


USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
M.S. PARKER

A woman with long, dark, wavy hair is shown from the chest up. She is wearing a black corset with intricate gold filigree patterns on the front. Her hands are positioned on her chest, holding a black whip. The background is a vibrant red, draped fabric. The overall aesthetic is classic and sensual.

TAKE ME
SIR

*"I wasn't sure how it happened but accidentally
I became his Sub."*

A decorative gold filigree element, matching the one on the corset, is centered at the bottom of the page.

TAKE ME, SIR

The Billionaire's Sub 3

M. S. PARKER

Belmonte Publishing, LLC

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BOOK DESCRIPTION

When a chance meeting brings together twenty-two year-old Kyndall Letlow, and London-born billionaire Dean Stokes, both claim that they're only looking for a one-night stand. Fate, however, has something else in mind. Unable to stay away from each other, Kyndall and Dean struggle to overcome family disapproval and a secret that could put everyone at risk.

*Don't miss out on the much-anticipated sequel to M.S. Parker's steamy **Billionaire's Sub and Make Me Yours.***

Chapter One

KYNDALL

Many people associates all of California with the famous southern cities, Los Angeles and San Diego, and they don't realize how completely different the northern part of the state is. Like how much damn hotter the summers are in LA than in the northern part of the state. It was the last weekend in June, and the temperature was at a record high, making me miss the East Coast even more.

If Cambridge, Massachusetts was as different from the Northern California town where I'd grown up as night from day, then LA would be a whole other planet by comparison. Not that I'd seen much of the city in the short time I'd been here. I flew in three days ago, and it'd been all wedding, all the time, from the moment my brother picked me up at the airport.

I sighed as I sipped at the expensive glass of champagne I'd snagged from one of the caterers as they'd rushed around, trying to get food and drinks to everyone in a hurry. I was just trying to stay out of the way and avoid awkward questions from my parents. Fortunately, the chaos of my brother's wedding was doing a lot to help that.

My big brother was married. And a father. I was still trying to wrap my head around it all.

I looked toward the table where Dalton and his wife, Juliette, were talking to her parents. Her mother looked anxious, and I couldn't say that I blamed her. The excitement of the day hadn't only been about Dalton and Juliette finally tying the knot. Juliette's little sister, Hanna, had been almost as much the center of attention as the bride. A week overdue, I'd heard her talking to my sister, Lia, about being induced tomorrow. That hadn't happened though.

Instead, as everyone had been standing to applaud at the end of the ceremony, Hanna's water had broken.

Hence the catering staff rushing around to get everyone fed so they could head over to the hospital. Well, Juliette's family anyway. My family would say their goodbyes and go back home tonight. Everyone but Dalton, of course. This might not have been his house, but this was his city and had been before he'd even met Juliette. The two of them had a huge apartment, but the house had been a better fit for a wedding. Either way, LA was their home.

As for my sister, Lia and her family lived only fifteen minutes away from our parents. And now that I'd graduated from college, I was expected to return as well. Mom and Dad had already voiced their surprise that I hadn't come home earlier this month. I managed to convince them that I needed to stay to finish up an internship with one of my professors, but now, I was out of excuses.

Well, excuses they'd accept anyway, and in my family, there weren't many that could be deemed such. Dalton got a pass because they liked telling people that their Vanderbilt alumni son taught second grade at an inner city Los Angeles school and worked with Habitat for Humanity. Lia was happy living there with her husband, Torrence, and their five kids. She loved being a stay-at-home mom. Sure, our parents had been upset when she'd gotten pregnant her senior year of high school, but she'd still graduated. Married the baby's father. She made her life into what she'd always wanted it to be, and it meshed well with what our parents had wanted for her.

I almost snorted into my drink. I'd just graduated from MIT with a doctorate in mathematics, emphasizing on statistics, at the age of twenty-two...and I still felt like I had to prove myself to my parents. I loved my parents, and I knew they loved me, but it wasn't a matter of love. It was a matter of never being able to live up to the person they thought I should be.

I frowned as I put down my glass. I was starting to get a headache, and these heels weren't doing my feet any favors. At five-three, I always liked to give myself a little extra height, but I'd been on my feet for hours today, and the crimson red stilettos I purchased just for today weren't as appealing as they had been.

I reached up and pulled out the pins that were holding up my honey blonde hair, sighing with relief as the waves tumbled down over my shoulders. Despite the air-conditioning in this gorgeous house, I was still

overly warm, but even that couldn't make me put my hair back up.

“Kyndall, sweetheart.”

I forced a smile as my mom came over. My maudlin mood didn't need to be shared, especially today. “Are Dalton and Juliette going to the hospital before they leave for their honeymoon?”

The edges of her mouth tightened. “They're going to wait until after the baby's born before they leave. I suppose when you're taking a private plane, you can afford things like that.”

I kept my expression blank. My parents were good, hard-working people, and they really did like Juliette, but the fact that she had a lot more money than Dalton had never really sat well with them. Part of it, I knew, was their slightly archaic view of marriage roles, but more of it was their general distrust of anyone who was rich enough to live well-off in a place like LA.

“Dalton said the use of the plane was a wedding gift from Hanna and Cross, not a plane Juliette owned.”

Mom sniffed, her expression clearly saying what she thought of the fact that Juliette was sister-in-law to someone wealthy enough to loan out a plane. My family had never been poor, but at the very most, we could've been considered upper middle class.

“We're going to take Anthony back to the hotel tonight,” she continued. “Raymond and Caroline are heading to the hospital to wait for the baby.”

I hoped she wasn't trying to hint that I volunteer to watch him. I loved my nephew, and I was hoping to spend some time with him soon, but not tonight. I'd drunk a little too much champagne to be comfortable with a baby...or with one of my parents sharing my room so the other could stay with the little guy in their room.

I gestured toward Lia, who was holding her three-year-old daughter. Torrence had Quinten, the one-year-old, and was trying to help their oldest, Mara, corral the twins. It appeared to be quite the task.

“Are they heading back?”

“Torrence wants to get on the road early tomorrow,” Mom said. “Your dad and I are planning on staying until Raymond and Caroline can take over watching Anthony. Are you going to ride back with Lia and Torrence, or your father and I?”

Ride back.

Right.

Because I'd flown here from Cambridge, I clearly would need to ride with

someone to go home. Except I didn't think I wanted to go.

"I'm not sure." I pretended I was interested in the caterers who were starting to clean up. "I think I'll stick around here for a bit, let Dalton know that I'll make sure things are all locked up after everyone leaves, so no one else has to stay behind."

The look on Mom's face said she was about to give me one of her patented *very good reasons* why she didn't think I should make that particular decision. And she didn't disappoint.

"Honey, this isn't his house. I'm not sure it'd be a good idea for him to let you stay here. The caterers are more than trustworthy. They work for Juliette, after all."

I tried not to hear what it sounded like she wasn't saying. That Dalton would sooner trust employees rather than his own sister to make sure that his friend and sister-in-law's house was locked up tight.

"I'll still offer," I said. "I can get a taxi back to the hotel whenever I'm ready."

I bit my tongue to keep from adding that I'd been living on my own for six years. Okay, so the first two had been in dorms, but by the time I turned eighteen, I'd gotten my own apartment.

"All right," she said. "But don't be too late, sweetie."

I smiled without giving a response. It wouldn't do any good. Most kids who were the youngest in a family were looked at as the baby, but I'd never really gotten that impression from my parents. It'd always felt more like they knew how old I was, but didn't believe I could be responsible enough to do much of anything important.

Fortunately, I didn't have to fake it with Mom any longer because Dalton and Juliette were coming toward us.

I spoke up before my mother could say anything, "Hey, I was just telling Mom that I can stay around here, make sure things get locked up after the caterers are done."

My brother's eyes narrowed a bit as he looked at me, trying to figure out what I was up to. I didn't have to pretend much because *I* didn't know what the hell I was up to either. I just knew that I didn't want to go back to the hotel at six o'clock in the evening and spend the rest of the night doing the same thing I'd been doing for the past three days.

Pretending to be okay with the fact that everyone in my family acted like I'd been goofing off my whole life and now I needed to settle down and get

serious. Well, not so much Dalton, but it wasn't like he'd defend me either. He had enough going on in his life.

“That would be great, Kyndall.” Juliette gave me a wide smile, making me think again how lucky my brother was to have turned a one-night stand with a gorgeous woman like Juliette into a family.

I liked Juliette. I really did. But I couldn't deny that it pissed me off that both of my siblings had made *unwise* decisions with some life-changing consequences, but I was the one who needed to be watched.

“Let me get you the keys.” Juliette looped her arm through mine and pulled me away from my family. “Dalton said you've been finishing up an internship of some kind since graduation.”

I nodded. “More or less.”

She gave me a sideways look, those unique light violet eyes gleaming. “I'm getting the impression that an internship for school might not be *exactly* what kept you in Cambridge.”

I raised an eyebrow, waiting for her to speculate. I didn't know her well enough to know where this conversation was going, so I chose to play my cards close to my chest until I did.

“Do you have a boyfriend back there that you don't want your family to know about?”

I laughed at that. “Not even close.”

“Girlfriend?” She grinned at me.

I grinned back. “Now, it wouldn't be fair of me to try to steal my brother's wife right after their wedding.”

She laughed, and if the past three days hadn't been enough for me to see why Dalton had fallen in love with her, that laugh would've done it. I was glad for them both. The age gap had kept my brother and me from being as close as we could have, but I loved him and wanted him to be happy. Juliette made him happy. From what I'd heard, it wasn't easy for the two of them to get together, but it was clear they were perfect for each other. I looked forward to getting to know her better.

“Dalton tells me you have a doctorate from MIT.”

I liked the fact that she hadn't pushed things, that she'd let me blow it off with a joke. “I do.”

“He also said you're a genius.”

I nodded as she picked up a set of keys from her purse and handed them over to me. “Don't worry, I let Dalton think he's smarter than me most of the

time. Wouldn't want to give him a complex.”

“Oh, no, we wouldn't want that.” Juliette slipped off her shoes, then turned to look at me, her expression more serious. “Are you planning on going back home to your parents or back to Massachusetts?”

I shrugged. “I haven't decided yet.”

“You should stay here,” Juliette said. She handed me a second key. “That's to Dalton and my place. You're welcome to stay there if you'd prefer it to a hotel. If you decide not to, just leave the key here when you lock up.”

My confusion must've shown on my face because she reached out and squeezed my hand.

“I know what it's like to need to get away from family and make your own way. We can love them, and know they love us, but still need some distance.”

She got it, I realized. She understood in a way that other people didn't. A way that Dalton couldn't understand. As I thanked her and headed back downstairs, I thought about what she said...and I continued to think about it as I hung in the background and watched everyone finish things up. By the time the caterers were gone, I'd drunk enough additional champagne to take the edge off of things and to make Juliette's idea sound appealing enough for me to decide to stay at least a couple days to see how things felt.

As I locked up, I decided to go back to the hotel for tonight, then head to their place after I told my parents I was staying for a while. I was so caught up in my plan that I didn't see anyone standing in front of the house until I ran straight into a wall of solid muscle.

Dark-haired, blue-eyed, ruggedly handsome muscle.

Well, damn.

Chapter Two

DEAN

I couldn't decide if I'd come home or left home, but I definitely liked the weather in California better than that of London. There were many fine points that the city of my birth had to offer, but an abundance of sunshine wasn't one of them. I'd stopped in England on my way back to LA from my business trip to Madrid, talked to a couple friends of mine, but I hadn't felt an overwhelming urge to stay there for long. I had friends here, too, after all, and I was closer to them than most of the people I knew in London.

I looked down at the gift I'd picked out and frowned. Up until a year ago, I had a personal assistant who usually took care of things like gifts and wrapping and shit like that. I hadn't minded doing my own shopping for Christmas last year or buying my parents their anniversary and birthday gifts. They were actually pretty easy to buy for. I just hadn't thought about what I'd do if there came a time when I didn't know what to buy.

And then my friends, Cross and Hanna Phillips, had announced they were having a baby. Cross was rich enough that they didn't need anything, and they hadn't asked for gifts, but I wanted to get them something for the baby.

Except what the hell did I know about babies?

Not only was I an only child, but my parents had been a lot older when they had me, so I'd lost my grandparents young, and the last of my uncles had passed two years back. Since I'd been raised in London, then gone to Oxford, I'd never gotten to know any of my much older cousins. Basically, the only kid I'd spent much time around at all was Dalton and Juliette's son, Anthony.

So I found myself standing in a baby boutique during a layover – who the hell thought of something so daft anyway – trying to figure out what a nice

gift would be, and I realized that for the first time in my life, I was in over my head. Fortunately, a pleasant looking sales person had come up at that point and helped me. She also wrapped it up for me when she saw how completely clueless I'd been.

So, now, back in LA, I was on my way to drop the gift off at Cross and Hanna's. The last I heard, she was supposed to go to the hospital tomorrow to be induced, but it was still early enough that I could stop by with my gift without disturbing them both.

A sudden gust of hot summer wind caught the ribbon on the package, and I looked down as I tucked the box more tightly under my arm. Before I'd gone two more steps, I collided with something soft...and short.

Someone. Not something.

I looked down, ready to apologize, and found myself staring into a pair of the deepest midnight blue eyes I'd ever seen. Honey-colored waves hung a couple inches past her shoulders. Her features were breath-taking. Full lips I immediately wanted to taste. Then my gaze dropped, and I saw curves that made me instantly and painfully hard.

"Pardon me, mum."

She blinked. "Did you just call me 'mom?'"

I grinned, unable to stop myself. "Sorry, love. No offense meant. I said *mum*. Similar to your American *ma'am* or *miss*."

Her eyes widened, then narrowed. "You're British."

I purposefully thickened my accent. "What gave it away, lass?"

She chuckled, and damn if that wasn't the sexiest thing I'd ever heard. I wanted to hear it again. Plus, that dimple appearing next to her kissable mouth...

"Pink teddy bears?"

Shit. She'd caught me off-guard, and I had no idea what she was talking about. "Pardon?"

She gestured toward my arm, and then I remembered that I was carrying a box wrapped in cream-colored paper with pink teddy bears decorating it.

"Gift for a friend."

Her eyes lit up. "Oh, Cross and Hanna."

"You know them?" How in the world was that possible? I hadn't been away *that* long. If they'd known her, why hadn't I met her before? Where had this exquisite creature been hiding?

She nodded. "Hanna went into labor in the middle of her sister's wedding.

I offered to lock up so the family could go to the hospital.” She held out a hand. “I can put that inside for you.”

I was reluctant to let her have the gift, but not because I didn't trust her with it. I didn't want to have to walk away. As she took it, I found myself blurting out a question, “Would you like to have a drink with me?”

She looked startled but didn't balk. Instead, she gave me a once over, her expression making me wonder if she was picturing me naked. Not that I minded. I'd like a drink, but naked was the ultimate goal.

“I'll be back.” She turned and walked away, giving me a prime opportunity to check her out from behind.

Damn, that was a nice view.

Some guys may have liked girls who were thin, but I'd always been partial to curves, and this woman had them in spades. The dress she was wearing said she'd been a guest at the wedding rather than working. I couldn't tell what sort of fabric it was made of, but it clung to her body in a way that made me want to peel it right off. A deep blue that made her skin practically glow, the neckline was high enough to be decent, but low enough to tempt my restraint. The hemline affected me similarly. Without her heels, she was probably a good foot shorter than me, and the thought of picking her up and having her wrap those legs around me...fuck. I was uncomfortably hard by the time she came back outside.

“I'm Kyndall, by the way,” she said as I led her across the driveway to where my car waited.

“Dean.” I opened the passenger side door and didn't bother trying to hide my appreciative look at her legs as her dress rode up her thighs.

She didn't say anything as I turned toward my hotel. There were plenty of bars and clubs I could've taken her to, but if things went as well as I hoped, it'd be a lot easier to ask her to come upstairs rather than going from a club to a hotel. Besides, the club I usually went to wasn't exactly the sort a man took a woman to unless he knew she was into the same things.

I fully intended for us to drink and chat a bit first, even if not about certain sexual preferences. I wasn't looking for some random quickie. I was the sort of man who liked to seduce women before sex, even if it'd only ever be a one night stand. While I'd never met a woman who I could see having a relationship with, I never treated the ones I was with poorly. After all, I'd been raised to be a gentleman.

The thought almost made me laugh. I was a gentleman. I could be as

romantic as the next man, probably more so if I put my mind to it, and I enjoyed giving pleasure to the women I took to bed. I didn't mind sex that was mostly vanilla, and I always made sure that my partners came.

But what very few people saw was that I had another part of me that wasn't very gentlemanly at all. A part that liked to use restraints and hear a woman beg for release. A part that got hard at the sight of a red handprint on a woman's ass, or hearing the crack of a crop against soft flesh. I liked handcuffs and blindfolds and toys and clamps and all of the things that had recently become a little less taboo to fantasize about. Except I didn't fantasize. I could get off without the domination, but I'd be lying if I said that wasn't a huge part of how I was wired.

I glanced over at Kyndall and wondered if I was going to have to set down some ground rules about how this was only going to be one night. However, when I pulled up in front of the Beverly Hills Hotel, something that looked a lot like relief crossed her face. My gut told me we were looking for the same things from tonight. Good alcohol, and then no-strings-attached sex at a fancy hotel. After that, we'd go our separate ways. If our paths happened to cross again due to mutual friends, then so be it, but it wouldn't be anything either of us would go looking for.

As we walked into the bar, I broke the silence to ask what she wanted, then ordered her Espresso Martini and my glass of Highland Park. I may have been born in London to American parents, but they claimed I drank like a Scot.

We made small talk while we drank, keeping things casual. Nothing about families or our pasts, nothing about a future we wouldn't share. All of it was music and entertainment and hobbies. The sort of things that made us both a bit more relaxed, but didn't get personal enough to leave either of us with the wrong impression of what would happen if we moved things to my room.

When. Not if. Because she wanted me as much as I wanted her. I could see it in the way she leaned toward me, how her eyes would drop to my mouth for just a moment. How she didn't mind when I indulged in a long look at her lovely body. When I asked her, I was certain she'd say yes.

She finished the last of her drink and set down the glass, giving me an expectant look that warmed me straight through. She wasn't the sort of brassy, bold woman who often hit on me, but she was no shy, demure innocent either. She clearly knew who she was and what she wanted. The sort

of woman who the Dom in me wanted to make submit.

This wasn't the time or the place for it though. If I wanted a Sub, I'd head into the club and find someone who already knew about the lifestyle. I doubted, however, that no matter what elements I might have inclinations toward, sex with her would be far from boring, so I felt no need to stop things between us.

