd really have to write a positive review of the brand.

My dress was a little wrinkled, and it took me a couple minutes to get it back to a place where it merely looked like I'd been walking around all evening and not that I'd been pinned to a door with my dress around my waist. My underwear, however, was a complete loss. Brody had torn the lace badly enough that I couldn't even attempt to put it back on, which meant I'd be going home commando.

Under other circumstances, I might've enjoyed the thrill of something that would have shocked the faculty members in the other room. Tonight, it just reminded me that I'd done something stupid. Especially since, even though I'd cleaned myself up as best I could, the insides of my thighs still felt slick.

"You can do this." I looked my reflection in the eye. "Walk out. Find Dr. Ipres. Tell her I'm leaving. Go home. Take a hot shower and pretend like nothing happened."

This sounded like a good plan, but I could see a half dozen ways everything could go wrong, not the least of which would be running into Brody again. The second worst thing would be running into Korbin.

He was the only person who'd seen Brody and me together, and he thought the two of us were a couple. If he'd also noticed that Brody and I had been gone for a while, he could guess what we'd been doing, especially since he seemed like a man whose mind would go in that direction, even if it hadn't been true.

Rumors could destroy my reputation, true or not. Yes, I was responsible for my part of what happened between Brody and me, but it wasn't as if either of us were underage or there was a power differential between us. A man's reputation wouldn't really be that damaged under the same circumstances, but a woman's would. Unfair, yes, but that was the way the world still worked.

I needed to walk out there as if Brody and I had simply had a conversation with each other, and now I was going home to check on my sister. Nothing more, nothing less. Calm, cool, and composed. I'd always behaved in a professional manner, and no one would have any reason to think otherwise unless I gave them reason to.

I took a few slow breaths to steady myself further and then left the restroom. I kept my chin up and refused to give even the appearance that something out of the ordinary had happened. My pulse raced as I stepped into the main room, adrenaline spiking at the thought of seeing Brody, but then I saw Dr. Ipres almost immediately and headed straight for her without looking for anyone else. Fortunately, she was only with her husband.

"Thank you for inviting me tonight," I said with a smile. "I'm heading home. I don't want to leave Aline alone too much longer."

"Of course." Dr. Ipres squeezed my hand. "I hope she feels better."

"Me too." I said good night to Andrew as well and then headed to get my jacket. I breathed a sigh of relief when I was able to make it to my car without seeing anyone else.

Hopefully, Aline would be asleep when I arrived because I definitely didn't want to have to tell her about tonight, not before I'd had a night to process it myself. Tomorrow, I'd call my doctor and set up an appointment to get blood work done to make sure Brody hadn't been lying about anything else.

I'd learned my lesson well this time. I wasn't going to make the same mistake again. I was done with him.

## Brody

I checked the distance to my next turn and then glanced at the clock again, even though I'd done the same thing only five or so minutes ago. And five to ten minutes before that. I wasn't the sort of driver who did either of those things regularly when I was on a trip. I had an instinct about directions and only had to look at something on a map once to see how it laid out in front of me.

I used a GPS service that included construction and traffic jam information so I wouldn't be caught off-guard, but unless an alert came up, I rarely checked it. Looking at the time was just as pointless since the only way I'd arrive any faster would be to go over the speed limit by more than the few miles I was doing now. Since Paris wasn't in danger, I was putting safety and obeying the law – more or less – first.

I could've lied to myself about why I kept doing it, made up some excuse about how I was worried for Paris, and was using all of this for a distraction. I didn't bother, though. I knew that I was basically doing the exact opposite of distracting myself. Paying attention to what I was doing reminded me of who I was doing it for. Kept me from being more than mildly annoyed at Freedom for disappearing on me.

Paris needed me to take care of her. Not because she was helpless. Aside from the fact that she would've had my balls if I'd even suggested such a thing, it wasn't true. Paris was one of the most independent, strong-willed people I knew, regardless of gender.

But that didn't mean a dislocated shoulder wouldn't make life difficult for a while, and she'd called me to pick her up. She would need to make plans about how she wanted to handle her day to day living arrangements, and I'd be there to help with whatever she needed.

After all, it wasn't as if I had anything else to do tonight.



I turned the radio up and tried not to think about what Freedom might have planned for the rest of her night.

Next Valentine's Day, I was going to take the entire day off and not leave my apartment. I wouldn't even open my door.

And I sure as hell wouldn't step foot on that damn university campus for the entire month of February.

\* \* \*

When I arrived at the ER, I texted Paris to let her know I was there and tried not to be disappointed that I didn't have a message from Freedom explaining why she'd left or even asking where I'd gone. I reminded myself that the two of us had no understandings or promises between us. We'd hooked up. It happened.

And I had more important things to take care of right now.

I headed inside, going straight to the front desk where a tired-looking man was on the phone. Since I could hear someone screaming on the other end of the line, I patiently waited for him to finish.

"I'm telling you that my fucking fish gave me the rabies like it's that damn crazy dog in that movie!"

I couldn't tell if the caller was male or female, but the words were crystal clear.

"I assure you, again, that is not possible." The man in front of me rubbed his forehead, and I wondered how long he'd been on the phone.

"Then why am I foaming at the mouth?" they shot back. "I tried to pet him, and he bit me, and I went to go get some water because that's supposed to cure the rabies—"

I barely managed to stop laughing.

“—then my mouth tastes all weird, and I’m foaming, and I’m gonna go crazy and die from the rabies because you won’t send a doctor to me—”

I turned my laugh into a cough this time because there was no way to completely hold back.

“Excuse me.” When the person on the phone didn’t stop talking, the man at the desk finally shouted, “Will you be quiet for a damn minute?!”

Startled silence.

“Is it possible your cup had soap in it?”

Several more seconds of nothing, and then just two words. “Fuck off.” And then the call ended.

The guy hung up the phone and sighed before looking up at me. “Can I help you?”

“I’m here to pick up my sister. She was in a hang-gliding accident earlier tonight.”

He grinned. “I know who you’re talking about.”

“She does leave an impression,” I said as I pulled out my wallet and removed my ID. “I’m Brody McCrae.”

He looked at it and then at me. “She’s married?”

I shook my head. “Step-sister, technically.”

“You can either wait out here for her to be discharged, or I can send someone back to confirm your identity so that you can go back to get her.” He gave me a practiced apologetic look. “It’s one of our safety protocols to prevent abusers from being able to get to their victims. You’d be surprised at how many more people are willing to press charges when they know they’re safe.”

“Have her confirm my identity,” I said, impressed with the program. “In case she needs me to help her out.”

He nodded and called over one of the orderlies. He gave her my ID and told her where to find Paris.

“I have to ask, is that policy new? I’ve just never heard of it anywhere else,” I said. “It makes a lot of sense, but I’m sure it takes some extra staff, which means budgeting would’ve been an issue.”

“You have no idea.” He ran a hand down his face. “It took two years to finally get it approved, and it only happened because the person heading it up managed to get a donation to cover the pilot program.”

“Would it be possible for me to leave you a card to give to the person running the program?” I took out my wallet again and retrieved a business card this time. It wasn’t mine, though. “My parents are always looking for new programs to support, and I think they’d love this one.”

He looked surprised but took it. When he read it, his eyebrows shot up. “The Grace Foundation?”

It wasn’t surprising that he’d clearly knew the name. My parents’ foundation was pretty well known on the West Coast.

The orderly came back just then and handed me my ID as she spoke to the clerk. “She says he’s her brother.”

“Go ahead and take him back,” the clerk said before looking at me. “I’ll make sure the card gets to the right place.”

I thanked him and then followed the orderly through the doors and into the main ER area. I heard Paris before I saw her, and the sound of her laughter eased the last bit of a knot from my stomach.

Even though she’d already told me that she was fine and only had a dislocated shoulder, I needed to see her for myself before I’d completely believe her. I wouldn’t have put it past her to lie about the severity of her injury just so I would come and not call our parents. It’s what I might’ve done in her situation. But if she was well enough to laugh, she’d be all right.

“Maybe next time you decide to do something crazy, you’ll make sure you have a better partner.” I threw up my hands as I approached the bed. “No more wimps.”

Paris rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I picked a real dud this time.”

The doctor turned to me. “You’re the brother?”

“I am.”

“I’m sending enough painkillers with her to get her through until she can get to a pharmacy tomorrow. She promised to make an appointment with her regular physician for follow-up.” The doctor glanced at Paris and then looked back at me. “And I’m guessing she’ll fill you in on anything else you need to know.”

“I will.” Paris grinned, but someone who knew her as well as I did could see that it didn’t quite show in her eyes. Her skin was paler than normal, and her mouth had a pinched look at the corners.

“Well, I’ve got everything I need from you, so you can head out now that your ride’s here. Have a good night.” The doctor nodded at both of us and left.

“Thanks for coming,” Paris said as she swung her legs over the side of the bed. She looked tired, but okay, at least. “Hope I didn’t ruin big Valentine’s Day plans.”

The feel of being in Freedom’s body. The sounds she made. The way her face had looked when she came.

I shook my head. “You know me. I don’t do Valentine’s Day.”

“Yeah, well, I think I’ll follow your example next year.” She stood up and swayed on her feet.

I put out a hand but didn’t touch her yet. She caught herself, and I dropped my hand to my side. My other sisters might’ve at least let me steady them, but Paris had always been headstrong, insisting on trying it herself before acknowledging that she might actually need assistance.

Yet another thing we had in common.

“I’m guessing since you didn’t call our parents that you don’t want me to take you back there.” I walked on the same side as her injured arm, using my body to prevent anyone from bumping into her. If she noticed what I was doing, she didn’t comment on it.

“I was sort of hoping my favorite big brother would let me crash at his place.” She gave me a sideways look.

“So, Austin’s coming to get you?” I teased.

She rolled her eyes. “I’d hit you if you were on the other side.”

“Why do you think I’m walking over here?” I held the door open for her and the two people behind us.