I drained the last of my second glass and then reached across to take her hand. It was the first time we'd touched aside from our first run-in, and the shock that ran up my arm made me catch my breath. Why hadn't I been touching her this whole time?

“Come up to my room.” My voice was rough, and the strength of the desire I felt surprised me.

One corner of her mouth curved up. “I thought you'd never ask.”

She laced her fingers between mine as I pulled her to her feet. We walked together to the elevator, the air between us thickening with every step. The moment the elevator doors shut, I released her hand and caught her around the waist. I'd been patient long enough.

“You're absolutely gorgeous, love, you know that?” I put her back against the wall, leaning toward her until our bodies were only an inch apart. “Enough to drive a sane man mad.”

“You're a fine lad yourself.”

Her attempt at an accent made me laugh. “That's horrible.”

She reached up and ran her fingers through my hair, then grazed them down my cheek. The moment her fingertip touched the corner of my mouth, my self-control snapped, and I closed the short distance between us, finally taking her mouth.

I plunged my tongue between her lips, the flavor of her drink exploding across my taste buds, mingling with something I knew was just her. She tilted her head, arms going around my neck. Her body pressed against me, all those lush curves mine for the taking. I ran my hands down her back to cup her delightful ass.

The doors dinged, and I reluctantly pulled away, pleased to see a slightly dazed expression on her face. I wrapped my arm around her waist, keeping her tight to my side as we walked out. I didn't know what perfume she was wearing, but I liked it.

“The penthouse?”

I gave her a smile as I opened the door. “Impressed?”

“A little.” She slipped out of my grasp and grinned before she turned her back on me. She reached behind her, sliding down the zipper of her dress to reveal a dark blue thong that just made her ass even more exquisite.

“Bugger me,” I muttered.

“How very British of you.” She was halfway to the bedroom when she turned again and let me see how her matching bra hugged her breasts.

“Would you have preferred if I'd said 'fuck me?’” I made the last two words come out in a typical, flat mid-western American accent as I walked toward her with even, deliberate steps. “My parents were American, so I can use either one.”

She reached behind her back again, and a moment later, her bra dropped to the floor. Not for the first time, I saw that strange combination of boldness and refreshing innocence. There was none of the arrogance that I'd seen in other beautiful women, none of the guile, but there was no embarrassment or timidity either. She was someone who was comfortable with her body and seemed to know what she wanted.

And right now, I was fortunate enough for that to be me.

“Right,” I practically growled. “Enough talking.”

She gasped when I picked her up but didn't hesitate to wrap her arms and legs around me. I groaned as she rubbed against me, my erection pressing up against my zipper. A few more steps and then I was dropping her onto the bed. All that lovely hair spread out beneath her, her full breasts bouncing as she fell. And the only thing covering her was a damn thin scrap of dark silk.

I wanted to rip it away, free my cock, and drive into her until we both saw stars. But I wanted to taste her too. See if her pussy tasted as good as her mouth.

I dropped to my knees next to the bed and reached for her hips. I yanked her to the edge of the bed, then pulled off her panties, leaving her wonderfully naked. The hair between her legs was light and soft-looking. Her skin the perfect shade of pink.

“Such a pretty pussy.” I pulled her legs over my shoulders. “Shall I see how many times I can make you come in my mouth?”

“Do you have any idea how fucking sexy that sounds with your accent?”

I chuckled. I'd had women comment on my accent before, but none of them said it quite like that. I didn't answer though. I was too busy leaning forward to run my tongue over her folds. She made a sound that I liked, so I did it again. Another great sound. Her skin was salty, but not unpleasant. I

used my fingers to part her lips, and this time when I licked her, she let out what I could only call a wail.

Fuck me. I *really* liked that.

My new goal became seeing how many different sounds I could get her to make, and I immediately set about working toward it. I gripped her hips tight as I started to play with her clit, my tongue flicking across it before I started to suck, long even pulls that had her writhing. Her hands dug into my hair, nails scraping my scalp. Then she shouted my name – fuck that was hot – her back arching as she came.

There was one.

She wasn't faking, that was for sure. I could see and feel the orgasm going through her entire body. She was just that responsive, and it made me want to see how far I could push her.

So I did.

One climax rolled into another, and my name turned into a curse. And a few nonsense words that just made me try even harder. I wanted her completely senseless. Well, not too senseless to consent, because I wasn't sure how much longer I could hold back, but the nice sort of senseless.

“One more time, love,” I murmured against her soft skin.

“Can't.” The word was a whimper that made me close my eyes.

I used the same voice I used on my Subs, hardly aware of making a conscious decision to do it. “Yes, you can, love. Come on, Kyndall, let go. Come for me, and then I'll give you what you really want.”

I pushed two fingers inside her hot pussy, swearing as she gripped me tight. I curved them, pressing them against her g-spot as I wrung one more orgasm out of her. She didn't make a sound, but every muscle in her body tensed...then suddenly went limp, the only movement the harsh rise and fall of her chest.

My knees popped as I stood. I'd been down there longer than I planned, but seeing the blissed out expression on Kyndall's face was worth it. I licked my fingers clean as I allowed myself the luxury of visually devouring every glistening inch of her.

Then I started undressing, more than ready to feel her skin against mine. As I pulled a condom from the bedside table, I had a brief moment of wishing that I could take her bare. I'd never wanted that with anyone.

Sex, for me, was about control. Pleasure. Not intimacy. Never that. Not because it scared me, but because there was no one I wanted to know that

well.

I pushed my thoughts aside and focused on the woman on the bed in front of me. I rolled on the condom, then moved to get Kyndall settled in a more comfortable position. She opened her eyes and smiled at me but didn't try to move on her own. The Dom in me preened, but I forced it down. That wasn't a part of tonight.

She propped herself up on her elbows, eyes dropping to my cock. She licked her lips. "Is that for me?"

I ran my hands up her legs as I positioned myself between them. "Every single inch." She gasped as I started to slide in, and I swore, "Fuck, love, you're tight."

"Not *bugger*?" She chuckled, and I swore again at the vibration around my cock.

"You do that again, and we're going to be done before I get started."

She reached up and pushed my hair back from my face, a gesture that almost seemed too intimate for what we were doing. I eased forward, both of us moaning as we came together. She shouldn't have fit me so well, so perfectly, but she did. One leg hooked over my hip as I rocked into her, letting us both have a few moments to get used to the new sensation. She was slick and wet, and I could almost feel her body throbbing with need. I'd brought her over the edge so many times that I knew she'd be on a hair trigger, ready to go with very little friction.

Which was good, because I wasn't going to last as long as I normally could.

I covered her mouth with mine, needing her kiss as I moved inside her. Her nails dug into my back, hips rising to meet mine, every sensation pushing me toward release. When her teeth sunk into my bottom lip, the sharp edge of pain to my pleasure sent me over the edge.

Still, I pushed myself against her, determined to get her off one more time. Only after I felt her shudder beneath me did I let myself go completely, and for several blissful seconds, everything was perfect.

As we came down, I rolled off her and gave myself time to recover from one of the hardest orgasms I'd had in a long time. I found that I didn't mind having her there next to me, but I knew I'd have to do the awkward after-sex talk before she got too comfortable.

Before I could, however, she was moving up and off the bed. I watched with surprise as she picked up her panties.

“Just let me run to the bathroom, and then I'll show myself out.” She smiled at me. “Thanks for that, Dean.”

Okay, definitely not how I saw that going.

Chapter Three

KYNDALL

I always thought of myself as a strong person, brave even. I graduated from high school at sixteen and then moved to the other side of the country all by myself. I'd not only survived on my own, but thrived. Coming back here, though, seemed to sap all of that strength.

Case in point, I was currently playing with my nephew in Dalton and Juliette's amazing apartment, but I'd told my parents that this past week in LA had been spent house-sitting for my brother and helping my sister-in-law's parents with Anthony. While that was technically accurate, I'd kept the full truth to myself.

I was staying in LA, at least for a little while. My parents had kept protests to a minimum when I'd stayed in Cambridge through summers, but I'd known that was because I was in college. Even the apartment I rented there had been in an area where other students lived. They'd never let me hear the end of it if I said I wanted to live there for good, so far away from family. And I didn't really want to be that far away from them all the time. Just far enough that I could have my own life without them interfering.

Los Angeles was perfect for that. I was close enough that I'd still be involved in family things without too much trouble, but I'd be able to go about my day-to-day business without running into my parents. And with Dalton here, it'd be easy enough to imply that he'd keep an eye on me. And, with Dalton, at least I'd have an ally in Juliette.

A string of babbling sounds and half-formed words drew my attention back to the dark-haired little boy in front of me. He was almost a year old, and it still amazed me how a child so young could have so much personality.

I was thirteen when my niece Mara had been born, but I hadn't spent much time with her, some because I'd been focusing on school, but some because my parents and my sister had always made excuses about why someone else was the better choice for a babysitter. By the time the other kids had come along, I was already in college, so this past week with Anthony had been something new.

I was actually better with the kid than I expected to be. I wasn't sure if that was because I'd just been nervous about my lack of experience, or because a part of me took my parents' lack of faith in me to heart. Either way, I'd been pleasantly surprised by how much I'd enjoyed babysitting Anthony. Not that I'd done it a lot. Juliette's parents had kept Anthony most of the week, but their flight had left at ten this morning, and Dalton and Kyndall's plane was running a couple hours late, so they'd taken me up on my offer.

"You're going to be a real lady-killer." I ran my hand over Anthony's silky hair. He looked so much like Dalton's baby pictures, except with dark hair instead of light. "All right, so there are some things you need to know to survive our family. First, I know most people might tell a kid to take it easy on their parents, but not me. Your father's awesome, but I want you to give him hell."

Anthony laughed and waved his hands at me.

"I probably shouldn't have said *hell*, huh?" I grinned at him. "I have a feeling your parents both swear more than that, but we'll keep it our little secret, okay? You won't tell on me, right? I mean, I am your favorite aunt."

I glanced up at one of the pictures above the fireplace. Dalton, Juliette, Cross, and Hanna. I called Cross a couple days ago to let him know about the gift I'd left in the house, and he'd let me know that everything was going well with Hanna and the baby. I had a feeling I'd like the two of them even more once I got to know them.

"Okay, so Hanna can be your favorite aunt on your mother's side," I told Anthony. "I can settle for being your favorite on your dad's side." I lowered my voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "We just won't tell Aunt Lia."

Anthony made a grab for my hair, and I laughed, tossing it over my shoulders as I turned him around to face the soft fabric blocks I'd found. He laughed again and grabbed at them. I leaned back against the couch and watched him play, appreciating the downtime.

Even though I hadn't been babysitting all week, I hadn't been taking a vacation either. I liked the idea of living in LA, but I knew the only way my

parents would be okay with me staying here would be to prove that I was responsible.

Maybe *okay* was too strong a word. They wouldn't like it no matter what, but if I had things under control, they'd most likely just sit back and wait for me to screw up. They wouldn't say it like that, of course, but they'd remind me that they would be here when I needed them. They'd tell me to call them when I ran out of money, or when I got tired of staying with Dalton and Juliette. They'd try to make me feel guilty for crashing at my newlywed brother's place, even if this apartment was so huge that I could live in a guest room for a month and never see anyone else.

Since I knew that's how my parents would be, I'd spent the week working on preempting problems. The first one had been looking for an apartment. I knew that it'd be smart to do what I'd done back in Cambridge and find something small and unassuming, the kind of thing that I could believably pay for with a regular job. After all, I had the sort of degree that normally equaled a good-paying job. Now that I had a doctorate, I should've been able to get a better paying job than the one I pretended to have in Massachusetts so I could've found something decent.

But I didn't want decent.

I wanted to finally have the life I could afford. I was tired of hiding, of pretending to be something I wasn't. Moving here would give me the opportunity to find my own place, figure out who I was without all of the school and family stuff. Dalton would be a safety net – one I didn't intend to ever need – and my parents would be less likely to freak out when I told them. Besides, I planned on taking a page from my brother's book and reminding them that LA was closer than where I'd gone to college.

So I spent a few days looking at places before putting down a deposit on an apartment almost as amazing as this one. Which made sense since it was located just one floor below. Discretion regarding just how much money I had would've been a good idea, but I'd fallen in love with the place the moment I'd seen it and decided it was well worth the risk. Besides, Dalton had a new wife and an energetic almost one-year-old. I doubted he'd pay much attention to what I was doing.

I scrambled to my feet as Anthony made a beeline for the entertainment center. “Hold up there, speedster.”

I grabbed him around the waist and tossed him into the air, smiling as he let out a huge belly laugh. He was such a happy baby. My parents had always

said Dalton was like that. The perfect little angel. Lia too. They'd lulled my parents into a false sense of security so that when I came along, they thought it'd be exactly the same. I never had to wonder what sort of baby I'd been because they loved telling the stories.

Like how I'd had colic for weeks and kept everyone up all hours.

Or how I'd gotten my days and nights mixed up for three whole months.

My personal favorite was when they'd tell people about my childhood habit of stripping off all my clothes and running around stark naked.

Cute.

Even as I thought the word, another word came to mind.

Gorgeous.

And, of course, I heard it in a British accent. Because half my damn thoughts this past week had been in that fucking accent. I heard it in my dreams.

Heard *him* in my dreams.

I'd had a couple of sexual encounters in my past, but Dean had blown them all away. I'd been able to feel his body for days afterward, so I knew that it was a good thing that he'd only been visiting LA. If I'd known he lived here, known that I had a chance of seeing him again, I would've wanted to, and that wouldn't have been a good idea. He hadn't struck me as the sort of guy who wanted to get involved with anyone, and I didn't want to taint the memories I had.

The sound of the door opening caught my attention, and I pushed thoughts of Dean aside. I stood, Anthony stirring in my arms. He hadn't really been asleep yet, so as Dalton and Juliette came into the living room, he peeked over my arm.

"There's my boy," Juliette said as she reached for him. "I've missed you."

"We had some fun aunt and nephew time," I said as I handed him over.

"You know," Juliette said, "you're welcome to babysit anytime." She winked at me.

"Be a bit of a drive just to babysit," Dalton said as he ran his hand over his son's head.

If that wasn't a sign to share, then I didn't know what it was. "Actually," I said, "it wouldn't be long at all."

My brother gave me a surprised look. "You're not going back to Cambridge?"

I shook my head. "Better than that. I'm moving here."

“To LA?” Still surprised, but at least he didn't seem annoyed.

I shrugged. “You know how it is. I want to make my own way but figured it'd be nice to know some people.”

“Well, I think it's great,” Juliette said. “You're welcome to stay here as long as you need.”

Dalton didn't look too happy at that, but I couldn't blame him. He and Juliette hadn't had the most traditional relationship, what with her getting pregnant before they'd even dated. They didn't need his little sister hanging around right after they got married.

“I don't need to,” I said. “I found a place.”

“Already?” Now it was Juliette's turn to sound surprised.

“I had some time on my hands this week.”

“I'll want to check the places out with you before you make a decision,” Dalton said, his big brother face firmly in place. “Make sure they're safe.”

I couldn't resist. “You already did.” I kept my expression bright. “There was a great place available one floor down. I'm moving in tomorrow.”

“Here?” Juliette glanced at Dalton. “Not that we won't be glad to have you close by. It's just...”

“Where'd you get the sort of money for a deposit?” Dalton put it out there.

“I've been saving,” I said, hedging the truth. “I worked a lot during school, and I had a good scholarship.”

He still looked worried. “If you need any help—”

“I'll ask.” I tried not to sound as annoyed as I felt. I knew he just wanted to help, but he could look less like I was some clueless kid who was in over her head. “I lived on my own back East. I'll be fine.”

Dalton opened his mouth like he wanted to say something else, but Juliette put a hand on his arm, and he closed it.

It looked like I did have an ally in my sister-in-law, and I was looking forward to getting to know her better. Yet another reason why staying in LA was going to be good for me.

Chapter Four

DEAN

I'd intended to give myself a day to recover from my trip, but that hadn't really worked out. Sure, I thoroughly enjoyed my night with Kyndall, and she'd left without any drama or expectations, but that should've lent me to a restful night's sleep leading into a lazy day on Sunday, making me ready for work first thing Monday.

Except that hadn't happened. Sure, I'd fallen asleep not long after Kyndall had left thanks to a nice combination of jet lag and great sex, but it'd been a sleep filled with dreams of the American with the honey-blond hair and amazing body. Which meant I'd woken up with a massive erection far beyond the usual morning wood. That one hadn't gone away until I'd jacked off in the shower – twice – like some randy teenager.

That'd ended up being only a temporary solution, however. Walking back into the bedroom made me think of how Kyndall had looked on my bed, which had made me hard again. I went to the hotel gym and managed to distract myself for a bit. Then a redhead had come in and started flirting with me, but all I'd been able to do was compare her to Kyndall.

I'd gone to work then, knowing that my relaxing day would otherwise be spent trying to find something to do that didn't involve my hand and fantasies about that tight pussy.

So for the past week, I'd scheduled and attended meetings with investors and directors and producers, searching for independent films worth my investment. Then, I'd toured various non-profits and talked to their founders. I'd spoken with lawyers from a dozen different firms and specialties. I'd drawn up proposals and business plans, researched what sort of non-profits

were needed in this area.

Every waking moment had been scheduled to ensure that I wouldn't have time to think about Kyndall, to wonder what she was doing and who she was with. That last one had been the thought that'd always set me off. I'd gotten distracted. Paced. I'd always been a high-energy person, needing to stay busy to keep from being restless, but I'd never had problems focusing. I had a professor once describe me as a textbook example of a type-A personality. Driven. Ambitious.

But now, even with everything I'd been doing all week, there were times I hadn't been able to stop something from triggering a memory. Like nearly every damn time I smelled espresso, I remembered how her mouth had tasted. And that would make me think about how her pussy tasted. Then how it'd felt.

And I'd be off in my own head until someone or something brought me out of it.

It wasn't every hour, or even every couple, but it was still enough that it annoyed me. I wasn't sure who I was more hacked off at, Kyndall for being so distracting or myself for not being in control.

By the time I finished at the gym this morning, I still couldn't shake the restless energy that'd been humming around me all week, and I knew I needed to go out and blow off some steam. This wasn't just too much energy in general. It was a sexual tension that I couldn't quite get rid of, and that meant I needed something more than exercise and masturbation.

Which meant I was going out tonight.