“Seriously, though, Brody. Can I come back to your place tonight?”

I unlocked my car and opened the passenger door for her. The fact that she didn’t make a snarky comment about it spoke volumes. She might’ve been trying to cover it, but I could tell how exhausted she was. Most people didn’t realize how much energy a serious injury took out of a person, especially when the person in question had a high threshold for pain and didn’t like others to see any form of weakness.

When I slid into the driver’s seat, I half-turned toward her before starting the car. “Is this a ‘can I stay the night so I can figure out how to tell our parents what happened’ or is it an ‘I plan on hiding out indefinitely so I’ll need you to field calls from our parents’ kind of request?”

She gave me a sheepish grin. “I was hoping for the second one, but I’ll take the first.”

I sighed and turned the key. “How about we compromise? I’ll take you back to my place, and tomorrow, we’ll discuss where things go from there.”

“Thanks.” She leaned back into the seat with a pained sigh. “I have a dig scheduled in South America in a week, and the doctor said that if I rested between now and then, I’d be good to travel. I’ll have to get someone else to do any heavy lifting for a while, but I can still do my job. Mostly.”

I understood where she was going with this train of thought. “You’re worried that if our parents find out about your shoulder, they’ll try to stop you from going on your dig.”

“Do you really think they’d be okay with me going when I can’t use my arm correctly for a few weeks?”

“Only a few weeks?” I asked.

“The doctor said I’d heal almost completely in just three weeks.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Oh really?”

The little sheepish half-smile she gave me said she knew I was calling her on her shit. “Well, he said it can take anywhere from three to twelve weeks, but if I do everything I’m supposed to do, it’ll be on the shorter end of the recovery time.”

“You sound like you have it all worked out.” It didn’t surprise me that, even with a dislocated shoulder, she’d already started thinking of ways to keep doing her work.

“Yes, of course.” She put her head back and closed her eyes. “You’d do the same thing.”

“I wouldn’t risk making an injury worse,” I countered.

She made a snorting noise, and I glanced over to see a loopy smile on her face.

“The drugs have really kicked in, haven’t they?”

She laughed but didn’t open her eyes. “I only took half a dose when they offered it because I wasn’t about to be all goofy yet. Doctor gave me the other half when the person came with the plastic picture.”

I chuckled. Paris had a high pain threshold but a low tolerance for pain medicine. She’d once lost an entire day after taking an adult-sized dose of cold medicine. Fortunately, she’d been at home with our parents at the time, so she wasn’t in any danger, but we’d all heard stories of the crazy things she’d said and done. She’d been good-natured about the teasing and had since been cautious about any medicine she took since.

“You wanted to be able to ask me if I’d take you to my place before you got all loopy.”

She nodded. “I say lots of stuff.”

“Yes, you do.” I glanced at her again. “You want to be able to downplay your injury to Mom and Da, and you think you wouldn’t have been able to stop from telling them the whole thing.”

“Yup. I say lots of stuff.” She turned her head so that her face was toward me, but she didn’t open her eyes. “Like I say, you should find a girl. Nope. Woman. Nice woman. A sister I don’t have to share with. Except you. I share you with her. Not my room.”

I laughed. Before our family had moved to San Ramon, we’d spent the first few months of our life as a blended family in the Carideo’s house in San Jose. It’d been big, but we’d had two big families, so the place had been more than a little packed.

Paris was little when it’d happened, but it’d made an impression because both my biological sister Maggie and the youngest biological Carideo, Aspen, had shared Paris’s room for that short period of time. When we’d moved into the big house in San Ramon, one of the things she’d been adamant about had been that she wanted her own room.

“You don’t think you have enough sisters?” I asked, curious as to what had prompted her declaration. She’d asked me earlier if she’d interrupted plans for tonight, but at the time, I’d assumed she would’ve asked the same thing on any other night just as a matter of courtesy. Now, I wondered if it’d been something else.

“Pfft.” She blew out air. “You can’t date sisters, silly.”

I laughed. “That’s an excellent point.”

“I know.” She grimaced as we hit a bump.

“Sorry. I’m trying to drive as smoothly as I can.”

“Best driving is flying.” The words were slightly slurred, blunted almost.

“If you say so.” I glanced at her again. “We’ve got a bit of a drive. Why don’t you take a nap, and I’ll wake you up when we get home.”

“Your home.” The words were forced.

“Yes, Paris. I’m taking you to my home.” I kept my tone gentle. “Now, go to sleep.”

“Okay.”

Soon, the only sound in the car was her slow and steady breathing, and I was more or less alone with my thoughts again. This time, however, Paris’s words had gotten me thinking. When I got home, I’d text Freedom to let her know that I hadn’t blown her off. It was the right thing to do, regardless of whether or not this thing between us led us anywhere.

But maybe, just maybe, I could follow my little sister’s advice.



# Freedom

I hadn't yet given up on getting to sleep at a decent hour, so my light was off, and my eyes were closed when my phone alerted me to a text. Aline had gone to bed almost immediately after I'd arrived home, and she'd been sound asleep when I'd checked on her before I'd turned in myself.

Since she knew I was home, she wouldn't be texting me, even if she was awake at the moment. No one involved with the university would be sending me a message this late. Which left my parents, and either of them texting at this time of night meant it was important.

I sighed and rolled onto my side, reaching for my phone. I really hoped this wasn't a case of my father accidentally composing and sending a message via voice-to-text. It'd happened before...while my parents were having sex. Those had been words I couldn't unsee. To this day, I'd never told either of them about it because I knew it'd be horribly embarrassing for them and me. In fact, I liked to pretend it had never happened at all.

Neither of their names showed on my screen, however. It was the last name I wanted to see, tonight or any other night. Or day. Ever.

Brody McCrae.

I considered just deleting the message without even reading it, but a part of me wanted to know what he had to say for himself. I wanted my anger to be justified. I wanted to tear apart whatever excuses he gave or give in to some righteous indignation if he was annoyed that I'd left without a goodbye.

When I opened the text, however, it didn't make me feel justified in how I felt. It just made me go from being angry to furious.

*Sorry for rushing out without letting you know what was going on. I looked for you but didn't see you. My sister called to ask me to pick her up at the ER. She dislocated her shoulder hang-gliding in San Leandro.*

What. The. Fuck.

I'd heard him call the woman Paris, and I seriously doubted he knew two people with that name. It had to belong to the beautiful dark-haired woman I'd seen with him before. Paris Carideo, the archeologist.

No way was that his sister.

First, his last name was McCrae, and hers was Carideo. Granted, a different last name didn't one hundred percent guarantee they weren't related since she could've gotten married and Carideo was her spouse's name, but I hadn't seen a ring on her finger at the art exhibit.

And I'd spent enough time watching the two of them together that night to know.

They also looked nothing alike. Not in complexion, hair color, eye color, facial features...nothing. Yes, I knew that not all siblings resembled each other just because Aline and I did, but it was just one more thing to support my belief that Brody was involved with Paris.

Also, a point in my favor was how completely ridiculous his lie was.

Hang-gliding, at night, in San Leandro on Valentine's Day, and she called her 'brother' to come get her at the hospital? It was too ludicrous to even say out loud.

When men cheated, they had absolutely no respect for either of the women involved. With a lack of respect, it was easy for them to think so little of the women's intelligence that the lies they created didn't necessarily have to be good ones. They assumed that they themselves were such prizes that women would overlook everything that didn't make any sense.

I'd been there before, and I'd be damned if I believed another asshole's bullshit.

In fact, I wasn't even going to give Brody the satisfaction of responding. I wasn't going to call him on the lie or give him a chance to make up some new excuse. I was through wasting my time on him. No matter how explosive the sex had been every time we'd been together, it wasn't worth all of this. No relationship was, not even one that should've just been sex.

Honestly, everything that'd happened recently made me think that perhaps I needed to consider completely swearing off men, at least through the rest of this semester. It wasn't like they were the only way for me to orgasm. I'd taken care of myself plenty of times in the past, and if the tension that came with finding a guy to hook up with outweighed the benefits of the release I received, I needed to rethink my way of looking at things.

The first step would be to call my doctor as soon as the office opened and schedule an appointment to get bloodwork done to make sure Brody hadn't given me anything other than another reason to stay away from men. Once that was done, I'd put all of this behind me and get through this semester without any other distractions.

No matter how hot they were.

## Brody

The little deck slash platform area where I stood had been a part of this building before I'd purchased it, and for a while, I'd planned to tear it down and make the wall solid. Then I'd considered making the entire wall glass.

After a couple months, I was glad I hadn't gone through with any of it. The ability to walk straight out from my office and go down to the floor was nice, but I also appreciated being able to stand here and see the entire floor all at once. Not because I wanted them to feel like I was above them, watching for mistakes. In fact, it was the opposite. I told each and every one of them that if they saw me up here, then they could come talk to me about anything without needing to make an appointment because it meant my calendar was clear at that moment.

The last few weeks had been so good for business that I hadn't really had any time to be up here. In fact, I'd barely been able to make time for my usual walk-throughs to talk to each shift. If things kept going this well, I'd have no choice but to delegate some tasks so I could continue doing the ones that I thought were the most important. Like having a personal connection with my employees.

Adding Club Privé, Black Masque, and Stanford University to my client list had more than doubled my production numbers, and I had two more possible additions to follow up with after the weekend. Already, I'd had to add a dozen new employees, and bringing them on had confirmed one thing: I needed more room.

This building wasn't small, but it could barely hold what I required for my current orders. If Shannon's did well at Black Masque and Club Privé, both clubs would increase what they wanted since, unlike Stanford, they'd be selling it every night the clubs were open rather than the special occasion purchases the university did. The Mannings had also told me that they would most likely want to add their other clubs, even the one in France.

Which meant I had decisions to make. I could expand this building, but because of where it was and the zoning laws, I didn't think that would be the most practical solution. Purchasing another building made more sense, but with that choice came more decisions to make.