I'd first come to LA several years ago, and I'd met Cross at a business meeting then. We'd kept in touch on and off, so when I'd come back to California on a slightly more permanent basis, I'd looked him up. It'd taken only a few conversations before he introduced me to Hanna, Dalton, and Juliette, and invited me to the BDSM club they sometimes frequented. I purchased my own VIP membership not long after, and while I didn't generally go with them – being the fifth person in a two couple group could be a little awkward – I often saw them there.

Tonight, however, I hoped I didn't. I was trying to figure out how I'd spent nearly half a year knowing Dalton and Juliette but hadn't been introduced to Kyndall. If any of them were at the club, I wasn't sure I'd be able to stop myself from asking about her. For all I knew, she was some college friend of Juliette's who'd only been up for the wedding and was half-

way across the country by now. I wasn't sure I wanted that disappointment...or how I felt about the fact that her being out of reach would be disappointing.

Then there was always the chance that Kyndall lived here in LA, but we'd never had the opportunity to meet. I was better friends with Cross than with Juliette, so it made sense that I wouldn't know many of her friends, especially since Kyndall didn't frequent the club. And I had to consider that was the reason Juliette hadn't introduced us. Juliette knew I was a Dom, and as one herself, she'd be a good judge of character when it came to the sort of person who might be interested in the lifestyle. There was a good chance that Juliette knew Kyndall wasn't into BDSM and assumed that meant the two of us wouldn't be a fitting match.

I didn't know if that was the case or not, but the only way I'd ever find out was if I asked. And I couldn't ask. There were so many possibilities that I didn't want to consider.

I needed to go to the club and get rid of this tension, clear my head, and then move on with the rest of my life. Kyndall had been a one-time encounter, and her quick exit had suggested that she preferred it that way. The way I was supposed to have wanted things to go.

So I was going to do what I always did when I felt like I was wound too tight. Go to the club, let loose in my own way. I nodded at the doorman as I walked past, letting the club music wash over me. It wasn't obnoxiously loud, but it was enough that I could feel the bass thudding against my heart. Enough to drown out a lot of my chaotic thoughts, which was the entire point of me being here.

It was Saturday night, so the place was packed, and even the air conditioning couldn't keep up with the press of bodies writhing on the dance floor. I rarely danced and wasn't in the mood to do it tonight, so I skirted the floor, making my way up the stairs to the VIP level. A show would be starting soon, and I was in the mood to watch for a while. Watch the show and see if I could spot a Sub I wanted to take into one of the club's specialty rooms.

I had to admit, one of the things I missed about having a house of my own was having my own playroom. When I decided to leave London, I sold my house, but I put all of my things in storage, ready to be shipped as soon as I had a place here. I hadn't minded being in a hotel since I'd gotten here, but I couldn't deny thinking that it would've been nice to have had Kyndall at a

house, a place where I could've asked her to stay, a place where I could've taken her to play.

I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose. I needed to find someone else to play with. Someone who knew the game.

The music downstairs shifted, lowered, and I focused my attention on the stage downstairs. A familiar couple was making their way up the steps. Miranda and Jason, a pair of regulars I'd met the first night Cross had brought me here. With a pang, I realized that Miranda's hair color was similar to Kyndall's, but at least the similarities ended there. Miranda was short, slender, almost petite.

And she was a Dom. Her dark-haired Sub was barely average height, with a lean build. Both looked barely old enough to vote, but I put their age closer to mid-twenties. No matter how old they were, they'd apparently been performing here for a few years and were a couple outside the club as well.

They wore matching leather outfits, though hers covered a lot more than his. I was strictly straight, so the fact that Jason was pretty much wearing what amounted to a jockstrap didn't do it for me. I could, however, appreciate the way Miranda dominated him. Brisk commands that resulted in complete submission, the sort of trust that a lot of couples could envy.

She took him over to the padded bench that'd been set up and strapped him in, restraints around both wrists and ankles. When she pulled something out of her bag, a ripple of approval ran through the crowd.

A pair of nipple clamps, and not the nice soft ones. These had metal teeth. I let out a low whistle. I liked a little pain for my Subs, but that was a bit more pain than I liked to inflict. Judging by the loud groan that came out of Jason's mouth, however, it was the exact right amount for him.

Then Miranda brought out a pair of small weights and hung them from the clamps. Jason's body jerked, which made the clamps move, which, in turn, made him moan.

"Too much?" Her voice was quiet but carried enough for me to hear.

He shook his head, and she smacked his ass hard enough to leave a red mark.

"No, Mistress." Jason's fingers flexed.

"Tell me what you want," she instructed.

"More, Mistress. Please."

She went back to the bag and pulled out another clamp. I sucked in a breath, suspecting where that one was going to go. She didn't disappoint. My

own balls tightened in sympathy as she attached the clamp to Jason's balls. When she hung a weight on it, the sound Jason made wasn't a pleasant one, but he still didn't use the safe word I was sure he and Miranda had established.

For a moment, I wondered what it would be like to have Kyndall here with me, to have her sitting at my side as Miranda gave her Sub what he needed. What Kyndall would say if I told her I wanted to find out what she needed, that I wanted to take care of her like Miranda was taking care of Jason.

What would she think of Miranda's expert use of a crop on Jason's ass and cock? Would she be able to recognize that the cries he made weren't solely pain, no matter how violent Miranda's treatment might've seemed? If I slipped my hand between her thighs, would I find her wet or would she be so horrified that she'd run as far away from me as possible?

I shook my head. I couldn't be thinking like that. Kyndall wasn't someone I was casually dating or a friend with benefits. She wasn't anything to me other than a girl I spent one great night with. One night. That was all we planned on, so there was no reason for me to be thinking of anything else.

A sound from the stage caught my attention. Miranda had pulled a giant strap-on out of the bag and was liberally applying lube to the slick surface. I'd always considered myself to be well-endowed – and the women I'd been with had supported that opinion – so I knew how much preparation needed to go into anal sex, but Jason and Miranda had clearly done this before because the thick shaft disappeared with relative ease.

And that brought up another question.

Was Kyndall the sort of woman who'd find it hot, but only for the domination quality, or would she think of it as something she'd want to do herself? She was confident, but that didn't mean she wasn't submissive. It didn't mean she was either. She could've been neither.

Hell, for all I knew, she'd think that the whole BDSM lifestyle was disgusting and be appalled that she'd been anywhere near me, spoiling the memories of what we'd shared.

I sighed, the sound lost in the murmurs of arousal and excitement that were building throughout the club. Both Miranda and Jason were approaching climax, and the energy in the air was palpable. As soon as they were done, the music would come back up, and dancing would resume, most couples moving with more deliberation, working toward their own eventual

release.

I stood, but it wasn't to return downstairs and find a partner. There were plenty of Subs down there who I was sure would want to join me for whatever I wanted to do, but I wasn't into it, and I didn't go into an encounter without being fully committed to it.

I wasn't into relationships, but that didn't mean I was a complete bastard.

Chapter Five

KYNDALL

I'd paid an obscene amount of money to have my belongings shipped across the country within a week, but it'd been worth it yesterday when I'd been able to move my things into my new place. Granted, they hadn't taken up much room since my previous apartment could've fit into my new one three times over, but they made it feel more like home.

And that's what I was looking for here. A home. A place of my own, where I could be in charge of my own life, without having to worry about all of the expectations that came with being a part of my family. I loved them, and I was proud of the people my brother and sister had become, but I wanted to be me. I wanted this to be the place where my family came to visit me and acknowledged it as mine, to decorate and furnish as I liked.

They'd have questions, I knew, about how I could afford a place like this. Dalton had already started asking, and it was clear he didn't believe me about having saved money while I worked through college. I didn't blame him. The sort of money I would've needed to make to be able to afford a place like this was well beyond what a graduate student could've earned.

My plan for keeping up the subterfuge was actually a simple one. Let Juliette keep Dalton out of my business for a month or two so he could see that I really was financially secure, and I'd let it slip that I found an excellent job that paid well. A statistician for a wealthy start-up company that'd given me a hefty signing bonus. I was counting on my family thinking that the sort of work I did was boring enough that they'd never ask more than the basics once they knew I could take care of myself. Probably six months to a year of constantly reassuring them that I didn't need their help, and I'd be set.

As I looked around the spacious layout of my new apartment, I smiled with pride. My means might've been unconventional, but I'd accomplished all of this on my own. It was slightly annoying to have to keep all of it to myself, but I knew my family would never understand. Hell, they'd most likely go beyond not understanding to straight-up scolding and condemnation. We didn't *do* the sort of unseemly things I made a living doing.

Because my parents had both inherited a sizable chunk of land, they were considered pillars of the community, the sort of people who'd always had eyes on them. Lia's teenage pregnancy had been scandal enough, but the area was liberal enough that the fact she graduated rather than dropping out had been more than enough to make things right again. What I was doing, well, I doubted I'd get the same leniency.

I gave myself a critical once-over in the mirror. I needed to look good enough to show that I belonged, but not so decked out that I drew unwanted attention. I wasn't going tonight to be eye candy, or to find a high roller to hang onto. I had a nice nest egg, but I wanted to make sure I was even more secure before I took too much of a break.

Besides, I needed the distraction, and this was better than sex since I was willing to bet that I wouldn't find anyone as good in bed as Dean had been.

It was too hot for pants, so I'd gone with my favorite dress. Too slinky to be considered a sundress, but not so tight or revealing that I looked like I was going to a club. A low enough neckline to show a bit of cleavage, but still respectable. Long enough that I could sit comfortably, but short enough to take advantage of the distraction my legs could offer. It was definitely an asset.

If I'd been a superstitious person, I might've called it my lucky dress, but I believed in things I could see, count, touch. While there was an element of chance in what I did, for the most part, it required skill, not some fickle, mystical energy that came and went without rhyme or reason.

I checked the bills I'd tucked into the small pocket at my waist – another reason this was my favorite dress – and then double-checked the directions to the address Jan had given me. Jan Denman had gone to MIT with me but dropped out to pursue an acting career. When I arrived in LA, I looked her up, but not because I wanted us to hang out. We'd been acquaintances more than friends in school, but she'd always been friendly enough, and the sort of person who always knew what was going on, and that hadn't changed.

Thanks to Jan's boyfriend, Teddy, I was on my way to my first poker

game on the West Coast. My nerves were steady as I made my way downstairs to where I had a car waiting. I'd sold the one I used for school and hadn't yet bought one here, so I'd be using a car service for the foreseeable future. I didn't mind though. While I liked the independence having my own car brought, finding a reliable service in LA wasn't difficult, and it gave me the opportunity to focus on the night ahead.

I allowed the familiar thrill to run through me, let my adrenaline have free reign. Once I arrived and got into the groove of playing, the excitement would keep me going, but I needed the edge to start. That wasn't why I did it though.

Sure, I enjoyed the rush of doing something illegal, but that wasn't the main attraction. And it wasn't an addiction. When I took a break, I didn't get the sort of itch that came with needing a fix. For me, it was a job. A means to an end. A way of proving that I could use the skills I had to take care of myself. The fact that I could be a little rebellious while doing it was just a bonus, even though it wasn't exactly the sort of rebellion I planned on anyone else knowing about. It was more of a...*private* thing.

Still, in the back of my mind, a part of me wondered if I'd chosen this particular route because I never intended for anyone to know about it because I was ashamed of the choices I'd made with my life.

I told myself to shake it off and smiled at the driver who opened the door for me. I needed to get my head in the game.

The driver looked surprised when I gave him the address, but thankfully, didn't make any comments. I knew he assumed I was going to the game as entertainment, not a player, but as long as he kept his opinions to himself, I didn't particularly care what he thought.

The man at the door glowered down at me, but Jan had sent me a picture of Teddy, so I didn't even hesitate as I walked right up to him.

"I'm Kyndall." I smiled, but it wasn't the same sort of smile I would've given to a bouncer at a club. Those sort of guys, I'd flirt with to get inside without a cover charge. Here, I had to show that I was only here for business, and not the sort of business that most women would be here for.

Teddy frowned at me. "Kyndall?"

"Jan said you put me on the list for the game." I tried to look like I wasn't about to melt in all this heat. "She and I went to school together."

"Right!" The lightbulb went on. "Mr. Maverick said to make sure you had your buy in."

I pulled out the bills I'd tucked away. "Fifty grand, right?"

Teddy nodded and opened the door. "Straight down the hall, second door on the right. You don't got no weapons, right?"

I shook my head and started past.

"They're probably gonna pat you down anyway," he called after me.

I'd long since gotten past any issues with groping disguised as a pat-down for weapons. As long as they kept their hands over my clothes and didn't linger longer than a couple extra seconds, I didn't complain. Well, technically, I didn't complain either way, but I had ways of making my displeasure known.

I thought back to the first high-stakes game I'd gotten into.

"Honey, my girls wear a hell of a lot less than that. You want to work one of my games, lose the dress."

I glared at the cocky son of a bitch running the game. "I'm here to play, asshole."

"Sure you are, sweetheart."

I took another step inside. "I got the buy-in. You want the money or not?" I didn't like the grin I got in return, but I didn't move.

"Check her for weapons."

The bodyguard didn't even pretend that he wasn't leering at me, but I held up my hands and stayed still as he ran his hand over me. He squeezed and pinched, lingering longer than he needed to, but I put up with it. When his hand brushed the inside of my thigh, I gritted my teeth.

"You go any higher," I said, "and I'm going to twist your nuts so hard that you won't be able to get it up for a week."

The hand on my leg paused.

"Just thought you'd want to be treated like one of the guys, since you're here to play," the asshole said with a smirk.

"If this prick grabs those men's crotches like he's grabbing at mine, you might want to consider letting us charge him."

The wandering hand went straight up to my panties, and I grabbed him before he could react. One quick twist and he was cursing.

But his hand was no longer between my legs, so I was taking it as a win.

The pat down in the room took place just inside the door, but there was no funny business. When I stepped past the bodyguard, I took a moment to look at each of the other players, including the man who was clearly in charge.

Early forties. Blond, with cold green eyes. Jan said the guy's name was Stanley Maverick, like I was supposed to know who that was. I hadn't asked for details though. That was a surefire way to make everyone think I didn't belong.

I didn't mind letting people make assumptions regarding my intelligence based on my age and appearance, but I didn't do the whole 'play dumb' thing. I already put up with enough dumb blonde jokes that I didn't need to add any fuel to the fire. If they couldn't tell by the way I spoke that I was smarter than them, that was their own fault. I wouldn't be blamed for them not taking me seriously.

Some people might've thought that was arrogant, but it wasn't arrogance if it was a fact. I'd been the smartest person in any room since I was a kid.

I walked toward the table and tried not to scowl at the way Stanley's eyes crawled all over me. I'd been dealing with creeps like him for years, and I wasn't about to let it throw me off the game now.

“You sure you're in the right place?” Stanley asked as his gaze landed on my chest. “My boy tells me you're here to play, but you look more like entertainment.”

He patted the ass of a scantily-clad waitress as she walked by. The expression on her face didn't change, telling me that she'd gotten used to Stanley's touch and that his hands probably did a lot more wandering than that.

It pissed me off, knowing that more people would have a problem with me gambling than they would with me working as a waitress at a place like this. It was one of the reasons I'd chosen poker over other forms of employment. It pissed me off that, often, the only way women could make as much money as a man playing poker was to take off her clothes or put up with unwanted attentions.

“I have the buy-in.” I dropped the money on the table and waited to be told to take the empty seat.

It was a fine line to walk, that balance between giving respect and not letting the men walk over me. One of the things I'd learned quickly was to ignore ninety percent of the sexist remarks that came out of their mouths, especially at the beginning.

Stanley counted it, then gestured to the seat. “We aren't going to go easy on you just because you got a nice set of tits.”

I shrugged. “I wouldn't want you to.”

A laugh went around the table as I sat down. That was okay. I'd be the only one laughing at the end of the night. I arranged my chips in front of me as I watched the other players, making note of each little tick and gesture. Some people with a mind like mine would've done straight card counting to win, but I'd always combined my math skills with my observational skills. It tended to help when playing with less scrupulous people who might want to cheat. I'd caught more than one dealer who'd been paid off to deal favorably one way or the other.

Then the cards went out, and I began to count. It was second nature now to keep numbers running in one part of my mind, so much so that I wasn't sure I could play without doing it automatically.

I started slow, low bets where I cared more about learning the others' tells and making sure my count was thorough than I did about winning. It also looked good to win a few and lose a few before I got to the big bets. While a casino would kick a person out for counting cards – which I thought was a bunch of bullshit if they weren't using technology to do it – games like this went by a different set of rules. My arms were bare, so it was clear I wasn't hiding cards, and most men wouldn't even consider that someone like me could be smart enough to run a game with only my brains, but if someone did figure it out, I risked more than simply getting kicked out.

So I purposefully let myself lose a hand or two, never going all in or betting so much that I made anyone suspicious. My usual pattern allowed me to double my money with every game and walk away without anyone being the wiser, but I was having a difficult time keeping my temper tonight. Stanley hadn't shut up since I'd come in, and his comments had gotten more and more vulgar as the night went on. Most of the guys ignored him, but at least two looked uncomfortable as things got worse.

After nearly three hours of listening to his shit, I'd had enough. I knew better than to physically or verbally attack him here. This was his place, his game.

So I hit him where it hurt. Disregarding my usual restraint, I began to play more aggressively, placing larger bets and forcing him to match, relying more on my ability to know what cards came next than I typically did. One by one, the other men dropped out, until it was just Stanley and me.

Despite the air conditioning, a faint sheen of sweat beaded on Stanley's forehead, and I could feel the moisture on my own skin. The room had taken on that musty sort of smell that came with overheated bodies in close

proximity to each other, and when Stanley lit a cigar, the smoke only made it harder to breathe.

Finally, I knew we'd reached the point where I had to make a choice. I knew that if I traded in two cards, I'd have a straight flush, and no matter how many cards Stanley asked for, he wouldn't be able to get any higher than four of a kind. I could go all in and clean him out, or I could fold now and take my winnings. I'd made more than what I brought in, and this was a new game in a new city. That'd be the smart thing to do.

“Don't feel bad, sweetheart,” Stanley said. “It's nothing personal. It just takes balls to win at this game, and you don't got them. If you'd like, after the game, I'll let you get up close and personal with mine.”

I gave him a tight smile and slid two cards toward the dealer. “Two.”

When he called, I bit back a smart remark as I laid my cards on the table. The men around me cursed as I leaned forward to sweep my winnings toward me. Stanley just stared at me, the look on his face unreadable. I wasn't gloating or even celebrating, but I had a feeling Stanley was taking my winning as a personal insult.

“Let's get you a bag for all that cash,” he said as he stood. “And then I'll get you a ride home, princess. We can talk about your game on the way.”

Shit.

Chapter Six

DEAN

After my night at the club was a bust, I decided to try a completely different form of distraction.

Friendship. I didn't want to bother Cross and Hanna yet, not with the new baby. Dalton and Juliette, however, had come back from their honeymoon a week ago, so I could pop by for a visit and not feel guilty.

I stayed for a couple hours while we enjoyed the wine I brought. They told me about their trip, and I told them about mine. It was nice and casual, the sort of thing that should've been perfectly relaxing. Except the question of Kyndall was always there in the back of my mind.

By the time I said goodnight, I decided that ignoring my problem wasn't making it go away. I needed to face it head on, deal with the fact that Kyndall had made an impression, and that I wasn't going to see her again. If I did see her, I needed to be able to stay cordial. I didn't want either of us having our friendships damaged because I couldn't be mature about the way things were. I'd always managed to have polite interactions with previous one-night stands. Kyndall couldn't be any different.

The air was thick and heavy as I stepped outside. It felt like we were going to get a rare thunderstorm tonight. While I generally liked the sunny weather, a storm actually sounded appealing. It would remind me of home.

A car pulled up in front of the building, the back door flying open before the vehicle came to a complete stop. I had a moment to register amazing legs, and then Kyndall was on the sidewalk, face flushed, eyes sparking.

She was halfway through saying something, her voice raised enough that I could hear it. "...if you don't like losing to a woman, you shouldn't have

taken my money.”

A man came out of the car right behind her. Seedy-looking, with greasy, slicked-back hair. He didn't look angry, but there was something hard about his eyes that made me not like the way he was looking at Kyndall.

“You didn't say you were some ringer.” He stormed after her, completely ignoring me. “You lied to us.”

“Did you ask the men how good they were?” She spun toward him, curls flying. “Or does having a dick make a person exempt from that sort of question?”

The man's hand clamped down around Kyndall's arm, and I snapped. “Get your fucking hands off her!”

The man turned his head toward me, looking more annoyed than anything else. “Mind your own fucking business, pal.”

“Let go of me,” Kyndall said.

“You don't give me orders, bitch.”

I dropped my hand on the man's shoulder and reminded myself that it wouldn't be a good idea to beat the shit out of him. “Let her go.”

“I can handle myself,” she snapped at me, then focused back on the man. “Take your hand off me, or I will take you down.”

I felt the man tense, and I knew Kyndall had said the exact wrong thing. I didn't know who he was, but I knew his type. Every city and every country had dozens like them. The people who thought they were too rich or too powerful or too important to follow the rules. I had no doubt that Kyndall could handle herself, but this guy didn't strike me as the type to take a threat or assault and walk away.

“You're going to want to think hard about what you do next,” I said quietly. “If you walk away now, I'm going to stay right here with the lady. But if you decide to threaten or try to harm her, you and I will have more than an exchange of words. And I guarantee you will find me more than a match.”

A muscle in the man's jaw clenched, but he released Kyndall's arm, and that was all I cared about. He shot another malevolent look her way, then went back to the car.

“Are you okay?” I put my hand on Kyndall's arm, keeping my touch light.

“I'm fine, Dean.” She sounded annoyed but didn't shake off my hand.

“What was that about?” I asked as the car behind me pulled away.

“Nothing.” She made a dismissive gesture, her eyes narrowing as she

looked up at me. "I meant what I said. I can handle myself."

"I didn't mean to imply otherwise," I said as I dropped my hand. "I would've stepped in no matter who was involved. No man should put his hands on a woman like that." I gave her what I hoped was a charming smile. "I happen to be a gentleman."

She raised an eyebrow, but her expression was a lot more open than it had been a few seconds ago. "I don't know of many gentlemen who can do to me what you did the last time we saw each other."

She had no idea that what I wanted to do to her now was a hell of a lot less gentlemanly than anything we'd already done.

"Did I not insist that you come first?" I teased. "If that isn't the mark of a gentleman, I don't know what is."

She laughed, and the tension between us shifted to something infinitely more pleasant. "How'd you know how to find me here?"

I frowned, confused. "I didn't. Why *are* you here?"

"I live here." She gestured to the building.

I suddenly began to believe in fate. I stuck my hands in my pockets and smiled. "I really had no idea. I suppose we have to take this as a sign that we were supposed to meet again."

"Maybe." She reached out and brushed her hand across my chest.

My cock stood up and took notice.

"But seriously, what brought you here?" She stiffened slightly, as if something just occurred to her. "If you were here to see someone else, that's okay—"

"I wasn't," I said quickly. "I mean, I was, but not like that." I ran my hand through my hair. "*Bollocks.*"

She laughed, relaxing again. "It's okay, Dean. No explanation needed."

"I was here to see our mutual friends," I said.

Her entire body went still. "What mutual friends?"

Okay, I was a bit confused now. She had to know that she was living in the same building as Dalton and Juliette, right? "Dalton and Juliette. You were at their wedding. I assumed you knew them."

"You're friends with Dalton and Juliette." She took a step back, her expression unreadable. "So when you brought that gift to the house...you're friends of the Breckenridges, then?"

It was an odd question, but I answered it anyway. "Cross Phillips and I met a couple years ago. When I moved to the city, he and Hanna introduced

me to Dalton and Juliette.”

“Shit,” she muttered.

“Is something wrong?”

Things had been going so well, but I got the feeling something happened in the last couple minutes to make it go sideways. Still, it didn't stop me from wanting to kiss her.

She crossed her arms over her chest, the movement enhancing her impressive breasts. “You don't know who I am, do you?”

“You're Kyndall.” I really didn't understand what was going on here.

Her lips twisted into a strange smile. “Kyndall *Letlow*.”

It took a moment for it to sink in.

Letlow.

As in Dalton Letlow.

Shit.

“You're Dalton's...”

“Sister,” she said. “Little sister, actually.”

“*Bollocks*.”

She laughed, a harsh quality to the sound. “Yeah, that pretty much sums it up.”

Shit! I didn't have any siblings, but I was pretty sure I'd be pissed if someone fucked my little sister. If someone wanted to do the things I wanted to do...

“I'll go now.”

I started to turn away, but she grabbed my arm. “Why?”

“Why?” I stared down at her. “Your brother is one of my friends, and he'd kick my ass – well, he'd try anyway – and it's not...”

“He's not the boss of me,” she said. “I do what I want.”

This was a bad idea. A really bad idea.

But I did it anyway.

“And what do you want, Kyndall?”

Her eyes locked onto mine. “You.”

Chapter Seven

KYNDALL

I didn't consider sleeping with Dean a mistake. We'd had fun, and there hadn't been any strings attached. No personal connections.

But now that I knew that Dean was friends with my brother, things changed. Or, rather, it should've changed things. Dalton hadn't been around me much when I'd started dating, but he'd still always been overprotective of me, which I was pretty sure would translate to dating too. I had a feeling that it wouldn't matter how good of a guy Dean was, Dalton wouldn't want the two of us dating, much less hooking up.

But none of that changed the fact that I wanted him again. Maybe one more night would get him out of my system. So when Dean asked me what I wanted, I answered honestly.

His eyes had darkened the moment I told him that he was what I wanted, confirming for me that this wasn't one-sided. I ran my hand up his arm, smiling as I felt the muscles twitch under my palm. Okay, maybe one more night wouldn't be enough, but it'd be a start.

“Want to see my new place?”

“I'm not so sure that's a good idea,” Dean said. He looked like it almost pained him to say it, and I knew he was trying to do what he thought was the right thing.

To hell with that.

“I told you,” I ran my hand down his chest and hooked my fingers in the waistband of his pants, “Dalton's not the boss of me.”

His hand wrapped around my wrist, sending fire licking across my skin. “I should walk away.”

“But you don't want to.” I didn't make it a question. I wasn't one of those women who thought that every man wanted her, but I could tell that Dean did, so unless he left, or flat out told me that he didn't want me, I was going to press the issue.

“No, I don't.” His voice had that low timber to it that made me instantly and embarrassingly wet.

“So come up and see my apartment,” I said. “I'm an adult, Dean, and I make my own decisions. Now, are you going to come upstairs, or do I have to find someone else to show me a good time?”

I had a moment to see something fierce flash across his eyes before his mouth came down on mine, hard and hungry. His grip on my wrist tightened as his tongue swept between my lips. I leaned into him, moaning at the taste of fine wine and him. It didn't seem possible that a single kiss could make me feel so much. It was literally making my knees weak.

I dropped my free hand to his crotch, felt how hard he was. He made a rough, desperate sound, and pushed his hips against my palm. My pussy throbbed, and I was almost reckless enough to unzip him right there. I needed him inside me, and if getting my hands on him was the only way to do that, I'd do it.

“I can't,” Dean said as he pulled his mouth from mine.

For a minute, I thought he was going to walk away, and the disappointment that went through me was stronger than I liked. I could find someone else like I said, but I didn't want someone else.

“I can't do the right thing.” He cupped my face, ran his thumbs across my cheekbones. “I've always thought of myself as a strong man, but when it comes to you...” His voice trailed off as he brushed his lips across mine, eyes closed as he made his decision. “Let's go.”

I took his hand, threading my fingers between his, and led him toward the door. He was right about the smart thing being the two of us just going our separate ways. Dalton would never have to know about the two of us hooking up, and we could stick to polite greetings any time we happened to run into each other, eventually even becoming friends.

I might've been a genius, but that didn't always mean I did the smart thing, and right now, I wasn't going to listen to my head at all.

I smiled at the doorman and led Dean to the elevator. An older couple got on with us, but that didn't stop Dean from sliding his arm around my waist and pulling me back against him. I could feel the hard length of him against

my hip and had to resist the urge to roll my hips.

His fingers splayed out across my stomach, and he lowered his mouth to my ear. “Do you have any idea the sorts of things I want to do to you, love?”

I swallowed hard as I shook my head. Suddenly, I had a feeling that there was a lot more to Dean than I realized...and that I'd gotten myself in way over my head.

“If we were alone here, I'd have you pinned against the wall right now.” He kept his voice quiet, but there was nothing soft about it. “Cup those gorgeous breasts of yours and tease your nipples until they're nice and tight. Grind against you until you're wet and panting.”

He didn't need to do any of that to make me wet. I was already there.

“When we get to your apartment, I'll push up your dress, rip off whatever panties you're wearing, and lick you until you scream.”

My heart was racing, breath coming in harsh pants.

“Then I'll bend you over the closest surface and fuck you until we both come.”

He nipped my earlobe, and I barely managed to stop a whimper.

“And that's just to get things started.”

Fuck me. I was *definitely* in over my head.

“But since we're not alone,” he continued, “I suppose I shall just have to be content with telling you that I haven't been able to stop thinking about how you felt wrapped around my cock. That it was your mouth and cunt I imagined every time I had to stroke myself to release in the shower this week.”

If he kept this up, I was fairly certain I'd come before we got to the apartment.

And then the doors dinged open on my floor, and we followed the couple into the hallway. His hand rested lightly on my hip as I punched in my key code to the door, but the moment we stepped inside, his grip tightened, and he spun me around. I caught my breath, surprised even though he'd told me what he was going to do.

My back hit the door, slamming it closed, and he buried his hands in my hair, leaned his body against mine, pinning me in place. His kiss was just as fierce as it had been outside, all tongue and teeth. It made my legs tremble, my skin hot.

I moaned as his lips moved across my jaw and down my neck. Then he was on his knees, pushing up my dress. I felt a slight sting as he ripped my

panties off, but then his mouth was on me, and that was all I cared about.

He held me firm as he ran his tongue between my legs, bold strokes without any hesitation or gentleness. The part of me that was still riding high from the adrenaline of the game and the confrontation with Stanley didn't want Dean to be gentle. I wanted the man who'd told me what he wanted to do to me. I wanted it all. Needed it.

As heat and pleasure coiled inside me, it looked like I was getting exactly that. His lips circled my clit, and I moaned, digging my fingers into his hair. He sucked hard on that little bundle of nerves, making me push my hips closer to his mouth, eager for more. And he complied, increasing suction until it was almost painful.

"Please, Dean." I pulled on his hair, and he raised his head, his mouth glistening with my arousal.

"Please, what, love?"

"Make me come. Fuck me. I don't care, just do one of them."

One corner of his mouth quirked up, and his eyes locked on mine as he pushed his middle two fingers inside me. I let out a strange yelping sound, then swore as he twisted the long digits. He fucked me with short, almost brutal thrusts, not quite hurting me, but close enough that I rode the line between pain and pleasure until pleasure won out and I came.

My knees buckled, but he caught me before I hit the floor. He picked me up, carrying me over to the small love seat I'd purchased last year. Instead of laying me down on it, however, he set my feet back on the floor and bent me over the arm, flipping up my dress. My brain was still reeling, so I only half-registered the sound of a zipper and a wrapper tearing.

He buried himself inside me without warning or finesse, driving out a half-strangled cry. Not that there wasn't skill involved. It took a hell of a lot of skill to do what he was doing without hurting me in a bad way. The good way stretched me around him as he filled me over and over with hard, deep strokes.

"Come on, love, one more time before I go."

I nodded, as if there was anything I could actually do to make it happen. I was having a hard enough time simply staying on my feet. This wasn't what I had in mind when I asked him up to my apartment, but I wasn't going to complain, not with so many intense sensations coursing across my nerves, and pleasure coiling into something hot and tight low in my belly.

Without missing a single stroke, one hand slid around my hip to find my

throbbing clit. I squeezed my eyes closed as he made brisk circles over and around it, each pass almost harsh, keeping me on that near-painful edge. It felt like every inch of my body was on fire, overly aware of each touch, feeling more than should've been possible. Every movement pushed me closer until I finally exploded. He followed me quickly, his body stiffening behind me.

We rested there, neither of us talking or moving as our breathing slowed. As I came down, I realized that we hadn't undressed at all. The only piece of clothing that'd been removed was my panties, and they were somewhere over by the door. I still had my shoes on, and I was pretty sure Dean hadn't even taken off his pants.

I tried not to be disappointed as he pulled out. I hadn't asked for the night. A quickie that had gotten me two orgasms wasn't anything to blow off. Besides, it'd done what I'd wanted and released a lot of the tension I'd been feeling. A long, hot bath, and I'd probably be able to sleep tonight after all.

Dean's hands were gentle as he helped me stand up, smoothing down my dress so I wasn't completely exposed. I looked up at him as he leaned down and brushed his lips across mine, his eyes glowing a rich, deep blue.

“Now that we've taken the edge off, we can go about things a bit slower.”
Oh.

The night continued to defy my expectations.

Even though I'd led the way through my apartment, showing Dean each room, I felt like I was following him. Once we'd reached my bedroom, there was no doubt as to who was in charge.

Which was why, ten minutes later, I was laying on my bed, hands gripping the headboard, legs spread wide, while Dean stared down at me like a kid in a candy store. A hungry kid.

And I was definitely the candy.

“Keep your hands on that headboard until I give you permission to let go,” he ordered. “I plan on fucking you one more time tonight, but not until you beg.”

One part of me wanted to resist, tell him that there was no way in hell that I'd be begging, but I knew it was all posturing. Having had him inside me twice hadn't been nearly enough to satisfy my appetite, and I was already willing to do almost anything to have it again.

Including telling him where my vibrator was when he asked. I'd had a guy once make a joke about fuzzy handcuffs, but not a single sexual experience of mine had included a guy using a toy, especially not one of mine. If I'd ever thought about it, I probably would've said that since I got enough use out of mine when I was alone, I'd never considered using it with someone else. Now, however, it looked like I was going to find out whether or not it would be worth using with another person.

The silicone shaft slid into me easily, not nearly filling me as much as Dean's cock had, but when the vibrating tip brushed against my clit, I still gasped. One of the reasons I bought this one had been for the dual functions it offered, clitoral stimulation and penetration. I'd always preferred both.

“When you're ready for me to fuck you, beg,” he instructed. “Not a simple *please*, but real, true pleading.”

As he turned on the vibrator, sending a shudder through me, I wondered if I should just start begging now. Then I looked at his face, and something primal in me responded to the light in his eyes. He didn't want me to make it easy on him...or on myself. And even though we weren't in a relationship, I wanted to please him.

So I gave myself over to it – to him – determined to last as long as I could. When he lowered his head to my breasts, licking across first one nipple, and then the other, I arched my back, wanting more. The cool air made my wet nipples tighten into hard pebbles, and when he flicked them with his fingers, my body jerked at the new sensation. He repeated the movement, and my fingers flexed on the headboard.

He played my body like a master musician with his instrument, each touch intended to maximize what I was feeling. Short thrusts with the vibrator that gave my sensitive clit barely enough time to register the change before it was being stimulated again. His mouth on mine, tongue caressing mine so that I could taste myself, teeth biting at my lips until they felt swollen. Then tongue and teeth on my breasts, nipping and licking across my skin and over my nipples. Fingers tugging and twisting until the darker flesh was standing up. Touch hard enough to bruise, but not damage. I'd feel every inch of it tomorrow, and it would only be that much sweeter knowing how well I'd done.

My first climax hit me out of nowhere, rolling over me like a wave. His teeth latched onto my nipple as he pushed the vibrator as deep as it could go, the part pressing against my clit hard enough to make me swear, but none of

that took me out of my orgasm. If anything, it caught me tighter, pulled me deeper, until I felt like I'd been caught in some sort of undertow, drowning in pleasure so intense that it brought tears to my eyes.

I screamed his name, my grip tightening on the headboard until the muscles in my arms burned. But I couldn't let go because I was still coming. His fingers and mouth drove me from one climax into the next until I couldn't think straight, couldn't breathe, couldn't do anything other than sob his name, and, finally, beg for him to fuck me. When he removed the vibrator, I fell back against the bed, every muscle in my body limp.

I hovered there for what felt like an eternity, until I felt pressure against my ass, and my eyes flew open. He was watching me carefully, and I wondered if it was because he wanted to see my expression or if he was waiting for me to protest. I didn't though. I trusted him to make me feel good. He'd already proven that he could.

“Relax, love,” he said. He brushed a kiss across my lower belly, then pushed, the tip of his finger breaching me.

“Dean...” I squirmed, unsure how I felt about the slight burn.

“Is this the first time?”

I nodded.

A dark sort of triumph crossed his face. “I'm going to make you come one more time with my fingers, love, and then I'm going to fuck you until you see stars.”

Any other man, I would've thought they were bragging, but I didn't doubt for a moment that Dean could do it.