Would it be better to buy one much larger building and move everything from here, adding more equipment as needed, or should I find an additional building to fill from scratch with both employees and equipment? If I did the latter, I needed to consider the cost of shipping versus a new distillery or two in other parts of the country, maybe even Texas or New York.

These weren't problems – far from it – but that didn't mean they were easy choices to make. So many factors came into play, not the least of which would be the possible relocation or the addition of a new plant farther East. I liked being near my parents, but it wasn't as if they needed me to take care of them, and I did have family members all over the country. I could find places near one of them. Or I could open distilleries near them and just spend a lot more time traveling and take advantage of the new locations.

It was something I needed to figure out soon, but not right this second, not when I had new employees who were still settling in, and one of the things I prided myself on was Shannon's being family. Four of my new employees were on this shift, and I intended to see how they were doing. I still did my own interviewing and hiring for every position, though that was one of the tasks I knew I'd need to delegate at some point. Again, not something I needed to take care of right now.

I made my way down the stairs and over to the tall blonde who was working with Heath today. Polly Fogg was a twenty-six-year-old with a master's degree in chemistry. I'd told her that she was overqualified, but she'd insisted this was what she wanted. On her first day, I'd seen the look on her face, and it'd been pure joy.

“Mr. McCrae.” She looked surprised to see me.

“How's it going?” I shook her hand and nodded at Heath, who gave me a nod back.

“It's amazing here.” Her expression showed nothing but happiness. “I love the work, and the people are great, and I feel more at home here than I have

anywhere else in a long time.”

I couldn't help but smile back. “I'm glad to hear all of it. I've heard nothing but good about how you're doing. Heath says you'll be able to do his job soon enough.”

“Because he's a great teacher.” She glanced over her shoulder at him. “And thank you.”

I chatted with her a bit longer, not about work, but just a little about her in general, and then I went on to Ralph Waters, the barely twenty-one-year-old who'd joined my machine maintenance team. I didn't need to spend a lot of time with each person, just long enough for me to get a better sense of who they were. I'd needed to hire new people to work here, and I'd need more no matter how I decided to expand our operations. I'd need employees who knew what they were doing.

If I decided to create an entirely new, second distillery, I'd need to have workers I could depend on to run things and to train others. I could bring in people with experience, and I'd be open to new ideas, but unless there was a better way of doing something, I wanted people who knew my way of conducting business.

Adela was on the platform by the time I went back up the steps, her tablet in hand. “Mr. Shadows called. He had a family emergency and had to cancel your lunch.”

I frowned, but it wasn't about my schedule. “Did he say what kind of emergency?”

“No. He sounded distracted but not upset, if that helps.”

“If you can find out what's going on, I'd appreciate it.” We went back into my office. “Find out if he needs any help or if there's anything we can do for him. If it's an emergency that needs condolences, let me know. I'll reach out to him, and we'll send whatever needs to be sent.”

Adela made a note on her tablet. “I'll make some calls.”

“Good.” I took a seat at my desk and looked down at the planner. I had a calendar on my computer too, but sometimes I liked having paper in front of

me. "I think I'll order lunch in. Want to join me?"

She shook her head. "Today's my aunt's birthday, and that's the best time to call her."

I nodded. "Just let me know if you need extra time with her."

"I will. Thank you."

My cell phone rang just as Adela was stepping out of my office. Da's ringtone. It wasn't strange for him to call me in the middle of the day or to use my personal phone since I traveled a lot, but for some reason, a bright sliver of panic went through me, as if I sensed something bad on its way.

"Da?"

"Brody, lad. It's Eoin."

My heart sank, and I could barely repeat my brother's name. "Eoin."

"He's alive." Da's voice was thick but steady. "We dinna know a lot, but we do ken there was an explosion, and he's hurt, but alive."

I closed my eyes, relief and terror warring inside me. Relief that he was alive, but terror that he wouldn't stay that way. Terror that, even if he did survive, he wouldn't be the same.

I knew all too well the type of mark a brush with death could leave on a person, and my own hadn't been from an explosion in a war zone. The violence of nature was different than the violence of man, easier to understand and accept.

But dead would still be dead.

I lost my mother when I was a child, but I'd never let myself think about the possibility of losing a sibling, not even when Eoin had enlisted. Every time he'd been sent overseas, I'd told myself that I'd lost a mother, my siblings had lost a father. We wouldn't lose anyone else.

But we almost had. We still could.

"Brody?"

“You and Mom are at the house?”

“Aye.”

“I’m on my way.”



# Freedom

Things were finally back to the way they were supposed to be. A school routine that hadn't varied for the last three weeks. Hard work. Home-cooked meals and normal discussions with Aline. Time in the library. Calls to our parents every few days. The recommended eight hours of sleep. We worked toward our goal each and every day, and that was my only focus. I was ready for the next step.

Now that we were half-way through March, it was time for Aline and me to have some serious discussions about our plans after graduation. I figured we'd both worked our butts off over the years, so we should at least take the first week after the ceremony to spend some time with our parents, maybe even take a trip with them, but after that, we'd need to hit the ground running.

The best way to avoid the influx of recent graduates and take that time with family was to have everything in place *before* we actually graduated. If we could give employers a specific start date and make it June tenth, we'd be able to have that week of fun and relaxation with our parents before getting into our careers. If Aline was set on starting as a full-time teacher in the fall, the dates would be based on that particular school district, but the premise of my plan was still sound.

Tuesdays and Thursdays were two of our busiest days, so we normally stayed at the campus for lunch rather than going back to the apartment. Even so, we often ate together, using the time to touch base about the rest of our day.

Occasionally, friends would join us, but not as often as they had those first few years since several of the others had taken their four-year degrees and moved away from Stanford. Friends who were on the same track as us were just as busy. Today, Aline was alone at our usual table at The Axe & Palm, absorbed in something on her phone.

From the moment she looked up, however, I saw in her eyes that she hadn't been as focused on her phone as I'd thought. She had something to share that

had her practically vibrating with excitement.

“I’ll get our food,” I said, gesturing for her to stay seated. “The usual?”

Aline nodded, her eyes bright and sparkling. She was small and delicate enough that it was common for her to be mistaken as younger than she was. When she was like this, she could’ve been a child on Christmas morning, waiting to open her presents. “Thanks. When you get back, I have something to tell you.”

I chuckled and shook my head as I went to get our meals. I loved when she was like this, so innocent and full of wonder. I thought there were some drawbacks to how much we’d protected and sheltered her, but then I’d see that look, and I’d remember that it was worth the occasional annoyance.

By the time I made it back to the table, she’d managed to shred three napkins and make a little pile in front of her. I didn’t comment as I set down half a dozen napkins with her spicy chicken sandwich. She’d never liked sitting still, and age hadn’t changed anything. She always said it would be one of her best qualities as a teacher, understanding what it was like to need movement of some kind.

“Did your class let out early?” I asked before taking a bite of an onion ring.

She looked confused for a moment. “What? Oh, right, I was here first.” She made a dismissive gesture. “Class was canceled. Dr. Worth ended up with food poisoning after his husband tried a new sushi recipe last night. He spent the night vomiting—”

I made a face. “Trying to eat here.”

She laughed. “Sorry.”

I finished my onion ring and washed it down with my soda, gesturing for her to keep talking. She wouldn’t be rude if she thought I really wanted to talk about why she’d arrived early, but I’d just wanted to make certain that she hadn’t forgotten about her class today, and that question had seemed like the politest way to get the answer. She had a bad habit of getting so engrossed in something that she missed simple things, like the passage of time.

“So, yes, class was canceled, and I was able to get here before you.” Aline took another bite of her sandwich, chewing hard. “I was able to utilize that extra time today to confirm a few details. I didn’t want to tell you until I’d made it official, but now I have.”

I racked my brains, trying to think of what she could possibly have been planning that I wouldn’t have noticed. Had she asked me about anything over the last couple weeks?

“I’m going to Iran!”

My jaw dropped, and my brain froze. I struggled to find the words to form all the questions running through my mind. Any of them, really. Fortunately, Aline didn’t seem to notice and kept talking.

“Professor Clark gave this great lecture two weeks ago about her experiences teaching English as a second language in foreign countries. She went with this amazing group called Neutral Ground. They put together people from all sorts of different fields, not just education. Doctors and nurses for first-aid work. Construction workers and engineers for building schools and hospitals and digging wells.”

The name sounded familiar, but I couldn’t recall any specifics, not when I was still staring at Aline and trying to figure out what the hell she was talking about.

“So, I spoke to Professor Clark and made a few calls, and it turns out that they were just putting together their team for a trip to Iran in October. One of the things they were looking for was someone with an elementary education focus to work with teaching children to speak English.”

She was serious, I realized. She actually thought she was going to go teach Iranian children this fall.

“With the extra time I had today, I finished filling out the paperwork and submitted it. All I need now is for it to be approved. Once that happens, I can get started on everything else.”

“You want to go to Iran to teach English.” I finally managed a sentence.

Aline nodded, her face practically glowing. “I’ve been thinking about where and when I wanted to start looking for a place to teach, and then I heard Dr. Clark’s lecture and realized that I have a unique opportunity to do some good. I can afford to put off finding a teaching position and take the trip in October while a lot of other people wouldn’t be able to do that.”

Dammit. I knew that look. It was the same look she’d had when she was ten and insisted on our parents letting her carry her science fair project on her own even after they’d explained that it was too heavy for her.

She’d stuck to her guns and tried to pick it up from the table by herself. She’d made it two steps before she’d lost her grip on it. If our parents hadn’t been right there, we would’ve had a huge mess on our hands. That hadn’t been the only incident where she’d dug in her heels and refused to budge. Sometimes, they’d ended well. Most of the time, they’d been a wash. A few had...*not* gone well.

Aline wasn’t going to give up on this idea. The best I could hope for was that her application would be rejected, and I’d be able to shift her focus to preparing her resumé and going through her top school choices rather than looking for another organization. My intuition, however, told me that I wouldn’t be that lucky. Which meant I needed a plan because, if Aline thought I’d let her go to Iran by herself, she was mistaken.

That was when it hit me. My only real option was to go with her.

Fuck.

“Does Neutral Ground hire interpreters?” I picked up another onion ring, even though I was no longer hungry. “If I went with you, we could work together on your lesson plans since I speak the language.”

Her expression brightened even more. “That’s a wonderful idea!” She picked up her phone. “I’ll send you the link.”

Maybe this would actually be for the best, I thought. It’d look good on my resumé, give me some practical language experience, and I’d be able to keep an eye on Aline. It wasn’t as if I’d had any specific employment opportunities I was working on at the moment. I could just shuffle my plans to adapt to this new after-graduation schedule.

I could handle that.

## Brody

I'd been away from the office for five days, the longest I'd ever been gone without actually leaving San Ramon. Having Adela here to handle everything had been such a relief, and I planned on getting her a token of that appreciation as soon as I figured out what would be big enough.

I didn't know how I would've been able to get through these past few days if I'd had to worry about Shannon's too. The flowers I'd brought for Adela this morning would be a nice start. Well, not really flowers. It was a cactus, but not because I'd grabbed the first potted plant I'd found. She liked cactuses.

The moment she saw me, she came around her desk and gave me a hug, nearly poking herself with the cactus I was carrying. It was times like this I had to acknowledge how rare our relationship was that, in this moment, neither of us had to even think about whether or not the other person could read something into the embrace. We were simply two people giving and receiving comfort. I needed simple right now.

When she stepped back, I held out the plant. "It's not even close to the thank you that you deserve for taking care of operations while I was gone."

"Thank you." She seemed genuinely pleased. "Unnecessary but appreciated. I just did my job."

I shook my head. "No, you did your job *and* my job."

She smiled and carried the cactus over to her desk. "Well, whatever I did is thanks to you anyway. You hired great people who did their jobs and never once slacked off or caused problems because the boss wasn't here."

"They're used to me being gone on business trips," I reminded her. "But you're right that they're great people. I do select excellent people to surround me."

She gave me the same look my sisters did when they knew I was teasing to deflect from something serious. Just like them, she didn't let me get away with it.

“How's your family?”

I shook my head. “I don't think there's a single word that can describe how we're doing.”

I headed into my office, gesturing for her to follow. The last few days had taken a lot out of me. I'd only been up for an hour or two today, but I was already exhausted. I waited until she sat in her usual place across from me to explain. She'd only met a few of my family members over the years we'd known each other, but we were close enough that I was going to tell her the whole story.

“Eoin and his unit were in a convoy when the vehicle he was in hit an IED. It was a total ambush. Shooting. Another explosion.” I ran my hand down my face. “One of the men killed in the ambush was Eoin's best friend. He and Leo were friends since they were kids. They enlisted together.”

“Oh, no.” Adela breathed out the words.

I hadn't been as close to Leo as my younger siblings, but I'd known him and his family. He'd spent a lot of time at our house, and his house had been one of the few places Eoin had always been allowed to go, no matter what trouble my brother had been in. Leo was a good kid and an even better man.

Had been.

I cleared my throat. “Eoin was shot in the shoulder and in the leg, but neither one did a lot of damage. He was close to the second explosion, though. We don't know if his body armor was faulty or if it'd been damaged by everything else that'd happened or if it was just how strong the explosion had been, but he ended up with a lot of shrapnel wounds.” I closed my eyes for a moment, collecting myself before I went on. It'd been too close. “One piece ended up only a centimeter or two from his heart. Some of the wounds are infected.”

Adela let out a gasp and put her hand over her mouth.

“He’ll survive,” I reassured her. “They flew him to Germany, and he’s on some serious antibiotics, but he’s out of danger. My parents called me this morning with an update.”

“They’ve talked to him?” Adela asked.

I shook my head. “They flew to Germany on Saturday. They’ve only been allowed to see him for a few minutes, and he’s been in and out of consciousness, but the doctors say he’ll be okay. How much physical therapy he’ll need or...” I swallowed hard, “or how bad his scars will be...” I shrugged, unable to even go there just yet.

I’d heard the hesitation in Da’s voice during that last bit, but I was glad he’d told me. At least I’d be able to prepare myself before I saw Eoin. Not because it would bring up memories of what’d happened to me, but because my own scars might make Eoin more self-conscious of his own. Especially since at least one of his would be far more visible than any of mine. Da said there’d been a deep cut down the side of Eoin’s face. The doctors said he’d been fortunate to not lose his eye and that nerve damage was still a possibility.

“If he struggles, I’m sure he’ll come to you to talk,” Adela said. “He knows he has someone who understands what it’s like to have a life-changing moment mark you.”

Since I did wear short sleeves to work on occasion, everyone who’d worked with me during the summer had seen some of the scars on my right arm. Thanks to a faulty valve five years ago, Adela had seen me without a shirt, so she knew that the ones on my arm weren’t the worst. But no matter how bad some of mine were, I could still hide them.

I didn’t do it because I was vain or embarrassed about them, but because I didn’t like telling the story about how I got them. It wasn’t a bad memory, exactly, but I didn’t like how people reacted to it. And my story had a happy ending.

When Eoin looked at his scars when people asked about them, he’d not only be uncomfortable with any “war hero” talk, but he’d also remember the people he’d lost. He’d have to remember that he survived when Leo didn’t. What I’d been through and how I looked wouldn’t make Eoin think that I knew how he felt because I didn’t. Not really.



“He’ll get through it,” Adela said. “He’s strong, and he’s got a lot of people to support him.”

I nodded. “You’re right.” I let out a sigh and leaned back in my chair. “It won’t be easy, but he’ll be okay.”

I really hoped I wasn’t lying to myself.

# Freedom

I'd checked out Neutral Ground and hadn't been able to find anything that I could use to convince Aline that she shouldn't go anywhere with that particular agency. Even after I'd volunteered to go with her, I'd held out hope that I could get her to withdraw her application and then convince her to wait to do any charity work until she had at least a couple years of real experience under her belt. It wasn't that I didn't believe what she wanted to do was worthwhile, but it just wasn't practical.

Danger was also a factor, but I knew my sister well enough to know danger wouldn't be a good excuse either. The best I could hope for with that reasoning was her choosing another country, but I doubted even that would happen. She had a way of looking at the world that made her believe that things would always find a way to work out. She'd say something along the lines of how she could teach anywhere in the U.S., whether she started looking right after graduation or after she returned from Iran in October.

How could I argue with someone who just wanted to do good?

I should have seen this coming. When the story of Malala Yousafzai had hit the news, Aline had been obsessed. After reading the book *I Am Malala*, Aline's desire to become a teacher had never wavered. Of course, the story was inspirational, and Malala was someone to be admired. I was proud of Aline for wanting to become an educator, but I hadn't considered that she would want to go anywhere dangerous with her degree.

In hindsight, it made complete sense. If it hadn't been a professor sharing an experience, it would've been a commercial or advertisement, someone bringing it up at a charity event. Granted, she might not have had the same flexibility with her schedule if she was working, but I had no doubt she would've found a way to make it happen.

Which meant I had to stick with my plan to go with her. I couldn't think of anything else.

“Freedom?” Dr. Ipres cut into my thoughts. “Are you all right?”

I frowned, trying to think of what I could’ve been doing to make her think something was wrong.

“You’ve seemed a little off the last couple days.” Dr. Ipres stood and stretched, her spine making all sorts of popping and cracking noises. “Is it graduation? Some people have difficulty adjusting to the idea of no longer being a student, especially those who are full-time straight through graduate school. And you even did summer semester classes, so it’s bound to take some adjustment.”

I sighed. “It is strange, thinking of not being here, but it’s a good sort of strange. Or it was, at least.”

“What changed?” She came around her desk and sat next to me in one of the ‘student’ chairs.

I could talk to her about this, I suddenly realized. She knew Aline fairly well through me but didn’t have an emotional investment to cloud her thinking. She’d be able to provide a logical sounding board, and I didn’t need to be worried that she’d freak out like my parents were going to do.

“Have you heard of the organization Neutral Ground?”

“They put together teams of educators, doctors, nurses, construction workers, that sort of thing, don’t they? Because they don’t claim a specific country, they can sometimes get into places where other groups can’t.”

I nodded. “Aline signed up for one of their trips.”

“Well, I know she wouldn’t have done it during her last semester. She can be a bit absent-minded, but not that much. What’s the problem then? Because your expression is saying that you have one.”

“It’s in October,” I said, “which isn’t exactly optimal when it comes to employment.”

“Especially for someone who’s going into education,” Dr. Ipres added. “Yes, that could cause some difficulties if she’s set on going.”

“It’s even more complicated than that,” I continued. “The one she’s registered for is in Iran.”

My mentor’s eyes widened. “That’s an...ambitious first choice. Did she say why she chose that particular country?”

“She basically asked for the first open slot for a teacher, and that was it.”

“That makes sense,” Dr. Ipres said. “Most educators would need to go during the June to September timeframe. How does she plan on scheduling around work? I’d think not too many places would be willing to let a teacher leave one month into the school year, especially since those trips are usually several weeks long.”

“That’s the best part.” I shook my head. “She doesn’t plan on applying for anything until after we get back.”

“We?” Dr. Ipres echoed. “Do you mean to say that you’re also going?”

The question surprised me. “Of course.”

“How was she able to sign you up as well? I would think that the final interview would need to be with you.”

“She didn’t sign me up,” I said. “But once I saw how determined she was, I knew it’d simply be easier to apply than waste time talking her out of it.”

“I thought you’d planned to have a position lined up before graduation.”

“I did.” I shrugged. “But there are things that can’t be planned for, like a stubborn little sister.”

Dr. Ipres studied me for a moment, her gaze so intent that I almost squirmed. “They’re her plans, Freedom.”

“What?” I didn’t get it.