Then his finger was pushing deeper inside, and a sharp burst of pain shot out from the stretched muscle.

“Fuck!” The word came out in a half-whine, half-shout.

“Fucking tight,” he muttered.

I searched for some snarky comment, but nothing came before he slid two fingers into my pussy. With the sort of rhythm that told me he'd had a decent amount of practice at this, he began to work his fingers in and out of me, twisting them so that they rubbed against each other. The burn didn't fade, but the pain did, blurring into the heat until I had an entirely new type of pressure building inside me.

“Are you close?” His voice sounded strained.

I nodded. “Can I touch you?”

His gaze flew up to mine, surprise showing.

“Please, Dean. I want to...need to touch...need my hands on you...” The words fell out in a rush, stumbling over each other in my desperation.

When he nodded, I released the headboard, my fingers stiff and protesting as I reached for him. My hands moved over his broad shoulders and down his arms where I could feel his muscles rippling under his golden skin. When his thumb started to move over my clit, I dug my nails into his flesh and came.

I was still coming when he slammed into me, and I did indeed see stars. Bursts of light sparked across my vision as he took me hard and fast, pelvis rubbing against my aching clit, nipples pressed against his chest. He was everywhere. Over me, inside me, around me. His scent and presence filled me, made me wonder if I'd ceased to exist as myself, if I was now and forever a part of him.

And the thought didn't disturb me as it should have.

I pushed the thoughts aside, and let myself fall into the white-hot orgasm shattering me. There was no past or future, only this moment, and that was what I clung to as he groaned my name. Only the present mattered.

Chapter Eight

KYNDALL

I'd known that night with Dean would stick with me, but I hadn't realized just how much. After he'd basically fucked me into unconsciousness, we'd stayed in my bed for a bit, not talking, and not really cuddling, even though we'd been touching. Before either of us had fallen asleep, though, he'd asked to use my shower, and I'd known he was getting ready to leave. I hadn't asked him to stay even though the words had been on the tip of my tongue. I hadn't wanted him to think that I was asking for anything more than what we were already doing.

He'd been polite when he'd said goodnight, and there'd been none of the awkwardness I'd tried to avoid by leaving the first time. That'd just made me want him to stay even more.

I spent the first two days of the new week filling my apartment. I'd had enough furniture in Cambridge to fill my place there, but I hadn't sent for all of it, and there was a space difference, so I had some shopping to do. Furniture. Appliances. Electronics. A shit load of décor.

Since money wasn't an issue, I assumed it'd be simple enough to find what I needed, but as soon as I started looking, I realized that it wasn't about simply finding random pieces that I needed. I finally had a chance to make a home, to make choices based on what I wanted. I could've hired an interior decorator, and I knew a lot of people with the kind of money I had would've done just that. I decided that I'd rather have fun.

The last of my furniture had already been delivered, so I'd spent the earlier part of the day trying to decide what I wanted to do for the sadly bare walls. Finally, I'd settled on art. I didn't know many people in the city, but

one of the things I'd learned from Juliette in the past couple days was that if I wanted to go somewhere, asking someone who drove for a living was probably a good idea.

So I'd called for a car and asked the driver to take me somewhere I could get good art that wasn't pretentious. A half hour later, I walked into a small gallery in Venice Beach. The owner asked a couple questions, then started to show me various pieces. To my surprise, he didn't talk down to me or act like I couldn't afford any of the things I was looking at. Which was probably why I ended up buying half a dozen pieces from him, a variety of artists who all complemented each other without being repetitive.

As I walked around the apartment, trying to find the best place to hang the first piece, I made a mental note to check my accounts. I needed to know where I stood now that I had most of the big purchases out of the way. All I needed now was a car, but I didn't go flashy with that sort of thing, so the cost wouldn't be unreasonable. I didn't think I was anywhere near hurting, but it was always good to keep track of things so I didn't get too low to buy into a good game. I'd done that once before, forcing me to borrow from a less than scrupulous man. I paid him back after one game, but I'd had to essentially start over. It taught me that I never wanted to do that again. So now, I was extra careful.

I hung the abstract painting and then turned to get another. By the time the alarm on my phone went off, I had things right where I wanted them, for now anyway. I'd probably rearrange a dozen times before I finally fixed on what worked best. I was hoping to make LA my new home, so I wasn't going to settle for anything half-way. If I didn't like something, I'd change it until it was perfect.

But right now, I had more important things to do.

I smiled as I headed toward the door. I wasn't one of those women who were huge fans of little kids, but I'd fallen in love with Anthony the moment I'd seen him. When Juliette had called yesterday to ask if I'd babysit tonight for a few hours, I'd been thrilled to accept. I only hoped that meant Dalton was showing a little more faith in me than our parents did.

Taking care of Anthony would give me the chance to show my brother that he should believe me when I said I could do something, but that wasn't the main reason I was doing it. I hadn't gotten to know Lia's kids very well, and I wanted to be a good aunt. Anthony was my chance to do that without giving up my independence by moving closer to my parents.

I took the elevator up a floor and knocked on their door. Juliette answered, a harried expression on her face. "You're just in time."

That sounded ominous.

When I walked inside, however, I couldn't help but laugh. Anthony was sitting in the middle of the floor, covered in something that was either baby powder or flour, maybe powdered sugar. Whatever it was, it was all over him, and all over the floor.

And he looked quite pleased with himself.

"I'm not even close to ready, Kyndall," Juliette said as she gestured toward her son. "Would you mind...?"

"I've got him." I chuckled as I headed for the little guy. "You go do what you have to do."

"Thank you." She breathed a sigh of relief.

I stood over Anthony as he looked up at me with those big, beautiful eyes of his. "You're quite the handful, aren't you?"

He laughed, clapping his hands together. I crouched in front of him and brushed some of the powder from his hair. I raised my hand and licked the tip of my finger. Powdered sugar. An empty plastic container sat beside him, and I had to admit that I was impressed with the fact that he'd managed to take off the lid.

"I was in the shower for ten minutes, and he managed to do this."

I looked up as Dalton came into the living room, his hair still wet as he pulled on a shirt. His tone was half exasperation, half pride.

"I'll take care of it," I said, straightening.

"Are you sure you aren't too tired from...work?"

I gave him a mild look. "I always have time for family."

He raised an eyebrow. "Is that what kept you back East for the past six years?"

"No," I shot back. "That would be earning a doctorate in mathematics from MIT."

He shrugged it off with the same easygoing grin he always used. Dalton was a strong guy, but he'd always been laid-back. He had to be pushed hard to push back.

Case in point, rather than sticking with the issue, he changed the subject. "How are you settling in?"

"Good," I said as I walked into the kitchen.

When I came back out with a damp paper towel, a question was lingering

in the back of my mind. It'd been there ever since I discovered that Dean knew my brother, but I'd been trying to ignore it. Aside from the fact that I didn't particularly want my brother to get involved in my business, I wasn't sure I wanted Dalton to know that I'd slept with Dean.

Dalton had Anthony on his knee when I came back in, and he held his squirming child while I cleaned off his face. He was definitely a natural.

“So, where are you and Juliette off to?”

A flush spread up Dean's neck. “A club.”

“Really?” I picked Anthony up. “Maybe I'll have to come with you some time. I haven't been to a good club in a while.”

His eyes went wide for just a moment, sparking my curiosity.

“You do know I'm old enough to drink, right?” I kissed Anthony's forehead.

“Juliette mentioned something about a new guy at work about your age,” Dalton said quickly. “She thought you two might hit it off. I'll have her give him your phone number.”

“I've actually met someone.” Shit. I hadn't meant to blurt it out like that.

“Really?” Dalton's eyes narrowed. “At work? It's usually not a good idea to get involved with someone you work with.”

“Are you serious, Dalton? You're going to give me dating advice?” I laughed as I shook my head. “I love Anthony and Juliette, but your relationship isn't exactly the best example of a traditional progression.”

“I want to meet him.”

I took a slow breath and bounced Anthony on my hip. “Actually, you already know him.”

“Who?” Dalton stood.

“I met him after the wedding,” I continued, “but I didn't know the two of you knew each other until later.”

“After the wedding? Who would you have met after the wedding?”

“Um...” Fuck. I glanced back toward the bedroom, but Juliette was still back there.

“Kyndall.”

I hated the way Dalton said my name, like I was some child he was reprimanding. Why was it, when I wanted him to be all laid-back about something, that was when he chose to dig in his heels?

“Dean, okay? Dean Stokes.”

Myriad emotions flashed across Dean's face, but they quickly disappeared

behind the bull-headedness I'd seen only a couple times growing up. "No way in hell are you dating him."

Even though I'd expected a similar reaction, I bristled. "That's really not your call, is it?" I didn't bother to tell him that Dean and I weren't actually *dating*.

"He's too old for you, Kyndall."

I hadn't even thought about age. "If he's not our parents' ages, I don't think that's an issue."

"He's too old, and I'll be damned if I let him date my little sister."

"Like I said, it's not your call." I clenched my teeth. "I can date or sleep with anyone I want."

"I really don't want to hear that." Dalton ran his hand through his hair.

"Tough," I said bullishly. "If I want to see Dean, if I want to fu—" I glanced at Anthony. "If I want to sleep with Dean, I'm going to."

"Look, Kyndall, Dean's a nice guy, but you don't need to be around him in...*that* way." Dalton's expression was hard. "He's way too experienced. Stay away."

Before I could argue any further, Juliette emerged, and they hurried off, leaving me with a mess to clean up, and a night to try to figure out exactly what my brother had meant by *too experienced*. Something about the way he said the words had me thinking that there was more to it than just regular sex. Dalton knew something about Dean that he wasn't telling me.

Chapter Nine

DEAN

I was fairly certain I'd gone about this whole thing in the wrong way. I'd assumed that my inability to forget my night with Kyndall needed to be processed like some sort of hunger. Once I'd had my fill, I'd be satisfied and able to move on. When she told me that Dalton was her brother, I tried to walk away, telling myself that I didn't need to be with her. I could find another woman to satiate my appetite.

Then I'd seen the hunger in her eyes when she said that she wanted me. How was I supposed to resist that? It would've taken a stronger man than me to have turned down a woman like Kyndall, no matter how complicated my friendship with her brother may have made things.

Besides, once I had her again, I'd be able to walk away. One more night, and I wouldn't want her anymore. We'd part as two consenting adults who'd enjoyed each other's company. We were clear about where we stood. As long as Dalton didn't find out, things would continue on as if nothing had happened.

I'd managed to keep that train of thought the entire way up to her apartment. Then, my mouth had been on her, and I hadn't thought of anything else until we were lying in her bed together and I hadn't wanted to leave.

By the time I said goodbye, I'd known that I'd been wrong about comparing my desire for her to a hunger. That implied a point at which satisfaction was achieved and a period of time before the need reappeared. The moment I'd left Kyndall's apartment, I'd wanted her again. She was an addiction, something my body craved. Having her again had only made me want her more.

I couldn't give in though. It was bad enough that I'd had sex with Kyndall twice now – well, technically more than that, but it'd taken place on only two days, so I was going to only count it as twice – but I knew that if Dalton found out, he'd be pissed. The first time, I could claim that I hadn't known who she was, but the other night, I hadn't had the same excuse.

I muttered a curse under my breath as I accepted a glass of Highland Park from the scantily-clad waitress. Club employees were off-limits when they were working, but that didn't stop her from trying to catch my eye. The tall brunette had been overly attentive the last few times I'd been here, and I knew she was hoping I'd want to see her during her off hours, but I wasn't interested. She was trying too hard, which told me the sort of Sub she would be. I preferred women who knew who they were and what they wanted, and that was why they chose to submit.

I sipped at the alcohol as I considered my problem. I wanted to see Kyndall again, but I didn't want to risk my friendship with Dalton to do it. I'd known Cross longer, but I considered both men to be friends, and I didn't have that many here. I tended to keep people at arm's length, not wanting to risk their rejection if they discovered the sort of lifestyle I preferred, but those two, and their wives, were already a part of that world.

Kyndall wasn't. I was almost positive of that. She owned her sexuality, but she wasn't like the women here. If I could've written her off for that, though, things wouldn't have been so complicated. The way she'd obeyed me when I told her to grab onto the headboard told me that she could have submissive tendencies, the kind that could allow her to be molded into the type of Sub I'd always dreamed of. One who wasn't one hundred percent submissive by nature, but chose to submit to please me.

The thought was enough to send blood straight to my cock. I knew I should stop right there, but it was too late. It would haunt me until I allowed it to play out. I closed my eyes and let the fantasy take over.

I walked into the room and took a moment to admire her. She knelt in the center of the room, hands behind her back, knees shoulder-width apart, head up, but eyes down. Her sun-kissed skin was flawless, and the lack of tan lines would've pissed me off if I hadn't already known that she went to a private spa where no man would get to see her gorgeous body.

That was for me alone, and she knew it. She was mine.

Mine.

I'd always thought of myself as an enlightened sort of guy. Some people

thought the whole Dom / Sub relationship was a caveman kind of thing. Bossing the woman around and all that. But there were plenty of women who were the Dominants in their relationships. And I'd never had that sort of primal, visceral reaction...until her.

She was mine, and I didn't care how caveman that made me sound.

“Are you ready for me, love?” I brushed my hand over her hair, loving how she automatically leaned into my touch. Some Doms would've scolded a Sub for even that slight movement, but I never did. I loved that she craved my touch so much.

“Always.”

I moved around to stand in front of her, unzipping my pants as I went. “I want your mouth first, love. And then I'm going to fuck your ass, so make sure you get me nice and wet.”

I shifted in my seat, reaching down to adjust myself. I hadn't had the pleasure of having her mouth around my cock, but I'd felt the wet heat with my tongue, and I could imagine how amazing it would feel. I let myself drift back into the fantasy, preferring it even to the two women doing a scene on stage.

Her tongue moved around and over my shaft, teased across the tip of my cock. She was a natural, quickly learning the things that I liked, including some that I hadn't even known until she'd done them.

I let her take me to the edge, then tugged her hair to signal to her to pull back. Her lips were swollen, glistening, eyes glazed. I reached down to cup her breast, ran my thumb over her hard nipple. She moaned.

“Hands and knees,” I instructed. “Ass in the air.”

She turned immediately, positioning herself exactly how I wanted, leaning forward on her elbows, her nipples brushing the plush carpet. Her bare lips were damp, inviting, but it wasn't her pussy I wanted right now. I'd have that later. Right now, I wanted that tight ring of muscle wrapped around my cock.

I drained my drink and swapped out my empty glass for the new one the waitress brought. I could still feel what it'd been like to have my finger in her ass, and I knew my imagination couldn't do justice to how it would feel to be the first one to fuck her there.

I wanted to be the first. I wanted to see all the different ways I could make her come, explore her body, watch her come apart in my arms.

And that was the problem. I could see plenty of women around here that I would've been fine fucking a couple weeks ago. One word and we'd be in one

of the private rooms, or back at her place. With a woman from the club, all we'd need was an established safe word, and we'd be good to go. Handcuffs, crops, ball gags, clamps – without a safe word, they'd all be on the table. And if I wanted someone's ass, I knew at least half the women here wouldn't just be okay with it, but enjoy it. Prefer it, even.

I didn't want any of those women, though, and it was pissing me off. I'd worked hard to get where I was, and while I'd had some advantages, nothing had been handed to me. Female attention, however, had always come easily. I wasn't used to wanting a woman I couldn't have.

As I worked my way through my second drink, I wondered if things would be going down a different path if Kyndall wasn't Dalton's sister. From my side of things, I was already feeling guilty about having slept with my friend's little sister, but if I didn't have that guilt, I would've tried to see her again. I just didn't know if that was what she would want.

“Dean!”

A man's voice carried over the music. A familiar man's voice.

Dalton.

Shit.

I looked over and saw him and Juliette walking toward me. Judging by the expression on his face, either I'd done something I didn't know about, or he'd found out about me and Kyndall. I was betting on the latter.

I stood. “Dalton. Juliette.”

“Hey, Dean.” Juliette smiled at me, nothing in her greeting saying she'd learned anything new recently.

“Did you sleep with my sister, Stokes?”

Juliette gave him a startled look, but he didn't look at her. Instead, he took a step toward me.

“Did you have sex with my little sister?”

“Dalton.” Juliette sounded appalled.

“I'm sorry, but that's not your business.” I kept my tone easy, reminding myself that he was just being overprotective. “If she wants to tell you anything, that's up to her.”

“I'll take that as a yes.” Dalton's eyes flashed, and he came even closer. “Did you know who she was when you did it?”

The fact that he was asking meant he didn't know the details, and I didn't intend to be the one who explained. That wasn't my place. He was my friend, but she was his sister. She had the right to decide how much he knew or

didn't know.

“Dalton.” Juliette put her hand on her husband's arm. “Take a step back.”

He looked like he wanted to argue, but her fingers flexed, and he did as she said. It didn't, however, stop him from asking another question, “Have you been giving her money?”

I blinked, surprised by the question. “No.”

He gave me a hard look. “Do you know where she works?”

I shook my head again and bit back a comment about how Kyndall and I hadn't really talked when we'd been together. That would've been a monumentally stupid thing to say to an overprotective brother.

“She's got an apartment in the same building as us,” he frowned as he said it. “And I have no clue how in the hell she's paying for it.”

I glanced at Juliette, who shrugged, like that was a help. I turned back to Dalton. “That might be something you need to talk to Kyndall about.”

The muscle in his jaw clenched. “I don't know what happened between the two of you, but whatever it was, it's over right now. Stay away from my sister, Dean. I mean it.”

Chapter Ten

KYNDALL

First, I cleaned up the mess Anthony had made while he watched from the safety of his playpen. Fortunately, he seemed to be fascinated with what I was doing and didn't cry. Or he could've just been on a bit of a sugar high. Either way, I was grateful that he wasn't crying.

I looked over the list of instructions Juliette had left next. Her mother had given me a list twice as long when I'd watched Anthony before, and I wondered if it was because Mrs. Breckenridge had gone overboard, or because Juliette knew me better. It was probably something in between.

The next couple hours were busy as I got Anthony fed, changed, bathed, and then got him put to bed. It was tiring but satisfying in a way that was different from anything else I'd done. I wasn't ready to have one of my own, not yet, but as I settled back down on the couch, I realized I could see a future with kids in it.

That hadn't always been the case. One of the things about doing so much at a young age, I always felt like I had to keep up with the people I considered my peers, even though they were older than me. Relationships, however, had been the one place where I hadn't needed to worry. Women who went to graduate school could focus on work and not be expected to get married and have kids right away. So I'd never really let myself think about it in anything more than the vaguest of ideas. The fact that I hadn't had any serious relationships made it easy.