“Going to Iran with Neutral Ground. Those are *her* plans. You aren’t required to make them yours.”

“It’s not like I can let her go alone.” This wasn’t the direction I’d thought this conversation would go.

“When she first arrived here, she was sixteen. Young for college and a bit naïve. She’s what, twenty-one? Twenty-two? Old enough to drink.”

“She’ll be twenty-two the week before we’re scheduled to leave. And she might be able to drink, but there are still things she won’t be old enough to do. Rent a car. Run for office.” I fought to keep my frustration out of my voice. “And she’s still naïve.”

“When she’s teaching, she’ll be expected to take care of an entire class of children on her own.” Dr. Ipres’s tone was gentle, and for some reason, that only increased my annoyance. “I understand worrying for someone who plans to go somewhere dangerous, but it’s still her choice.”

I shook my head. “She’s never lived on her own, never traveled on her own. Going to a dangerous country with a group of complete strangers should not be the way she starts.”

“She won’t be on her own,” Dr. Ipres pointed out. “And I’m sure Neutral Ground has rules in place to ensure the safety of their people. Aline isn’t rebellious, no matter how stubborn she can be. I’m sure she’ll do as she’s told.”

“I’d never be able to live with myself if I didn’t go and something happened to her,” I admitted the thought that had been haunting me. “Besides, it’ll give me good experience for my resumé.”

“But is it what you want?”

I shook my head. “It doesn’t matter. Besides, once we tell our parents, they’ll either freak out and convince her not to go, or they’ll immediately ask me if I’m going too. I’m hoping for the former, but if it’s the latter, I’ll at least be able to tell them that I’ve already made arrangements so that she and I will be traveling, rooming, and working together.”

Dr. Ipres looked like she wanted to say something more, but instead, she just gave me a small smile and sat back down at her desk. I returned to the test I was grading and let the silence between us stand. I wasn’t going to get upset with her when it was clear that she simply didn’t understand.

Aline needed someone to take care of her, and that was what my parents expected of me when they couldn’t do it. So, I’d go to Iran and adjust my

own path to ensure that Aline would be safe.

# Freedom

As much as I felt like I had to look out for my little sister, I also had to admit that the one thing I'd never had to worry about was Aline wanting to party. Over the years, we'd occasionally spent time with friends, but those weren't really 'parties' in the college sense of the word.

We weren't total homebodies who hated being around people or going places, but we tended to prefer smaller gatherings, quieter ones. Playing games, talking, eating good food, that sort of thing. If we had music on, it wasn't deafening. If anyone wanted to dance, they did, and those who didn't stayed where they were. No one was made to feel out-of-place or unwanted.

The harder our classes became, however, the less time we spent with the others. Now, most of them had graduated, and a few had gotten married. And though we would most likely have at least one get-together before graduation, this last semester would mostly be just Aline and me. Including during spring break.

"The weather's supposed to be gorgeous today," Aline said as she came into the kitchen. "Perfect for what we have planned."

"Blueberry or maple syrup?" I asked as I slid the pancakes off the pan and onto a plate. "Whichever you want, I'll take too."

She nodded. "Coffee or juice?"

"Already have my coffee, but thank you."

We didn't always have a home-cooked breakfast, but whenever we had the time, we liked to make it from scratch. Cooking was an activity our family did together quite often, and Aline and I had continued doing it when we'd moved in here. We worked well together in the kitchen. It was the one place where the two of us had no conflict, no sense of one doing more or less.

Whoever woke up first chose the meal and made it. The other set the table. Unless something was out of the ordinary, we tended to wake up within fifteen or twenty minutes of each other, no matter how quiet we tried to be. We'd just always been that close, that aware of each other.

"I heard that Nancy Browning was going to Vegas to get married this week," Aline said as she went about setting the table.

"Really?" I asked. "To whom?"

She shrugged. "That's what has everyone talking. No one knows."

I laughed. "Seriously? How is Nancy keeping that a secret? Better yet, *why* is she keeping him a secret?"

"I've heard a couple stories," Aline said with a grin. "One is that her fiancé is Professor McNamara's TA."

I turned from the pan. "Wait, the guy with the mohawk?"

"Apparently, he told Professor McNamara that he wasn't coming back after break because he'd hit the lottery." Aline lifted both of the plates from the counter and carried them to the table.

"And people think that's code for marrying Nancy Browning in Vegas?" I asked as I took my usual seat.

"It's not my favorite theory," she admitted. "Everyone seems to think that Nancy is coming back, which doesn't mesh with mohawk-guy's story."

"Excellent point." I chewed a bite and then pointed my fork at my sister. "Any theory of yours a particular favorite?"

"There is. Someone said they saw this hot guy with dimples hanging around campus a couple of times this year, and there've been rumors he's hooked up with someone or more than one someone at actual events, but no one's caught his name. Like some sort of reverse Cinderella thing."

My heart about stopped. She couldn't be talking about Brody. And she definitely couldn't be talking about the times Brody and I had...no.

Nope. Nope. Not possible.



There were always guys who came to university parties and other events, hoping to hook up with whoever they could find. Brody wasn't like that.

He might've treated his girlfriend like shit by cheating on her with me – if that was what even happened – and that meant he hadn't treated me well either, but he wasn't some asshole predator. I'd seen him around other women. He didn't have that look in his eyes, the look I'd seen in far too many others.

“Are you all right?” Aline's touch brought me out of my head more than her question did.

I smiled and nodded, hoping neither looked as forced as they felt. “Sorry, just trying to think if I'd heard any of these rumors myself.”

“Have you?”

“Not that I can think of.” At least that answer was honest.

I didn't necessarily share everything with Aline, but I did try not to directly lie to her. Brody made that difficult, and it hadn't gotten any easier just because he wasn't around. It had been a month since I'd last seen him, and I still couldn't keep him completely out of my head.

“There's one other story that I think is closest to the truth, but it's not nearly as fun.” Aline popped the last bite of pancake into her mouth. “Nancy's roommate told me that Nancy had some high school boyfriend who'd gone to MIT, and they'd decided to take a break. Both of them went home for Christmas and started talking again. That much is fact. The roommate thinks they decided that they didn't want to be apart anymore and decided to elope. I tend to agree that's the most likely scenario.”

“Why isn't that story a good one?” I asked, honestly curious. I agreed that reconnecting with an old flame made more sense than other ideas. Those sounded more like Hallmark movies.

“I don't know.” Aline's tone was thoughtful. “Maybe I just like the big stories. Ones that are...epic. Epic love stories.”

Aline hadn't ever really expressed much interest in love or romance, so that explanation was a bit of a surprise. “Really? You'd prefer something that

didn't make as much sense?"

"Sometimes," Aline said. "I mean, don't you wish...want...something that just..." She frowned, as if she couldn't quite think of exactly what she was trying to communicate. "Something that's too big for just an ordinary life."

As she stood to carry our dishes over to the sink, I watched her, wondering if she thought her life was ordinary in any way. She'd been a miracle baby who shouldn't have been conceived and who'd nearly died at birth, who'd been so early that doctors had warned our parents that she might have permanent developmental issues.

Instead of struggling mentally, however, she'd excelled. A full-blown genius who'd graduated high school and went straight to Stanford University by the age of sixteen.

She was far from ordinary.

"I think that's one of the reasons I'm so excited about us going to Iran," Aline said. "Leaving this safe little bubble where I've spent my entire life and making a real difference in this world."

I loved her, and I loved her heart, but every time she talked about the October trip, I kept hearing my conversation with Dr. Ipres where she said that Aline going didn't mean I needed to go too. All the reasons I'd given as to why that wasn't a possibility had been valid then and remained valid now.

But I still kept thinking about it. About the possibility of not having to plan my future around my sister's choices. My parents had never actually *told* me that was what I had to do, and Aline had never said anything that indicated she consciously expected it of me.

But everyone just made those assumptions, and I'd lived this way almost from the moment Aline had been born. And it wasn't as if I was being mistreated by my family. I loved them and had no doubts about their love for me.

And wasn't putting others' needs above my own the very definition of love?

How could I tell them that I wasn't sure I wanted to be my sister's protector anymore?

Forty-Nine

# Brody

“You’ve been home for a single day, and you already have a date for Sunday evening?” I asked.

Sean shrugged. “It would’ve been for tonight if we weren’t going out with Cory and Fury.”

I looked over at him as I turned down the street Cory’s building was on. “Did you have one last night too?”

“I don’t kiss and tell.”

“Son of a bitch.”

He grinned at me, and I just shook my head. All of my siblings were good-looking, and Sean was certainly no exception. He and Xander were identical, and the two of them had been the most popular people in their class, pretty much from kindergarten to graduation. They probably would’ve been just as popular on their own – their careers proved that – but together, they’d garnered more attention than the rest of us ever had.

“You can’t be jealous,” Sean said as I pulled into the building’s parking lot. “It’s not like you have a hard time finding dates.”

Clear blue eyes flashed into my mind, and I pushed them away.

“Some of us work for a living,” I said. “We can’t all get paid just to run our mouths.”

He laughed, following me into Cory’s building. “Says the brother who gets paid to drink beer and whiskey.”

“Make,” I corrected. “I make it.”

“And you drink it.”

“Well, yes, but someone has to taste-test.” I held up the six-pack I’d brought with me. “At least I share.”

“Aren’t we going to a bar?” Sean asked as he knocked on Cory’s door. “Why’d you bring your own?”

“Because Shannon’s makes superior beer.”

Cory opened the door and motioned for us to come inside. “Fury’s running late, so he’s going to meet us there.”

“I thought the best part of having your own business was that you got to set your own hours,” Sean said.

“Says the guy who only works a couple hours a few days a week.”

“Give him a break, Cory,” I jumped in. “We all know who doesn’t work the hardest in the family. We don’t need to beat him over the head with it.”

Sean glared at both of us. “You know I write my own lectures, right? And I did all the writing for my book too. No ghostwriter. Just me.”