Now, I was starting to think that a family might be something I wanted.

I sighed as I leaned my head back and closed my eyes. There were two problems with thinking that way.

One, my current employment didn't exactly scream "mother of the year."
Two, Dean.

I wasn't in a serious relationship with anyone, and I wanted to be before I started thinking kids. I didn't have anything against single moms, and if I had to be one, I would, but it wasn't the path I preferred to take. I was pretty sure Dean wasn't the sort of guy who wanted anything serious, and that was okay because I hadn't slept with him with that in mind. I'd only wanted sex. But now, I couldn't stop thinking about him, which meant I wasn't open to meeting anyone else.

I needed to get him out of my head, but the thrumming in my body at just the thought of him said it wouldn't be as easy as I hoped. I hadn't had any expectations when I'd brought him to my apartment. Nothing apart from orgasms anyway. I'd had other one-night stands or casual flings that lasted a week or two, and my time with Dean should've been the same.

So why couldn't I stop thinking about him? Why could I still feel his hands on my body? That'd never happened to me before. Even when I'd masturbated, my fantasies had been about anonymous men whose faces I never focused on. Since sleeping with Dean, he was the only person I could see when I closed my eyes. And it wasn't only his body I saw, or even his face. I couldn't stop myself from seeing his eyes. The way they'd darkened when he'd looked at me, the heat and desire that he didn't even try to hide.

I sighed, mentally cursing myself for having slept with Dean in the first place. I should've just gone back to the hotel after the wedding, gotten a good night's sleep, and then dealt with my parents the next morning. It wasn't like LA was devoid of hot guys who'd be willing to have sex with no strings attached. I could've gone out at any other point and found someone.

But I hadn't, and there wasn't really a point in wishing that things had been different. It wouldn't change anything. All I could do was move forward from here.

I'd go out this weekend, I decided. Do some exploring. If I was going to make this place home, I needed to do more than go to clubs for dancing, drinking, sex, and the occasional poker game.

Maybe I'd talk to Juliette about asking Hanna if the two of them wanted to come. I'd always been a bit of a loner, mostly because of my age, and the thought of having two women I could talk to was appealing. Even though they were both married and had kids, I'd gotten the impression that we'd have other things in common, including the fact that they didn't seem to surround

themselves with tons of people.

I was finished with school, had my own place in a city where I wanted to settle down. It was time to start building a life here. Not something that I could pick up and leave without much thought like I had with Cambridge. Now that I had all of my things here, I didn't really miss it. No, I wanted to build something real here. The kind of thing that Dalton had with Juliette. Something real and lasting.

I pulled my hair out of my ponytail and massaged my sore scalp. A knot of anxiety and anticipation coiled in my stomach. I'd spent so much time thinking about when I'd be on my own, when I'd have a life I could control, that I hadn't given much thought to what I was actually going to do when I got there.

I heard someone at the door and turned toward it, frowning as I heard Juliette's and Dalton's raised voices before they stepped inside.

"And I'm telling you, Dalton, that you're out of line, no matter how noble your intentions may be."

Juliette's normally pleasant voice was tense, and I got to my feet, wondering if I should duck back into the hallway and wait for them to either call for me or come back to Anthony's room. I wasn't foolish enough to think that because I'd never heard them argue that they didn't, but it didn't make things any less awkward.

"Kyndall!" Dalton practically shouted my name and my head jerked up.

"Dalton, keep your voice down," Juliette snapped. "Anthony's sleeping."

I was glad she'd remembered because I was too shocked by the way my brother was glowering at me to remember much of anything at the moment. Dalton crossed the few feet between us in several angry strides and looked down at me like he had that time when we were kids, and he'd caught me pulling his *Playboys* out from under his mattress.

I frowned. Had Anthony made a mess I hadn't seen? That had to be it because there wasn't anything else Dalton could be so pissed about. Unless...the thought hit me suddenly. Dean. Shit.

"You had sex with Dean Stokes?"

"Leave it alone, Dalton," Juliette hissed.

"Why?" He didn't look at her. "Dean said if I wanted to know what happened, then I should ask her."

"You saw Dean?" I tried to ignore the way my heart skipped a beat at his name. Nothing good would come of that.

“That's not what he said, Dalton, and you know it.” Juliette's arms were folded across her chest, every line of her body tense. “He said that if Kyndall wanted you to know what happened between them, she'd tell you.”

“I want to know, Kyndall. Did you *fuck* my friend?”

A spark of temper flared, and I glared up at him. “That's none of your damn business, Dalton! I'm an adult, in case you've forgotten. If I want to go out to a club and take home a couple of guys to *fuck*, I can.”

Color flooded his face. “Don't be crude.”

“You started it,” I shot back.

“That's mature.”

Juliette threw up her hands. “I'm going to check on our son.” She shot a withering glance at Dalton and then headed toward Anthony's room.

I blew out a sharp breath. I didn't want to fight with my brother. Not over this. “Look, Dalton, I know you're just trying to protect me, but I've been basically living on my own for six years. I've had sex. I've gotten drunk. So have you. Unless you want me to start asking all sorts of questions about the things you've done in your life, don't do it to me.”

“He's too old for you—”

“I'm not having this conversation with you again, Dalton. Who I sleep with is my business, no one else's. If I want your opinion, I'll ask.” I kept my chin up, my voice even.

“Is he giving you money?”

Okay, not the way I saw the conversation going. “What?”

“Money, Kyndall. You met him after the wedding, and then you suddenly have enough money to put a deposit down on an apartment that you could never afford—”

“Dalton Emerson Letlow,” I said his full name slowly, giving him the time to know that I'd gone from pissed to full-out angry. “I'm really hoping that you just didn't think before you spoke, because if you actually *meant* to imply that I let your friend pay to fuck me, then we're going to have a serious problem.”

“You said *what?!?*” Juliette barely kept her voice down. “What the hell happened while I was gone?”

“I didn't say that,” Dalton said.

“It sounded an awful lot like it,” I said tightly. “But I'm going to pretend that your question wasn't insulting and answer it anyway. No. Dean hasn't given me any money. But where I got the money for my apartment isn't any

of your concern.”

“I’m just trying to look out for you.”

I glared at him. I knew he was telling the truth, but that didn't mean I had to like the way he was doing it, and I wasn't going to pretend it was okay.

“I took care of myself fine at MIT. I can take care of myself here.”

“I just don't want you doing something you'll regret because you think you have to prove something.”

I'd had enough, and it took all of my self-control to keep from shouting. “First of all, I have a fucking *Ph.D.* from MIT, and no student loans to pay off. I did it all on my own, so I don't know what the *hell* you think I would need to prove.”

He opened his mouth, but I pointed at him, and he shut it again.

“And second of all, talking about something I'd regret makes it sound like you're calling me a prostitute. Again.”

“I'm not,” he insisted. “I just know that there are some types of jobs that you might regret having done later on in life. Like when you want to get married or have kids.”

“You mean like my choice of vocation.”

Juliette's voice was cold, and I turned toward her, surprised, both by her tone and her words. She was a caterer, and a damn good one, judging by the apartment. What did that have anything to do with this conversation?

“Juliette.”

Her name sounded more like a warning than I thought it should have. Dalton should've been apologizing for whatever it was Juliette thought he was saying. Instead, he sounded like he was telling her to be quiet.

“No, Dalton, I think your sister deserves to know a bit more about us, especially since you're trying to sound all high and mighty.” She turned to me. “He's worried that you're doing something similar to me. Doing the things I did before Anthony was born.”

I was confused but didn't interrupt. I had a feeling this was part of what had made Juliette so riled when they'd first come in, but now it seemed to be connecting to my conversation with Dalton, so I kept quiet and waited. If she wanted me to leave, she'd tell me.

“That's different,” he protested.

“How, Dalton? You want to explain to your sister, and me, how your comments implying your sister is doing something...*improper* to make a living has nothing to do with us meeting when I was supplementing my

income being a dominatrix.”

Everything went quiet. Like pin-dropping quiet.

I really shouldn't have heard that. Dalton was clearly not happy, and now I had some mental images of my sister-in-law that I couldn't unsee.

“We didn't meet when you were...I didn't pay...”

If the situation had been different, I might've been amused by my brother stumbling over his words. This wasn't even close to funny though.

“No, that was two consenting adults having sex because they wanted to,” she replied. “But you knew what I was doing, and you didn't seem to have a problem with it when it was me, but heaven forbid your little sister act like her own person.”

“You stopped doing that when you got pregnant.”

“I stopped when you and I decided we were going to see if we worked as a couple.”

Something crossed his face, and I decided that I didn't want to be here anymore, not even if Juliette didn't mind.

“Would you have kept doing it if we hadn't started dating? How long would you have kept at it even when you were pregnant with our son?”

I started to make my way toward the door. Neither one even glanced at me.

“Do you want another Sub?” Dalton's voice cracked.

Yeah, definitely time to go.

No matter how freaked out I was about Juliette's revelation, or how unsettled I felt about things between Dalton and me, this was a private conversation that I didn't need to be a part of.

Chapter Eleven

DEAN

Well, that was a complete and utter fuck-up.

Aside from a couple good drinks, everything else about tonight had been a bust. I hadn't been having much fun outside of my little fantasies, and then Dalton had shown up to tell me, in no uncertain terms, to stay away from Kyndall.

I respected his place as her brother, and as his friend, I should respect his request, even if it had actually been more of an order. But I still wanted her. If I pursued her, though, it could drive a wedge between her and her brother, and that was the last thing I wanted to do. Ruining my friendship would be bad enough. Being responsible for ruining a family was something else entirely.

I yanked my shirt over my head and tossed it onto the sofa. This whole thing was fucked up. I wanted her but knew that going after her would have the sort of repercussions I wasn't willing to risk. My only option was to sit back and wait to see what happened. To see if I could forget her and move on to the next person. To see if, by some fluke, Kyndall and I ran into each other, and I could convince her to...to do what, exactly? Go on a date? Sleep with me again?

I had no fucking idea.

I'd just undone my belt, flicked open the button of my slacks, and was ready to step into the bathroom when someone knocked on my door. I sighed, running my hand over my hair as I walked back over to it. I hadn't ordered any room service or anything like that, but the hotel had occasionally sent some perks up to me over the past six months, and some expensive alcohol

sounded good at the moment.

Except when I opened the door, it wasn't a hotel employee standing on the other side, staring at my bare chest.

“Kyndall.”

“Can I come in?” She still wasn't looking at my face, but her eyes had moved away from my torso to some fixed point behind me.

“Of course.” I stepped back, my answer and actions coming before any true consideration of what I should say or do.

Dalton had told me to stay away, but she had come to me. She was an adult, and this was her choice. I wouldn't pressure her into anything. Besides, she looked like she could use a friend, and while I wasn't sure I really counted as one, she must have thought of me like that in some way since she was here.

These were all the things I told myself as I closed the door and followed her farther into the room.

“Did you tell Dalton that you and I slept together?”

Her question had an edge that told me my answer would shape the way everything between us went from here.

I gave her the truth. “I told him that you were an adult and that if you wanted him to know anything about your personal life, you would tell him.”

She nodded, her lips pressed together in a straight line. I took a step toward her, my hands clenching into fists so I wouldn't touch her. I wanted to be closer to her, comfort her, but I was going to stick with my decision to let her make a move here. I couldn't bring myself to walk away, but I could at least give Dalton this: I could let it be her choice.

She ruffled her hair in the sort of absent-minded way that told me it was a nervous gesture. “I babysat for Dalton and Juliette tonight. When I got to their place earlier, Dalton said something about me going on a date with a guy Juliette knew.”

The stab of jealousy I felt surprised me, but I didn't say anything. She had a story to tell and I was going to let her.

“I told him that I'd already met someone,” she continued. “He kept pushing until I said it was you. He told me that you were too old and too experienced for me.”

She finally looked straight at me. Shit. That wasn't a conversation I wanted to have right now, but I could at least get one question out of the way, especially since it was one I'd been turning over in the back of my head since

I found out who she was.

“I'm thirty-one.”

She nodded but didn't freak out. “Twenty-two.”

Okay, a bit younger than I usually went for, but not jailbait. If it didn't bother her, then I didn't care either. I braced myself for the next inevitable question, but it didn't come.

“I pretty much blew him off after he and Juliette left, but then they came home and the shit hit the fan.” She sat down on the loveseat. “He wanted to know if we'd slept together, and then asked if you'd given me money.”

“What the hell?” I couldn't stop myself. What had Dalton been thinking, asking his sister something like that?

“Yeah, that was pretty much my response,” she said dryly. “When I told him he was being an asshole, he told me that he didn't want me earning money by doing something I'd regret.”

“Wanker,” I muttered.

She laughed at that, but it wasn't a happy laugh. “It gets better...or worse, I guess, depending on how you look at it. How he said it...Juliette had been pissed at him when they got home. I got the impression that she'd been trying to tell him that what I did was none of his business, and he didn't agree.”

I nodded, remembering how Juliette had been at the club.

“But when he said that...she snapped. Started in on him about how she'd made extra money before they'd started dating, and it turned into a big fight.”

Shit. It was suddenly hard to breathe. Neither Juliette or Dalton had ever mentioned that Juliette used to work at the S&M club, but when Cross told me how he and Hanna had met, he'd included that Juliette had been a well-known dominatrix. Had Dalton told Kyndall that particular detail?

I knew I should be thinking about the big picture here, but that question wouldn't go away. What did Kyndall know, and how did she feel about it? It was self-centered of me to be wondering in the context of how she'd see me rather than her sister-in-law, but the thought was there, and I couldn't shake it.

“I'm trying to wrap my head around all of it,” she admitted. “My sister-in-law used to supplement her income by being a dominatrix, and based on the last thing Dalton said to her before I left, he's a Sub. I might not know everything about what that means, but I'm not so naive that I don't know at least the general gist of it.”

I sat down next to her, close enough to smell the baby shampoo she

must've used to bathe Anthony a few hours ago, but I still didn't touch her. I needed to know where this was going first. I wanted her, but if she couldn't accept Juliette and Dalton, I wouldn't press any further. A fling without venturing into that aspect of my life was one thing. This was different.

“They said they were at a club tonight. A club that Dalton freaked out about when I mentioned maybe wanting to go sometime.”

My fingers tightened on my knees at the thought of her at the club. With me. Wearing something sexy, but not so revealing that others could see what was only for my eyes. Watching her take in the sensuality, the decadence, of my world. The jealousy from every other Dom there because they knew they couldn't have her.

“At the time, I thought he was just being a typical big brother, but now, I think he didn't want me there because of the kind of club it was.”

I waited to see if she'd put the last piece of the puzzle together, my heart pounding against my ribs.

Her eyes met mine. “If I ask you a question, will you give me an honest answer?”

I could feel us walking a fine line here, and one wrong move would tip us over the edge. I was determined that it wouldn't happen, not if I could prevent it. “I will.”

“Do you and Dalton and Juliette belong to an S&M club?”

“That's the general term for it, yes.”

She didn't say anything at first, but I let her have the time she needed. I wasn't sure what moving forward with her would be like, but I knew that if she was open to it, I wanted to keep seeing her, and the idea of being able to include her in this part of my life was too appealing to deny.

“What does it mean?” she asked finally. “I mean...what are you...what does...oh, fuck, I have no clue how to ask any of it.”

“I'm a Dom.” I kept it simple. “Dominant, like Juliette.”

“And my brother's a Sub?”

I nodded. “Submissive.” A line creased between her eyebrows as she frowned. I guessed at what she was thinking, “It's not a male / female thing. It's just who a person is. In the time I've known Dalton and Juliette, I've seen how they're complete equals in everything else. Their Dom / Sub relationship is sex only. Some couples take it further than that, but they don't.”

A faint blush stained her cheeks. “Do you?”

I allowed myself a smile. “I can be a bit...alpha male, but I don't enjoy

controlling all aspects of a Sub's life. I don't even have to have it all the time in sex.”

Her flush deepened. “But you like it.”

“I do,” I answered honestly.

“What parts of it?” She shifted so that her knee brushed against mine. “What are the things you like to do?”

I swallowed hard. I wasn't sure I could have this conversation with her like this. I was all too aware that I wasn't wearing a shirt and my pants were already unbuttoned. My self-control was already stretched thin.

“I'm not hardcore, if that's what you're asking.” I could hear my accent getting thicker. “I like a little pain to intensify things, but I'm not a sadist or a masochist. Some bondage, but nothing too extreme.”

“Is that why Dalton said you were too experienced?”

I nodded. “I believe so.”

Her gaze turned inward, as if she was coming to some sort of decision, and then she looked at me. “What if I said that didn't scare me? Any of it. Not your experience, not what you like.”

Then I was fucked.

“Your brother told me to stay away from you.” I let the statement hang between us. She deserved to know before she made any sort of decision.

Her hand covered mine, the touch burning me. Slowly, she raised our hands and kissed the tips of my fingers, my palm. “I don't care.”

Her lips were soft beneath mine, her skin soft as my hand slid around her waist, fingers skimming just under her shirt. She leaned into the kiss, but let me control it. I didn't know what would happen tomorrow, but tonight, if she wanted it, I intended to show her what it meant to be dominated. Nothing too kinky, but enough that she'd understand who I was.

I buried my hand in her hair, cupping the back of her head to hold her in place as I deepened the kiss. My tongue swept over hers, plundered her mouth, possessed it. Her fingers dug into my shoulders, as if I had any intention of going somewhere.

I turned us so that she was leaning back enough for me to get her shorts unbuttoned and unzipped. I wasn't going to fuck her here, but I needed to see her come. Now. She made a startled sound as I slid my hand under the waistband of her panties.

“Open your legs,” I whispered against her lips.

She obeyed without hesitation, and my cock hardened. As my fingers

moved lower, I took her bottom lip between my teeth, worrying at it before drawing it into my mouth. I licked and sucked at the soft flesh even as I slipped a finger between her lips. Her body jerked the moment I touched her clit, and I knew it wouldn't take much to get her off.

“You're so fucking responsive,” I said as I released her mouth. As much as I loved kissing her, I wanted to watch her come more. “I want you to come for me, love.”

I moved my finger over and around the little bundle of nerves. I dropped a bit to gather some moisture but didn't penetrate her. I'd take my time with her later. Right now, I wanted a quick orgasm to remind her how well I knew her body, even after such a short time.

“Let go, Kyndall.” I let my voice shift into the authoritative tone I used with Subs.

She raised her hips, telling me without words that she didn't want me to stop. I increased the pressure on her clit, earning a sharp cry from her. Her nails raked across my chest, and I hissed, the sting of pain making my cock press against the front of my pants.

“I want to see you come, love.” I could feel her body tensing. “I know you want to. Let me take you there. Come for me, beautiful. Show me how much you want my touch.”

A shudder ran through her.

“There you go, sweetheart. Give yourself to it. Let go. I have you.”

She cried out, body tensing, and I watched the pleasure wash over her face. She curled in on herself, trapping my hand between her legs, the movement rubbing my finger against her clit again.

“Dean!”

A second climax hit her, and I wrapped my other arm around her, holding her tight as her body shook. I couldn't help but think of how perfectly she fit there.

“That's it, love. I've got you.” I kissed the top of her head. “You're fucking gorgeous when you come.”

A few minutes passed as I felt her breathing slow, her body relaxing against my chest. Finally, she lifted her head, face flushed.

“Will you take me to bed?”

I didn't even hesitate. “Hell, yes.”

Chapter Twelve

KYNDALL

I still wasn't entirely sure why I'd gone to Dean, but as he picked me up and carried me back to the bedroom, I was glad I had. Not having things between Dalton and me resolved left me feeling restless. His accusations and assumptions hurt. If I'd gone back to my apartment, I wouldn't have been able to sleep or concentrate on anything, and I would've been tempted to go up one floor and have it out with him. Or maybe I would've gone out and found a game, let the numbers clear my head.

But I hadn't gone to find a game.

I'd gone to *him*.

I hadn't even really thought about it. I'd given the cabbie the hotel's address. Taken the elevator to the penthouse. Knocked on the door.

I'd almost been surprised to see who'd opened it. And only some of that had been because he wasn't wearing a shirt. I hadn't expected him to invite me in, and I definitely hadn't thought he'd answer my questions so honestly. I didn't know what this thing was between the two of us, but it was what I needed right now.

"We can have regular sex, if that's what you want," he said as he sat me down on the bed. His eyes practically glowed as they met mine. "But I'd love to give you a taste of my world."

Desire twisted my stomach, made my heart beat faster. He would accept whatever my decision was, and we'd go from there, but I knew if I told him that I didn't want to have anything to do with his world – with the world my brother and sister-in-law inhabited – then this would likely be as far as things went between us.

Besides, the thought of finding out what it meant to have Dean dominate me...

Fuck.

“A taste?” My voice wasn't as steady as I would've liked, but it wasn't nerves that made it shake. Or, at least, not completely nerves.

That beautiful mouth curved into a smile that made my panties even wetter than they already were.

Well, shit.

Ten minutes later, my clothes were on the floor, Dean was kneeling over me, and I was wondering just what I'd gotten myself into. He was still wearing a pair of jeans that hung so low on his hips I could see those deep, sexy grooves, and the trail of dark curls that all led to the same lickable place.

He pulled his belt from its loops, and I stiffened. He'd said a taste, but now I wasn't so sure that was a good idea.

“Dean...”

He reached down to take my hand. “I'm not going to use it on you. Not in the way you think.” He made a loop with his belt and slipped it over my hand. “Not yet, anyway.”

I wasn't sure if he meant it as a warning or a promise, but judging by the heat that washed over me, I knew that my body wanted it to be a promise.

He made a sound that was half-growl, half-groan. “Damn, I love when your skin flushes like that.” His expression grew serious. “Are you certain this is what you want?”

I raised my other hand, offering it to him. “Please.”

He kissed the palm, then slid my hand to join the other. “Do you know what a safe word is?”

“In theory.”

“Red,” he said. “If you need me to stop, if it's too much, say *red*.”

I nodded, my pulse skipping a beat as he leaned over me, taking my hands with him. I couldn't see what he was doing, but when he sat back on his knees, my arms were stretched above my head, fastened to the headboard. It wasn't tight enough to hurt, but definitely too snug for me to slip out of them easily.

“The most important part of this life is trust.” He ran his hands up my calves, his voice low and even, almost hypnotic. “For a Dom, it's trusting the Sub to stop things before they go too far. For a Sub, it's trusting the Dom to read their body, to know how to push limits, and to stop when a safe word's

used.”

His fingers skimmed my thighs, up over my waist and ribs. He palmed my breasts, flicking his thumbs across my nipples. I squirmed as they pebbled. I hadn't realized what a difference it would make, not being able to move my hands. Before, when I kept my hands above my head, I'd still known I could move, that I was responsible for staying still.

Now, however, I wasn't in control.

Except, I supposed, based on what Dean had just said, I actually was. Sort of. It was all very confusing.

Dean leaned down suddenly and bit my breast.

“Fuck!” I jerked. “What the hell, Dean?”

He grinned at me. “You're thinking far too hard, love.”

“So you bit me?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Did I hurt you?”

I scowled at him but shook my head. “Not really.”

“Excellent.” He leaned down and brushed his lips across mine. “Because some people might not bite...but I rather enjoy it.”

A shiver ran through me. “Good to know.”

His mouth and hands began to move over my body, touching and teasing every inch of exposed skin – except the place I wanted him most. I cursed and writhed as little sparks of electricity danced across my nerves, but he never stopped. He seemed determined to taste all of me, and unless I used the safe word he'd given me, he wasn't going to stop until he was done.

Still, I begged.

“Please, Dean, please. Fingers, mouth, I don't care. Just please.”

“Where do you want my fingers and mouth?” He kissed just below my belly button.

I glared at him. “I'm not one of those women who has issues with talking about sex.”

“So do it then,” he dared. His thumbs caressed my inner thighs. “Tell me where you want me to touch you.”

I gave him a snarky smile. “A little farther north.”

He chuckled, the sort of rich, sexual sound that made my stomach clench. “Say it, love, or I won't do it.”

I doubted a Sub was supposed to tease a Dom, but I was still me, no matter how much I wanted him. “Do you prefer correct anatomical terms? Or do you like *pussy*? *Cunt*? Or is there some weird British term you want me to

use?”

He laughed again. “Love, you are something else.” He ran a finger down my slit. “Use whatever word you're comfortable using.”

My eyelids fluttered as his knuckle brushed over me again. “Just touch me, please, Dean.”

“Touch what?”

“My pussy! Dammit! Whatever the hell you want to call it!”

That laugh ran through him even as he pushed his finger inside me. Then his tongue and fingers were where I needed them, and I no longer cared about our little back and forth. All I cared about was that he kept doing what he was doing. When he wrapped his lips around my clit and began to suck, I came, pulling hard enough on the belt to lift my top half off the bed.

My arms were burning when I dropped back down, but I barely noticed. I could hear my heartbeat, feel every solid thump against my ribcage. What I couldn't feel, though, was Dean.

I opened my eyes and saw him at the end of the bed, pulling off his pants. I seized the opportunity to appreciate the amazing body being revealed. Broad shoulders, and a muscled torso, but not overly so. Some women may have liked their men big and bulky, like football players or weight lifters. Personally, I'd always preferred a swimmer's build, probably because I'd been obsessed with the Summer Olympics growing up.

Dean was built like something out of an artist's imagination. Not one of those artists who sculpted pretty marble men with discreet little leaves covering their crotches. No, more like an artist who understood the rugged beauty of a powerful, self-assured man. Rock-hard muscles, a narrow waist, and a cock that would've been impressive even soft, but was, quite frankly, intimidating when erect.

Like it was now.

I licked my lips in anticipation, imagining how he would taste. I hadn't yet had the pleasure, and I definitely wanted it. I'd always been ambivalent about oral sex, but he made me want a lot of things I'd never really wanted before.

His long fingers wrapped around the base of his shaft, and he began to stroke himself, the movement slow, almost leisurely.

“You're beautiful.” The words slipped out before I realized I'd thought them.

“Am I now?”

His accent was thicker than it had been when we'd first started, and I wondered if he deliberately softened it, or if it'd faded on its own.

“You know you're gorgeous,” I said. I flexed my fingers, starting to feel that pins-and-needles sensation that came with poor circulation.

His eyes flicked up to my hands. “Do you need me to untie you?”

I considered the question before answering. “Depends. Are you planning on fucking me anytime soon, or are you just going to make me watch?”

Okay, so maybe the question came out with a little more edge than I intended, but when I saw the way Dean's eyes gleamed, I decided not to regret it.

“I should make you watch me get off,” he said, his hand moving faster. “Get you all worked up and leave you frustrated.”

I squirmed, pressing my thighs together, and he gave me an infuriating smirk.

“Would you like to see me make myself come?” Without missing a single beat, he moved up to the bed.

I automatically spread my legs, but he didn't come any farther than my ankles. I glared at him. “You're saying you'd rather come with your hand than with me? Makes a girl doubt her appeal.”

His smirk widened. “I don't believe for a moment that you don't know how incredibly sexy you are.” He passed his thumb over the head of his cock, smearing the drop of precum that'd gathered there. “I could keep this up, come all over your perfect skin, on those amazing breasts of yours.”

A part of me wanted him to do just that, but the ache between my legs was stronger. I needed him inside me.

“Tell me, love, why shouldn't I do that?”

He'd said before that he liked how bold I was, so bold was probably the best way to go. And there was one thing I was pretty sure I could say that would get him inside me.

And it was something I wanted even though I knew I probably shouldn't.

“Because I'm on the pill.” I locked my eyes with his rather than staring at him touching himself. “And I trust you to tell me if there's any other reason you'd need to use a condom.”

He muttered a string of low oaths, some I didn't recognize, but the tone was enough to get the point across. He liked my reason. I knew there was a risk involved in what I was offering, but I'd meant what I said. I trusted him to be honest about whether or not we still needed to use a condom.

He grabbed my ankle, his grip tight enough to get my attention. “Are you sure, love? I don't want you to regret it.”

I bent my knees, opening myself up more to him. “I want to feel your skin against mine.”

He dropped over me so swiftly that I gasped, but he caught himself on his arms before he crushed me. He rested his forehead against mine, his hands grasping my hips to hold me steady. The head of his cock slipped between my folds, searching for entrance. The tip caught, and then he was inside, surging forward to take me in one deep thrust.

“Ah!” The sound burst out of me, my body clenching around the sudden intrusion.

His mouth covered mine, the kiss almost violent. Since I couldn't touch him, I gave the only thing I could, returning the kiss with matched intensity. Our tongues tangled, battled for the dominance that he was claiming from my body. When he began to drive into me, I lifted my hips to meet him even though I knew I would feel it in the morning. Or maybe it was for that exact reason. I wanted to be sore tomorrow so that I would know this hadn't been all some sort of strange, erotic dream. I wanted to feel the pulse between my legs and know that it was because he'd been inside me.

His lips left mine, and I dragged in deep draughts of air, my lungs burning. He bit his way down my neck, hard enough to sting before kissing and licking away the pain. I pulled at my restraints, the desire to touch him outweighing the bruises I knew I'd have on my wrists tomorrow. Then his teeth latched onto the skin at the base of my throat, and I screamed, coming hard enough to see spots. My muscles tensed, clamping around him, and he came too, warmth flooding me as his cock emptied.

I knew I'd pay for all of this in the morning, but for right now, I'd allow myself to bask in the moment.

I had vague memories of Dean cleaning me up and rubbing the circulation back into my hands, but everything after my climax was hazy. Even when he climbed into bed next to me and wrapped his arms around me, it almost seemed more like a dream than reality.

Except when I woke up, I was still there. In Dean's hotel room. In his bed. In his arms.

I'd fallen asleep with guys once or twice in the past, but it'd never felt like

this when I woke up. There was no anxious thought that I had to leave right away, no nerves telling me that things were about to get weird.

I rolled over to find Dean awake and watching me with a guarded expression. He tightened his embrace with one arm as he used his free hand to push back some hair that'd fallen across my face.

“Are you okay?”

I took a quick inventory before giving him an honest answer. “A bit sore, and I have a feeling my wrists aren't going to thank me anytime soon, but definitely worth it.”

The tension in his body didn't ease. “What we did, that's just a small part of the things I like to do.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Okay?” His eyebrows went up. “It doesn't freak you out that I liked tying you up? That I'd want to do other things to you?”

I shook my head. “Look, Dean, my brother may think that all of that makes you more experienced than me, and maybe it does. Maybe you've had a lot more partners than I have, but I wasn't a virgin before I slept with you. And while my number of sexual partners isn't high, it's more than only two or three. Sure, they were all pretty vanilla, but I had a roommate in college who liked things kinky, so I'm not shocked by it. Surprised, maybe, but that's it.”

“So you'd want to...explore things?”

I grinned at him and pressed my body against his. “Definitely.”

He smiled as he kissed my forehead. “Your brother might not like it, but I think he'll deal better with it if he knows I'm not giving you money.” He looked down at me. “So we should tell him.”

“About us?”

“That too, but I meant the money. Where's it coming from?”

Men could be such like-minded bastards most of the time.

Chapter Thirteen

DEAN

I had no idea what I'd done wrong. One second, she was in my arms, rubbing against me like a cat in heat. Next second, she was pushing away from me and glaring at me like I'd kicked her dog.

“Are you seriously asking me about my finances?” She pulled the sheet up to cover her chest as she moved to a sitting position.

I managed not to frown as I pushed myself up too. “You said that Dalton was arguing with you about how you were paying for things, so I thought if we told him how you were making money, maybe he'd ease up in general.”

“If we told him?”

My explanation hadn't made anything better, and I didn't understand why. “Yes, since he thought I was giving you money, I want to set the record straight.”

She climbed out of bed, letting the sheets fall behind her. “And here I thought it was about the relationship between me and my brother...about how he thought of me when I should've realized that it was about how he thought of you.”

“Wait a minute.” I needed to be standing for this conversation. “That's not what I said.”

“What is it with the men around me thinking they have a right to know anything they want about my life?” She grabbed her clothes, yanking them on hard enough that I was surprised they didn't tear.

“Your brother just wants to protect you,” I said, reaching for my pants.

“What about you, Dean?” She turned toward me, shirt in hand.

As hot as she looked, standing there in her shorts and bra, I was a little

more focused on how pissed she sounded.

“What do you get from all this?”

“I'm not trying to get anything,” I said. “I'm just trying to look out for you.”

“I don't need you to look out for me. That's the whole fucking point.” She put on her shirt. “You, Dalton, my family...everyone seems to think that I need them to take care of me, but I've been doing just fine on my own.”

This wasn't going the way I'd imagined a morning after conversation going with her. Not that I'd really thought about it. I'd spent more time thinking about the things we'd do the night before.

“I don't understand what the fuss is about,” I said, my own frustration bleeding through. “Just tell him where you work.”

She spun toward me, her face framed by wild waves of hair, cheeks flushed. If I hadn't seen the anger in her eyes, I would've told her that she looked stunning.

“It's none of his damn business where I work, and it sure as hell isn't yours!”

“Love—”

“No!” she snapped. “You don't get to call me that. I'm not your *love* or your *sweetheart* or any other form of endearment when we aren't fucking.”

I opened my mouth to tell her that I hadn't meant anything by it, but she wasn't done.

“This is why I never wanted to do the whole relationship thing. Guys either lie about wanting to be in one so they can get laid, or they want to be in control.” She glared at me as she stormed out into the main room. “I should've known that sex with a control freak could never be just sex.”

I didn't know what I was supposed to say. I wanted to defend myself, but even though my intentions had been noble, she was right that I'd been telling her what she should do based on what I thought about her situation. I didn't have an older brother poking his nose into my business or a little sister who I wanted to help. I'd always been my own person, and I couldn't truly understand what she was going through.

I should've asked her what she wanted to do, offer to help her if she was okay with it. Kept my mouth shut if she wasn't.

Instead, I stood there like a slack-jawed idiot and watched her walk out the door.

I'd made it halfway to the door before I remembered that I couldn't go

after her, at least not right away. I had a meeting this morning that had taken two weeks to get set up. I couldn't blow it off, no matter how much I might want to. Thinking about how pissed Kyndall was, giving her time to cool off seemed like a good idea.

No matter how good of an idea waiting was, it didn't mean she wasn't on my mind as I showered and dressed. And while my driver made his way across the city. And when I met with one of the board members of the Armitage Foundation.

Aramina Mueller was a few years older than me, happily married, and quite beautiful. She was also a talented DA and was one of the people who'd come up with the idea for the foundation. They offered science, engineering, and mathematics scholarships to inner city kids from all over the country, and working with them would help me with the non-profit I'd decided to start.

Clean energy sources and more environmentally friendly technology had been the area I'd finally chosen for my foundation. Instead of looking for people at the top of their fields and trying to convince them to donate their time or take a pay cut at the very least, however, I'd gotten the idea to offer internships to minds with less experience, but maybe more vision.

Despite my lack of concentration, I managed to get a decent amount of information from Aramina, and then promised her I'd be in touch. When I got back to my car, it was well past lunchtime, but I wasn't hungry. I was frustrated, distracted, and also feeling guilty for how I'd handled things earlier.

Instead of going home or somewhere to eat, I gave the driver Kyndall's address. I'd never shied away from anything that I wanted, and she was what I wanted. She said that guys either only wanted sex or they wanted to control. While I did want both of those things with her, I also wanted more. I wanted to see what other ways we were compatible, see if there could be a relationship between us.

And that had to start with something we hadn't done yet.

A date.

As we pulled up in front of the building, I tried to remember how long it'd been since I'd actually asked a woman out on a date without the end goal of sex. Not that I'd say no to sex, but that wasn't the point. The point was getting to know her, seeing if we meshed as well outside of the bedroom as we did in it.

Fortunately, the doorman knew me, so I didn't have to buzz anyone to let

me in. I was surprised at how nervous I was as I approached the door to her apartment. Kyndall wasn't like any other woman I'd ever met, and that meant I couldn't predict what she would say or do. It was...unsettling.

I knocked on the door and wondered if she'd simply look through the peephole, then ignore me. When I knocked a second time, though, the door opened.

“Did you come over to give me a lecture about all the things you've thought of since this morning that I need to do?”

“I came to apologize.”

She blinked, as if that was the last thing she'd thought I'd say. After a moment, she stepped aside and gestured for me to come in. I waited until we were both standing in the living room and her attention was on me before I said anything else.

“I'm sorry, Kyndall. You were right that none of that was my business. We've had sex, but that's it. I had no right to assume anything about what you wanted.” Some Doms – and some people in general – might've thought that admitting I was wrong made me look weak. I didn't see it that way. Honesty took strength. “And even if we were dating, it still wouldn't have been appropriate for me to put myself into your relationship with your brother.”