“I have to admit,” I said, “I did like seeing your name on the *New York Times* Best Seller list for thirteen weeks.”

“Number one for four weeks,” Cory said.

We were family, so of course, we were going to mess with each other, but we were all proud of each other’s accomplishments.

“Put the beer in the fridge,” Cory gestured toward the kitchen. “I just need to put on my shoes.”

By the time I’d done as he asked, Cory was ready, and the three of us headed downstairs to get the cab Cory had called. He had a car but getting a cab meant none of us had to worry about watching how much we drank. I didn’t think any of us planned to get drunk, but no matter the number of stupid decisions any of us had made in our lives, driving under the influence had never been one of them. Even the years Eoin had seemed to be bent on self-destruction, he’d never put others in danger.

The thought of Eoin took away some of my excitement at the night out with my other brothers, but he wouldn't have wanted me to ruin the night because I felt guilty for being here while he was in the hospital. When he came home, we'd take him out too.

When we arrived at the bar, I was surprised to see how close to the Stanford campus we were. And surprised that my heart immediately began to beat faster at the thought of Freedom possibly being here too.

Shit.

I didn't want to think about her tonight. She was the last thing I wanted on my mind.

And she was the reason I'd been staying away from the university since that last night I'd seen her. She hadn't responded to my text about picking up Paris at the hospital, and that had been that. I'd moved on. *Was* moving on.

When we walked inside, we found Fury waiting, but he assured us he hadn't been there long. Since he'd come straight from the office, he still wore a dress shirt and his suit pants, but he'd left off the tie and jacket. With the sleeves rolled up and the top button undone, he looked less like the intense businessman who'd started a ground-breaking company and more like a graduate student or TA.

He was a month younger than me, but he'd always seemed so much older, even when we were kids. He and his biological brother, Blaze, had been nine and eleven when both of their parents had been killed in a car accident. Their sister, Rose, had only been a year old, and even though they'd come straight to us since Theresa had already possessed all the paperwork for guardianship, they'd struggled with letting their aunt take care of their sister. I knew Austin and Alec both had felt similar responsibilities for their younger siblings – I had too to some extent – but we'd all had at least one parent. The Gracens had lost both at the same time.

After we'd all gotten drinks, Fury led the way to a booth in a back corner. He was the tallest of the four of us and had the solid muscle that made people think he'd played football or was a firefighter or something like that, so people got out of his way without him needing to say a word. Sean might've been the most charismatic of my siblings, but Fury was a force to be

reckoned with.

“Mr. Jenkins had a problem with the latest numbers for the Reprised account.” Fury directed his statement to Cory. “I explained to him what it meant for it to plateau, and he seemed to accept it, but we both know he’ll probably call on Monday and insist we both meet with him to discuss the next step.”

“I really wish people would read the contracts they’re signing.” Cory sighed. “We could save so much time and energy.”

I held up my hand. “No shop talk.”

“So, you don’t want to tell us how things are going with Shannon’s?” Sean asked with a grin. “I’ve heard rumors that you’ve gotten into some pretty exclusive clubs. Exclusive and...different.”

“Who told you that? London or Carson?” I took a sip of my beer and grimaced. Maybe I should do some business here too. This was awful.

“Carson,” Sean said. He looked at Cory. “Did he tell you the name? I can’t remember it.”

“Club Privé.” Cory rolled his glass between his palms, an anxious tick of his that I hadn’t seen in a while. Either he was stressed about something or had gotten better at hiding his nervous gestures.

“Club Privé?” Fury’s eyebrows shot up. “When I was at the New York office last year, I heard a couple employees talking about it. It’s a sex club, right?”

“Sort of.” I explained what I’d seen there and then filled them in about Black Masque too.

“Damn.” Sean let out a low whistle. “And you say I have an easy job. I think you win on this one.”

“You said Carson knows the owners of the one in New York?” Fury asked.

“London too,” I said. “But I don’t think she knows what sort of club it is.”

“She better not.” Sean’s expression darkened. “I’d beat the shit out of any guy who took her there.”

I snorted. “Says the guy who’d probably go in a minute if he got the chance.”

The way Sean’s moss green eyes lit up told me his answer better than any words would have.

“Can I use your name if I look into membership in New York?” Fury asked, his expression contemplative. “It sounds like something I might enjoy.”

Considering Fury’s personality, his interest didn’t surprise me. In some ways, Gavin Manning reminded me of him.

“Sure.” I took another drink and made a face. “This shit should be illegal.”

“Does that mean you want something different?”

I hadn’t heard the waitress approach. “Sorry.” I gave her my most charming smile. “I can’t help but be a critic. I make the stuff.” I held up my drink. “Not this stuff, though. This is awful.”

“Well, that’s what happens when you order what’s on tap at the end of spring break.” She grinned at me. “Why waste the good stuff when half of our patrons have been shit-faced all week?”

Right. Spring break.

“You get a lot of business from Stanford?” It was a work question. Nothing personal at all.

“We usually get more of the graduate students and TAs here,” she said. “I take it you’re not either of those.”

“We’re not.” Sean leaned forward and flashed the smile that gotten him in – and out – of a lot of trouble. “I’m Sean McCrae. Maybe you’ve heard of me.”

The woman gave him an appreciative look, clearly liking what she saw, but the smirk on her face said she wasn’t going to make it easy for him. Smart woman.

“Should I have? Are you...important?”

I chuckled as Sean’s face lit up. I teased him that what he did was easy, but I knew he worked just as hard as the rest of us. Some of it was just good work ethic, but he also had something that most of the rest of us had a lot of too: a

highly competitive nature. The only person who loved a challenge more than Sean was his twin, Xander. It was one of the reasons Xander was so good at what he did too.

“You have no idea.” He winked at her. “Do you have a break coming up? We could find a private spot. I’d be happy to show you a thing or two.”

“I’ll keep that under advisement, important boy.” She winked back and then walked away, putting a little extra swing in her hips.

“She didn’t take our drink order,” Cory said suddenly. We all turned to look at him. The tips of his ears were red, and he shrugged. “Well, she didn’t.”

Sean burst out laughing and motioned for me to get out of the booth. “Who wants another?”

Cory and Fury both did, but I wasn’t going to drink another one of these shitty beers. “Get me a Rusty Nail. I might as well find out if they can make a decent scotch-based drink.”

Sean nodded and headed toward the bar.

“You know he’s going to be a while, right?” I asked. “If he strikes out with the waitress, he’ll find someone else to flirt with.”

“The kid comes to see us and spends all his time chatting up women.” Fury shook his head, but he was grinning. “Yeah, he’s definitely our brother.”

“Remember that summer we went to the Independence Day fair?” I asked. “The one where you, me, and Rome decided to make a bet to see how many phone numbers we could get?”

“Damn.” Fury ran his hand down his face. “I haven’t thought about that in years.”

“You were so pissed at Rome when he won.” I laughed as I pictured the expression on Fury’s face back then.

“I still say he cheated,” Fury said.

“How did he cheat?” Cory asked. “And how have I never heard about this bet?”



“Half of his numbers were from old women,” Fury explained.

“Not ‘old,’” I pointed out. “They were in their twenties.”

“Their late twenties,” Fury corrected. “And for us back then, that was old. We were only, what, sixteen? Seventeen?”

“Yes, but it wasn’t like any of us actually looked like we were that young. Remember those two college girls who freaked out when they started flirting with us and found out our real ages?” I reminded him.

“Right. I’d forgotten about them.” Fury picked up a handful of peanuts from the bowl on the table and began popping them into his mouth one at a time.

“Liz and Amie,” I said.

Fury gave me a surprised look. “You remember their names?”

“I may have run into them again a couple years later.” I grinned. “But I don’t kiss and tell.”

Unsurprisingly, Fury felt the need to one-up me and launched into a story about his first spring break here at Stanford. I didn’t know if it was a tale Cory had heard before, but he sat back in his seat and listened. The two of them had always had a unique relationship. Fury played as hard as he worked, and based on his interest in Club Privé, that was even harder than I’d realized. Cory played everything close to the chest, working his ass off but keeping to himself whatever he did to relax. If he actually relaxed at all.

I had my doubts.

Though I wasn’t really one to talk lately. I was doing my damndest to enjoy myself, and on one level, I was. I liked being with my brothers, drinking, telling stories, laughing. But even as I listened to Fury, I couldn’t help looking around the room, glancing at the door every time I saw it open out of the corner of my eye. Searching for a familiar face.

And every time the face wasn’t hers, I wondered if she’d gone somewhere for spring break, her and her sister. Were they drinking and dancing and flirting? Had she fallen into bed with someone? Found someone else to make her scream?

I took half my Rusty Nail in one gulp as soon as Sean set it down in front of me.

Fuck.

So much for moving on.

\* \* \*

“Everything okay?”

Cory’s question snapped me back to reality, and judging by the expression on his face, it hadn’t been the first time he’d asked it.

“Sorry. What’d you say?”

“I asked if everything was okay.” Cory frowned at me. He’d always been on the quiet, serious side like Eoin, but unlike our younger brother, Cory wasn’t a brooding sort of quiet. He saw a lot more than any of us realized because he rarely turned inward.

“Sure. Why?” I smiled a hard, plastic smile and hoped he couldn’t see through it.

“You’ve just been...subdued.” He shrugged. “I thought maybe you were worried about Da and Eoin flying back.”

Guilt flooded me. I hadn’t been thinking about them at all. My brothers and I had talked a bit about it earlier since Eoin had been discharged yesterday – at least yesterday in our time zone – and Da had gone back to Germany so he could fly home with Eoin.

We’d compared notes on how our brother was doing and what we thought he’d do next, but since none of us really knew what he was thinking, we’d focused on the positive, and the conversation hadn’t been as heavy as it could have been.

“Our parents will be glad to have him close to home,” Cory said. “But I do wonder how pissed he’s going to be when he finds out Da pulled strings to get him stationed nearby.”

I chuckled. “As soon as Mom starts dropping off home-cooked meals, he won’t be complaining.”

Cory smiled. “That’s true.”

“She came with her roommate,” Sean announced as he dropped back into the seat next to me. “Who wants to be my wingman and take home the brunette?”

“No, thanks.” The refusal was out of my mouth before I’d consciously decided to turn him down. At Sean’s surprised expression, I gave a vague excuse and hoped he wouldn’t press the issue. “Not really in the mood for company.”

“Cory?” Sean turned to our brother, but not before I’d seen the curiosity on Sean’s face.

Shit. If he remembered this conversation tomorrow, I’d end up with questions the entire drive back to San Ramon.

“I have an early day tomorrow,” Cory said before he finished off his drink. “In fact, I think I should call it a night.”

“Tomorrow’s Saturday,” Sean pointed out.

“You’re right, Brody,” Cory said with a sigh, “he really doesn’t understand what it’s like to actually work for a living.”

“Funny, asshole.” Sean punched Cory’s shoulder. “I guess that means I get to find out if they’re interested in a threesome.”

The grin on his face said that was hardly something he minded.

“You could ask Fury,” I pointed out.

“Nope. He’s already got one.” Sean pointed over to where Fury was standing with a tall redhead, his mouth by her ear. Whatever he was saying, she appeared to like.

As Sean went back to his brunette with a new goal in mind, Cory slid out of the booth. “Want to share a cab, or was there someone else you had your eye on?”

I shook my head. “No, I think I want to take a walk, clear my head a bit.”

“All right.” Cory seemed concerned, but he didn’t push the issue. “You have the extra key?”

“In my pocket,” I said. “I’ll walk out with you, though. If Sean sees me alone, he might try to talk me into going with the roommate if the threesome idea doesn’t fly.”

Cory and I said goodbye to our brothers and then left. The moment I stepped outside, I could smell the coming rain, the scent that only came with spring. A promise of growth and good things to come. I kept those thoughts to myself as Cory flagged a cab and headed back to his place. Something had me more introspective and tense than usual. Despite what my family thought, I wasn’t always laid-back and at ease. I just hid stress really well.

This area was well-lit, and the night was the warmest so far this spring, which meant I wasn’t the only one out walking tonight, but I was the only one alone. Everyone else was in pairs and groups, laughing and talking. Some of them were heading toward the bar, others were going in the direction of the campus, and that was where I found myself heading too.

I wasn’t looking for anyone or going to a specific place, just walking. Listening without really listening to the conversations around me. Enjoying the weather and the aftereffects of the two Rusty Nails I’d consumed.

Their scotch wasn’t quite as good as what I planned to make, but it was a hell of a lot better than their on-tap beer. I wasn’t drunk, but it had given me a pleasant buzz, taking the edge off just enough for me to be able to relax. I hadn’t realized how much stress I’d been holding in until it’d been muted, and I couldn’t keep going on like that. I needed to figure out how to go back to the way I had been before.

Before I’d started looking for her everywhere. Thinking about her. Fantasizing about her. Wanting her.

I sighed as a glimpse of blonde hair at the end of the sidewalk appeared ahead.

Dammit. I needed to stop seeing her every—

I froze as the blonde came around the bend, and I saw that she wasn't just someone who'd made me think about Freedom.

She was Freedom.

“Brody.” She stopped as her gaze met mine. “What are you doing here?”

It was a legitimate question, and she didn't sound annoyed, but she also didn't exactly sound glad to see me either. Her expression was more...blank than anything else. I was tempted to tell her that it was none of her business why I was there. She hadn't even bothered to respond to my last text when I'd explained why I'd had to leave. I didn't owe her anything.

All of this ran through my mind in a matter of seconds, and then none of it mattered at all because I saw something else in her eyes. Something was wrong.

“Are you okay?” I asked as I closed the distance between us. I didn't touch her, but the need to comfort her was stronger than any of the negative feelings or thoughts I had toward her.

“Yeah,” she started. Then she stopped and shook her head. “Not really. My sister and I just came back today. We've been in L.A. since Tuesday.”

The way she said it made me think that it hadn't been a vacation-type trip. I didn't push, deciding to let her make the choice to tell me more. Something felt different, and I wanted to see how it played out.

“Our dad had a heart attack.”

“Oh, shit. I'm sorry.” Had I misread her silence? If her father had been having health issues for a while, I would've had to be a complete asshole to be annoyed that I hadn't heard from her. Now, I was really glad I hadn't shot off an angry text after not hearing from her in a couple days.

“Thanks.” She gave me a small smile. “He's okay. Well, as okay as he can be after having a triple bypass. He made it through the surgery, and the doctors

think he'll make a full recovery, but it won't be easy."

"I'm glad to hear he's recovering." I couldn't stop myself this time and reached out to put my hand on her arm. "How are you?"

"Okay, I guess." The corners of her eyes tightened, and she pulled her arm away from me. "How's your girlfriend?"

I let my hand fall back to my side and didn't try to touch her again, but that was all secondary as her question registered. "My what?"

"Your girlfriend." All the vulnerability on her face disappeared. "Paris? She came to the art exhibit?"

"Paris? She's not my girlfriend. She's my sister." A suspicion started to take shape as I carefully watched her every expression.

"Her last name's Carideo." Freedom folded her arms. "Someone at the exhibit told me, and the two of you look nothing alike. Try again."

And now I was almost positive I knew what'd happened between us.

"Stepsister. I have a huge, blended family," I explained. "My stepmother is Theresa Carideo. She and my father married when I was a kid. Theresa's kids all kept their biological father's last name."

"And Paris is one of them?" She looked skeptical, but I could see a shadow of hope in her eyes, and that gave me hope.

"Austin, Rome, Paris, and Aspen." I listed my stepsiblings. "My family's confusing, and we don't always clarify things when we talk about them because we really don't think about it." I met Freedom's gaze so she could see the truth in my eyes. "I swear to you, Paris is my little sister. I don't have a girlfriend, fiancée, or wife. No significant other, partner, or lover." I took a breath and decided to add another confession and put myself on the line. "And I haven't been with anyone but you since New Year's Eve."

Fifty

# Freedom

Paris Carideo was his stepsister. Not his girlfriend.

I'd been wrong. Both times.

Which meant the rest of what he'd said was probably true too. He really had taken that call because he'd needed to pick up his sister at the hospital.

He hadn't been the asshole. *I* had.

Dammit.

If nothing else, I owed him an apology for ghosting him. "I'm sorry I didn't text you back. I heard you say her name and remembered seeing you with her at the art exhibit. I made an assumption rather than letting you explain, and I was wrong."

"Will it help if I say that's not the first time it's happened?" He gave me that charming smile that showed off his dimples. "Paris is the most...exuberant of my sisters, so it's usually her, but we've all had people mistaking us for romantic partners rather than siblings."

"That does make me feel a bit better," I said honestly.

Well, honestly, for the most part, anyway. I was more than a 'bit' relieved.

"Thank you for apologizing for the mistake," he said. "Most people don't bother. I had one girl in high school tell me that I needed to tell Paris to stop hugging her brothers in public because people might get the wrong idea of what we were to each other."

"Please tell me you told her to go fuck herself." The indignation I had on his behalf bothered me, but not enough that I curtailed what I wanted to say.

He chuckled, and the sound slid over my skin like a caress. The memory of his touch twisted arousal in my belly, and I had to force my body not to tense.

When I'd thought he was a cheating ass, I'd been able to keep my attraction at bay, reminding myself that men couldn't be trusted, not really. Now that I knew I'd been the one in the wrong, I'd lost my defenses against him.

"Not in those exact words, but I made myself clear. Paris wasn't so subtle." He smiled, clearly proud. "My brothers and I weren't the only ones people had to watch out for when they went after one of us."

I could hear his love for his sister in his voice, and I completely understood it. This was a man who believed in family, not just his own, but as a concept. Beyond blood and DNA. Beyond legalities. He was someone who'd go to the ends of the earth for someone he saw as his.

I wasn't his. That wasn't how we were. And it wasn't what either of us wanted. But maybe we could have *something*.

I opened my mouth to make a suggestion that would lead us toward being naked in a bed, but then something in his eyes caught my attention. Not in them, I realized. Around them. He looked tired. Worn. He looked how I felt.

"Are you okay?" I asked. "No offense, but you look how I feel."

Some of the shine went out of his smile. "No offense taken. It's been a rough few weeks for my family too. My younger brother's a soldier, and he was caught in an ambush last month."

I couldn't stop myself from sucking in a breath. I hadn't really been thinking of anything specific he was going to say, but this was beyond unexpected.

"He survived, but he was just discharged today." Brody rubbed the back of his neck. "He's expected to make a full recovery, but he'll have scars." His hand dropped to his chest, where one of his scars was. "That's the physical side of the situation, but who knows where he is mentally."

I reached for his hand automatically, wanting to give him some of the comfort he'd given me just a few minutes ago when I'd told him about my father. My dad's heart attack was still fresh, and he had a long recovery ahead of him, with plenty of lifestyle changes, but what Eoin's family had gone through with his brother...I couldn't imagine it. There weren't any words I could think of to convey the sympathy I felt for him right now. Maybe, if we were in a relationship, I'd have been able to find the right



words, but we weren't like that.

I did know one thing that would help both of us, though, and it was something I could offer without complicating things between us.

"We've both had some serious stress lately." I kept my hold on his hand and stepped closer to him. "And we already know we de-stress well together."

Heat flared in his eyes. "We do."

"Hotel room?"

"No, but I have a guest room at my brother's place, and he won't mind." He turned his hand to lace his fingers between mine. "Trust me."

Heat flowed from where our hands touched, traveling up my arm and through the rest of me. My stomach clenched. How could I still want him this much?

That was a question I didn't want to answer, let alone knew how to answer. So, I said the only thing I could.

"Let's go."

The ride to the Sharon Green Apartments was a quiet one, but it only served to heighten the electricity between us. By the time we made it to the elevator, the air around us was practically buzzing. I breathed a sigh of relief when Brody's brother didn't meet us at the door. If we could get to a room without being seen, it'd make things a lot easier. The brother lived in Palo Alto, which meant I might eventually run into him, if I hadn't already. Better to avoid a possible awkward moment.

"This way." Brody wasn't whispering, but his voice was quiet enough for me to figure out that his brother was probably here but sleeping.

That worked for me.

I followed Brody down a dim hallway and then through a door. He turned on a lamp, giving us enough light to see but not enough to be harsh. I had a moment to realize how nice and spacious the room was before Brody caught my face between his hands, and his mouth came crashing down on mine.

For a minute, I yielded to the kiss, let him take control, let him be in charge. The physical sensation of his body pressed against me only added to the surprising bliss of not having to think.

A hand moved to my hair, fisted in it, twisted. I gasped, and he took the opportunity to plunge his tongue into my mouth. My hands moved under the back of his shirt, and I ran my nails along his spine, reveling in the low growl that came from his throat. As I sank my teeth into his bottom lip, the control between us shifted.

He was taller and stronger than me, but I was far from small, and I caught him off-guard as I moved him backward. We made it a few steps, our mouths fused together, and then he turned us, leaned into me, fighting for control again. I grabbed his shirt, tugged at it until he had to pull back to get it off.

The moment his torso was bare, I ran my hands over his firm muscles, tracing the lines I'd thought I'd forgotten. I wasn't an art connoisseur, but I knew what was beautiful, and his body was definitely a work of art. When I reached his jeans, I hooked my fingers into the belt loops and used them to pull him to me again.

“What do you want?” he asked. “Slow? Fast?” He tugged on my hair. “What do you need to de-stress?”

He moved one hand to cup my breast, thumb moving over my shirt for a moment before he squeezed. Fingers traced down my jaw with a feather-light touch.

“Do you want teeth? A bite or two?” He traced my bottom lip with the tip of his finger. “A little pain to go with your pleasure? Want me to go down on you? Make you come on my fingers? Tease you until you beg for me to take you? Bring you to orgasm so fast that it hurts?”

His eyes had darkened to that ocean-shade of blue-green, sharp intelligence telling me that he was taking note of every change in breathing, every tensing of my muscles, everything he could use to figure out for himself just how turned on I was by each suggestion.

“Come on, Freedom. Tell me what you want, and I'll give it to you. Make us both forget everything but how good we make each other feel.”

Well, damn. How was I supposed to say anything but what I wanted more than anything else?

“Fuck me.” I tightened my grip on his belt loops. “Forwards, sideways, upside-down. Just fuck me until I can’t think straight.”

“Your wish is my command.” A wicked smile curved his mouth. “Now, strip.”

It was like a switch in my head turned. I’d given him the instructions, and now I could stop thinking, stop being in charge. For once, someone else would take the responsibility, and I could simply exist.

He didn’t say a word as I undressed, simply stuck his thumbs in his jeans pockets and watched. The heat from his gaze was enough to make me flush from head to toe, but I wanted more. This need for him was visceral and heavy, a weight that surprised me but didn’t turn me off. If anything, it made my body feel more alive.

When my clothes were in a neat pile on the floor, he finally spoke. “Bend over and put your hands on the bed.”

I did as he said, looking over my shoulder at him once I was in position. He came up behind me and ran his hands down my back and over my ass. He gave my cheeks a squeeze before sliding his hands around to move back up to my breasts. I caught my breath as he lightly pinched my nipples, and then I let out a small cry when he did it again, harder.

He paused, waiting for me to protest, but when I didn’t, he went back to what he’d been doing. A roll and twist, tug and pinch, each one adding to the pressure building inside me. A little voice in my head wanted to analyze everything, but I ignored it. Instead, I closed my eyes, let my head fall forward, and concentrated on the slight friction and the small bites of pain.

I felt him shift but didn’t look to see what he was doing. His fingers still worked their magic, and I wasn’t going to be bothered with anything else.

Until I felt the lightest touch on my butt. A brush of lips against one cheek and then the other, followed by a nip of teeth that sent a shiver up my spine. The next bite was harder, almost painful, but the only sound I could make was a moan of pleasure.

“Do you like that?”

I nodded, not trusting my ability to actually use words at the moment.

He did it again, and I had the fleeting thought that I might end up with bruises that could make sitting uncomfortable tomorrow. Then he was moving my legs farther apart, and all I cared about was what came next.

I let out a sigh as he used the tip of his tongue to trace the sensitive flesh, the touch almost too light. He'd said something about teasing me until I begged, and now, I realized that he could do it. He could bring me to the edge of release and deny me, keep it just out of reach until I had no choice but to beg him...or leave.

Fortunately, I didn't have to make that decision because he changed tactics, sliding his tongue over my clitoris with firm, short strokes. I was vaguely aware that the angle of his neck must've been uncomfortable at the very least, but he wasn't complaining, and I wasn't about to ask him to stop.

My hands curled into fists, every muscle in my body tensing as each new pass sent out another pleasurable wave washing over me and through me. Each one nudged me a little higher, a little closer, and then, suddenly, I was there. His hands tightened on my thighs as I came apart, a reminder that he was there to hold me together.

He'd risen to his feet by the time my brain had regained the ability to function properly, and now he stroked my back and ass in an almost proprietary gesture that would have bothered me under other circumstances. Right now, however, it was okay.

“If you want me to stop, tell me.”

I didn't need to look at him to know that he wanted to keep going. I could feel his desire, his need, in the way he touched me, the rough quality of his voice. But I knew he would walk away if I asked him to.

“Don't you dare stop.” The words came out much stronger than I'd thought they would.

Point for me.

He laughed, and I had to bite my lip to keep from moaning just at that sound. It should've been illegal for someone's voice to be that sexy, especially since I knew it wasn't something he practiced. He didn't need to. The man practically breathed sensuality.

"I'm going to fulfill the promise I made you." He squeezed my ass. "No more thinking. No more stress."

When I felt his cock brush against the inside of my thigh, I realized he'd undressed and put on a condom at some point. I'd lost a little more time than I'd first thought.

"If I'm too rough, tell me."

I did look at him now, letting myself enjoy the view for a moment before saying, "I'm not a china doll. I won't break."

I'd never truly understood what it meant for someone's eyes to smolder until that very moment. There was no other way to describe how those blue-green depths looked as they locked with mine. We held each other's gazes, but I couldn't say for how long. Seconds. Hours.

Then he moved, and the spell was broken.

No, not broken, just changed. Whatever magic was working between the two of us exploded the moment he buried himself inside me. Each thrust remade it, created something so strong and intense that my body physically shook. It was too much to hold in, and I cried out.

Too many emotions and sensations fought for dominance for me to be able to process all of them, or any of them, for that matter. His hands moved over my body, up to my hair, down to my breasts, between my legs, each touch setting me on fire. I burned, and he did what he'd vowed. He made me forget everything but the white-hot heat that promised precious oblivion.

"Almost there." He yanked my body up, his chest to my back. When he pressed his mouth to the side of my neck, I tilted my head to make it easier for him. "I want you to come, Freedom. Scream my name. Scream for me, so I know you're not thinkin' of anyone else."

His accent was showing itself, and I felt a stab of pride that I could affect him that much.

“Now.” It was a command. “Come for me. Now!”

At the last word, he bit down on the place my shoulder and neck met, the shock jarring me into climax. I could do nothing but what he’d asked. I screamed his name and didn’t care if his brother heard me. Didn’t care that the rush of emotion that came with my orgasm was far more serious than I’d ever let myself imagine.

He drove into me twice more, and then his body stiffened. He groaned my name, his arms tightening around me as he kept us together, riding out our pleasure almost as if we were one being. We’d accomplished what we’d come here to do. Forget everything that’d happened. Forget everything but each other.

My mind was wonderfully blank as we slumped onto the bed, and I let him stay wrapped around me, enjoying the peaceful quiet. The feel of his body curled around mine. His breathing becoming more and more even. The scent of him and us permeated the air.

But it couldn’t last.

With the receding pleasure came the rushing forward of all the things we’d put aside. All the things I now felt that I didn’t want to feel. Things I hadn’t wanted to acknowledge. Things that could ruin everything if I gave them reign.

So, despite how badly I wanted to stay, I untangled myself from his arms and sat up. “That was amazing.”

“It was.” His fingers traced a pattern on my bare hip. “Give me a couple minutes, and I can try to top it.”

I smiled, trying to only let the good shine through. “I don’t want to overstay my welcome, and since this is your brother’s place, I think I’d better get going.”

I was off the bed and pulling together my clothes before he could argue. But he didn’t argue. He simply pulled on his pants and asked if I wanted him to

call me a cab.

I said no, hoping he'd just let me leave, because the longer I was around him, the more I wanted to stay. I didn't know if he sensed what I was feeling or if he was simply being a gentleman, but he walked me down to the lobby and waited until I got into a cab before he walked away, all without saying a word.

Dammit all to hell.

I should've shut him down the moment he'd approached me on New Year's Eve. What was happening between us wouldn't lead anywhere good.

It never did.

**Brody and Freedom's story continues in *Perfect Blend (The Scottish Billionaires book 7)*.**

# The Scottish Billionaires Reading order

*Alec's Story:*

[Prequel](#)

- [1. Off Limits](#)
- [2. Breaking Rules](#)
- [3. Mending Fate](#)

*Eoin's Story:*

- [1. Strangers in Love](#)
- [2. Dangers of Love](#)

*Brody's Story:*

1. Single Malt
2. Perfect Blend



# Office romances by M. S. Parker

The Boss

The Dom

The Master

[Chasing Perfection](#)

[Unlawful Attraction](#)

[A Legal Affair](#)

[The Pleasure Series](#)

[Serving HIM](#)

[The Billionaire's Muse](#)

[Bound](#)

[One Night Only](#)

[Damage Control](#)

[Pure Lust Box Set](#)