A moment of silence hung in the air before she responded, “Thank you.” Her voice was soft. “It means a lot that you'd say that.”

I crossed over to her, reaching for her hand. She looked surprised but didn't pull away. “That's not the only reason I came here. It was the first and most important, but not the only one.”

She threaded her fingers between mine. “What else was there?”

“I wanted to know if you would go out with me tomorrow night.”

“Out?”

I had to admit that I was enjoying seeing her off-balance. “On a date.”

She gave me a suspicious look. “Why?”

I laughed, squeezing her hand. “Because I realized, aside from my ill-advised comments this morning, I've enjoyed spending time with you more than I have with anyone else lately. And I want to see if that's the case when we're not having sex.”

She pulled her hand from mine, but not angrily, more like she couldn't think clearly when we were touching. “I need you to be a little more specific here, Dean. Are you talking about us hanging out like friends...with benefits?”

“No.” I chose my words carefully, wanting to make sure I was clear. “I want to see if we have what it takes to be in a relationship.” I gave her a crooked smile. “A real one, where I can call you *love* and *dearie* and *sweetheart*. Where I can offer my support for anything you need.”

She hesitated before responding, “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“One date, lo–Kyndall.” I corrected myself before using an unwelcome endearment. “If you think we can’t work, then I’ll back off like your brother wants me to.”

She gave me the sort of searching look that made me think she was looking for something specific. What, I didn’t know, but I hoped I had it. I wanted to see if this worked between us.

“All right,” she agreed. “But only if I get to choose where we go on our date.”

I would’ve preferred to handle things, to set up the perfect date, but if letting her choose meant we could go out, I would do it. “Okay.”

“Good.” She crossed her arms and smiled. “I want to go to the club.”

She had to mean something other than what I was thinking. “The club?”

She nodded. “I want you to take me to the S&M club. If we’re going to date, I need to see that part of your life for real. More than just a little bondage in bed. I want more than a taste.”

Shit.

Even if I took her on a night when I knew Dalton and Juliette wouldn’t be there, even if we never went back after that, word would get back to them. Which meant I was going to have to decide between getting the chance at an opportunity for a relationship with Kyndall, and the possibility of losing my friendship with Dalton.

My eyes met hers, and I knew that there wasn’t a choice. Not really. Something about this woman had grabbed me from the first time I met her, and I couldn’t give that up without at least trying to see where things could go, and if I declined her request, it’d be over before it began.

“All right,” I said. “Tomorrow night, I’ll take you to the club.”

And hope that her brother didn’t beat the shit out of me for it.

Chapter Fourteen

KYNDALL

When I left Dean's hotel room, I doubted I'd see him again unless we happened to be invited to the same place, and it'd be easy enough to avoid each other there. It didn't matter how much I'd enjoyed having sex with him, he'd crossed a line, sticking his nose into my business.

I'd never imagined that he'd show up at my apartment a few hours later and apologize. He hadn't struck me as the sort who'd apologized very often, but he'd been sincere. I'd seen that much in his eyes.

And then he'd asked me out on a date. Said he wanted to see if there could be more to us than only sex. He'd looked almost as surprised to be saying it as I'd been to hear it. I still wasn't entirely sure what'd prompted me to say that I'd go...if he took me to the sex club where he and his friends went.

Friends that included my brother.

I'd said that I wanted more than a taste of his world, and that was the truth, but I was still shocked at his request. The rush I'd gotten, having him in charge, had been heady, almost as much as knowing that he'd stop with just a single word from me. For the first time, I understood the appeal of a Dom / Sub relationship, and I wanted to know more.

Going to a club that I knew my brother and his wife were members of, however, wasn't the best idea, and I knew it. That was the part I hadn't thought through. Or maybe I had. Maybe a part of me wanted to see how serious Dean was about this relationship he said he wanted. A good way to prove that was to go in public together.

A better way was to see if Dean would be willing to take me somewhere my brother could see us together and know what we were doing. It was a risk,

especially since neither of us knew if this thing between us was worth the possibility of making things more tense between Dalton and me. But Dean seemed to think it was worth the risk, and so did I, which was why I was standing in front of my mirror right now, wondering if what I was wearing was appropriate for going to dinner and then going to a sex club.

A laugh bubbled up inside me, but it was more from nerves than anything else. I was confident in how I looked, and I'd put myself into unfamiliar situations all the time. Hell, I'd walked into a poker game with men a decade older than me, and it hadn't phased me. Now, though, I was going somewhere that all of my brains and abilities couldn't help me.

Damn if I was going to let Dean see any of that though.

I'd chosen one of the few dresses I'd bought for going out, and while it wasn't anything fancy, it showed off all my assets in the best possible way.

Well, the best possible without me being in lingerie or naked. I didn't care what kind of club we were going to, I wasn't into public displays of indecency. Exhibitionism definitely wasn't one of my things. I might not know exactly all of what I'd like, but that was one I'd set some limits on.

There was a knock at the door, so I took a deep breath and picked up my purse. I'd asked for him to do this, and I wasn't going to back out now, even if it meant I didn't eat much at dinner.

By the time we arrived at the club, I was glad I'd managed to eat at least a little because I'd also had two glasses of merlot, and while I wanted to be loose, I didn't want to be too buzzed. Dean and my conversation at the restaurant had been light, the sort of things any couple on a first date might've talked about. It felt a little strange to be talking so plainly, to hold hands, after the two of us had already spent quite a bit of time in bed together, but not nearly as strange as it felt to walk through a heavy set of doors and not know what to expect on the other side.

My initial impression was that it was fairly normal. Club music played, a little more sensual and less techno than the clubs I'd been to in the past, but not a jarring difference. The first few people who walked past looked pretty normal too. No leather or chains...

Until another couple passed by wearing nothing but leather and chains, and the fabric covering only the barest of essentials.

Dean released my hand, moving his to the small of my back. His fingers

brushed against the bare skin, tracing trails of fire that made me shiver. He leaned a little closer and put his lips against my ear.

“You all right, love?”

I nodded. I could do this. I *wanted* to do this.

Suddenly, I felt him tense, and I knew things were going to get seriously awkward. I followed his line of sight and let out a small sigh of relief when I saw Cross and Hanna coming toward us. I could tell the moment they recognized me because their eyes widened, and they both tried to act like they weren't sneaking looks at each other, and failing.

“Kyndall, right?” Cross said as he held out a hand.

“Hi.” I shook his hand, then Hanna's. When I had kids, I could only hope I got my figure back as quickly as she was regaining hers. “You look amazing.”

She smiled, increasing the resemblance to her sister. “Juliette mentioned you'd decided to stay in LA.” Her eyes flicked over to Dean, and I knew she was wondering if he was the reason why.

“I'd been thinking about moving back to the West Coast after graduation and decided LA was a better fit than farther north,” I explained.

“I completely understand that,” she said. “Sometimes we just need to get away from all the expectations and pressure, no matter how much we love our family.”

“Exactly.”

I'd forgotten about Juliette telling me how she and Hanna both had felt the need to get away from the town in Ohio where they'd grown up. Juliette had come out west first, with Hanna following last year. I gave her a harder look, wondering if she was just young-looking or if we were closer in age than I'd originally thought. After all, marriage and a child didn't always mean older.

“Speaking of family...” Cross said, his gaze moving across the crowd.

Dean's hand shifted, and for a moment, I thought he was going to move away from me. Then it settled again, his thumb making circles against my spine, as if he was silently apologizing for the hesitation.

Dalton and Juliette stepped through the crowd a moment later, and the expression on my brother's face said Dean hadn't earned any brownie points for bringing me here tonight.

Too fucking bad.

“Dalton, Juliette, good to see you both.” Dean's tone was overly polite.

Dalton made an annoyed sound as he scowled at the floor. Juliette,

however, smiled at both of us. They didn't seem to be fighting, at least. While I appreciated her support, I didn't want my problems with Dalton to become an issue in their relationship.

“What do you think, Kyndall?” She gestured around us, then spoke to her sister and Cross, “It's her first time in a club like this.”

I flushed, and Hanna gave me a sympathetic look.

“It can be a little overwhelming at first,” she said. “Just relax and have fun.”

“Dean will take care of you.” There was a warning in Juliette's voice that said if he didn't, he'd have to answer to her.

Hanna leaned close and put her hand on my shoulder. “I'm fairly new to all of this, too, so if you ever need to talk, I'm here.”

Dalton took a step toward me, but Juliette's grip on his hand held him back. She looked at me as she spoke, “We're going to check out a VIP room.”

“And we're going to dance,” Cross said as he wrapped his arm around Hanna's waist.

The other couples moved off, and I felt some of the tension go out of Dean. Without a word, he used the hand on my back to steer me through the crowd over to an elegant flight of carpeted stairs. He angled himself behind me as we went up the stairs, as if he didn't want anyone catching a glimpse of what was under my skirt.

“We're going to watch tonight,” he said as we reached the second floor and he fell into step next to me again. It was a bit quieter up here, and definitely less crowded.

“Watch?” I frowned. I wasn't sure what I'd been expecting, but *watching* hadn't been it.

“Trust me,” he said with a hint of a smile.

A beautiful redhead came toward us, her gaze sliding over Dean with clear lust in her eyes. Before I could be annoyed, she looked at me the same way.

“Are you two wanting to play?” Her voice was husky. “I can be as good, or as bad, as you like.”

The smile Dean gave her was kind, but not sexual. “Thank you, but no.”

“If you change your mind,” she looked at me, “come find me. We could have a lot of fun.”

She sauntered away, and Dean started walking again, as if these were the sorts of conversations people had every day. I followed him over to a small,

shadowed alcove. A sort of chaise sat there, turned so that we could have a clear view of the stage below, but no one up here could see us unless they came right over. He sat down, stretching one leg along the back of the chair while the other foot stayed on the floor.

“Sit.” He gestured to the spot between his legs.

I did, flushing as I leaned back against him. “Do you know her?”

“Know who?” he asked as he wrapped his arms around my waist.

His breath was hot against my ear, making me shiver. “The redhead,” I said.

“No, but I've seen her perform.”

“Perform?”

I felt him smile as his arms tightened around me. The music changed slightly, and I heard murmurs coming up from below.

“See the stage down there?”

I nodded.

“Just watch, love. This is the best way for you to see what my world has to offer...and if you want to be a part of it.”

I heard a hint of vulnerability in his voice, so I half-turned so that I could see his face. “I've liked the parts I've seen so far.”

He didn't look completely convinced as he lifted his chin toward the stage. “Then see more.”

For a moment, I wasn't sure what he wanted me to see, but then I saw three people walking up onto the platform, two women and a man. One woman was blonde, the other had darker hair, but they both had the same slender build, made all the more obvious by their outfits. Matching red bras and panties, and heels so high that I wondered how they could walk.

The man wore a pair of leather pants and a sheer sort of shirt that showed the tattoos he had underneath. I saw the glint of something I thought might be a piercing, but I was too far away to tell for certain.

As I watched, chains descended from the ceiling to where the two women stood at center stage. They stayed still, heads bowed, as he fastened leather restraints around their wrists. The chains retracted then until the women's arms were extended out and up.

“Legs apart.” The man's voice was harsh, and the women immediately obeyed without raising their heads. “Don't come until I give you permission.”

“Yes, Master,” they said in unison.

“Don't make a sound. Don't move.”

“Yes, Master.”

“Are they both his...Subs?” I asked Dean.

“They are,” he answered. “I've seen them perform before. The blonde is a total Submissive, but the brunette is a switch.”

“A switch?”

“She can be both dominant and submissive,” he explained. “And in that relationship, she dominates the blonde, but only when their Master tells her to.”

I made a sound of acknowledgment, filing away the information for future reference. On stage, the man was standing between the two women, his hands between their spread legs. I didn't need to be close to them to know what his fingers were doing, even if the women's faces were impassive, as if they didn't really feel his touch.

“How can they stay so still?” I asked, pressing my thighs together. Arousal thrummed there, and I was only watching. I didn't understand how they could not feel anything.

“Training.” Dean's fingers slid across my stomach, then up to caress the undersides of my breasts. “Lots and lots of training.”

“So they don't feel it?”

“I'm sure they feel it,” he said. “But they've trained their bodies to obey their Master above what they feel.”

I couldn't imagine having Dean's fingers inside me, stroking the most intimate parts of me, and not making a sound, not moving. “How?”

Dean's lips brushed my ear. “Reward and punishment.”

Something low inside me clenched tight, and I took a moment to think of how those three words shouldn't have had that particular effect. My voice shook slightly. “How does that work, exactly?”

He kissed the side of my neck. “Simply put, when a Dom gives his Sub a command and he or she obeys, there's a reward. When they refuse or are unable, then there's a punishment.”

Again, that primal, heated twisting.

“What are the rewards?”

His fingers brushed over my nipples. “It can vary from relationship to relationship, but I've always been partial to pleasure for rewards and denial for punishment.” He nipped at my throat. “Though pain can sometimes work wonders too.”

The words *punishment* and *pain* should've sent me running.

But they didn't.

What they did was make me wonder about all those wonderful words.

Punishment.

Pain.

Pleasure.

I didn't care about what Dalton thought. Being here hadn't changed anything for me. If anything, it'd solidified my decision.

I wanted this.

Chapter Fifteen

DEAN

I was being pulled in half a dozen directions, and the only thing that I knew for certain was that I wanted Kyndall more than ever.

Dalton was pissed at me even though I could tell that Juliette had been working on him about Kyndall and me. If he didn't come around, I could lose his friendship for good, and it could seriously mess up things between him and Kyndall. But she seemed to be willing to risk it, so I wasn't going to complain.

As for her, she was getting what she wanted: more than a taste of my world.

Any of which could send her running at any time.

For her relationship with Dalton, I knew I should want her to go. For me, however, I couldn't quite bring myself to wish for it. More than anything I'd ever wanted, I wanted her to see this part of my life and accept it. In the past, I'd always separated my encounters with women into vanilla and not. Since they were never anything more than sex or the occasional social event, it was easy to not care if a particular woman was inclined to enjoy certain aspects of my sexual preferences.

With Kyndall, I cared about what she thought, about how all of this made her feel. As I wrapped my arms around her waist and waited to see how she'd respond to the show, I knew I'd be willing to compromise on sex if it meant keeping her. I still wasn't entirely sure what that meant, or even if this thing between us could translate into something other than what it currently was, but I was going to try to make it work.

I'd never been the sort of man who was afraid of commitment or had

issues with the idea of a long-term relationship. I'd simply never met a woman who made me think of things that way. Always, in the past, when I made plans for the future, it was only me. Now, I thought of things like taking a trip back to London with Kyndall so she could meet my parents or taking her into consideration when I thought of buying a permanent place here in LA.

The women on stage came simultaneously, their cries carrying well above the sounds of the crowd and the music. I barely registered any of that though. My full attention was on the woman in my arms, on her ragged breathing, the flush spreading across her smooth skin.

“What's he doing now?”

Kyndall's quiet question made me turn my eyes toward the stage. The Dom was moving behind the women, and the crop he now carried told me what he had planned.

“He's going to use the crop on them,” I said, watching Kyndall out of the corner of my eye.

“Use it?”

I nodded, kissing her shoulder. “People who enjoy giving or receiving pain often use floggers, crops, whips, and hands when it comes to certain kinds of pain. It all depends on the pair. Or the group, in some cases.”

She flinched as the Dom brought the crop down with a sharp crack on the blonde's ass. The Sub whimpered, but it was a clear sound of pleasure.

“Why so many options?”

“Each one feels different,” I answered as I traced my fingers across her collarbone and along her neckline. She shivered as my fingers caressed the tops of her breasts. “In a way, BDSM is about two things: control and sensation. They manifest in so many ways that one may not always see their true nature, but the use of, say, a crop, produces a certain sensation.”

“Pain.”

Three cracks in quick succession, one more for the blonde, and then two for the brunette. The Dom then circled around to the front.

“Sometimes,” I said. I ran my fingers through her hair. “Each person has their own threshold for pain, their own way of interpreting pain.”

“What do you...oh.”

Her question had been interrupted by the Dom using the crop on the blonde's breast, the tip striking the lace-covered nipple with practiced precision. The blonde gasped, arching her back toward the Dom.

“You know how a bite can hurt and feel good at the same time?” I nipped at her earlobe, and she nodded. “It's the same principle.”

The brunette cried out when the crop came down on her breast.

“How do you know what feels good?”

I slid my hands over her breasts, loving the weight of them against my palms. “Practice.”

She stood so suddenly that I thought she'd had enough, but the moment my eyes met hers, I knew that wasn't the case.

“Your place or mine?”

“Are you certain this is what you want?” I asked as I opened the door to my suite.

She walked past me, stopped, and turned. With her gaze firmly on me, she slipped the straps of her dress over her shoulders and let it fall to the floor, pooling at her feet. The black lace panties and bra she wore covered just enough to tease.

I kicked off my shoes and yanked my shirt over my head. “Do you remember the safe word I gave you?”

“Red.” She stepped out of her heels. “I'll use it if I need to,” she continued. “I trust you.”

I covered the distance between us in two long strides and grabbed her, pulling her against my chest as I claimed her mouth. My erection pressed against her stomach through my pants, and I poured my sexual tension into the kiss. Her arms wrapped around my waist, hands moving up and down my back before dropping to grab my ass. I growled against her lips and bit the bottom one. The sound she made went straight to my cock, and I shuddered.

When she tried to unbutton my pants, I released her, taking a step back. A surge of pride went through me when she stumbled, her expression dazed. I loved how responsive she was to me. Now we were going to see how responsive she was to the Dom in me.

“Did I give you permission to try to take my pants off?”

She shook her head, eyes wide.

“Sofa.” I pointed. “Bend over the arm for your punishment.”

She swallowed hard, and I waited to see if it was too much. Then she turned and walked over to the sofa and leaned over it, putting that delicious ass on display.

“I'm going to spank you,” I said as I moved toward her. My hands were almost shaking, and I focused on steadying them. I'd never had such an intense, visceral reaction to a woman before.

I stopped behind her, smiling when I put my hands on her hips, and she twitched. I slid my hands over her ass, loving the contrast between her soft skin and the thin fabric of her panties. When I hooked my fingers around the elastic, her muscles tensed, then relaxed.

“There's a good lass,” I murmured as I eased her panties down her legs. I kissed one cheek, then the other, before helping her step out of them.

“You get more British when you're turned on.”

I chuckled as I stood again. “Is that a good or a bad thing?”

I unhooked the clasps of her bra and let it fall to the cushions. Her breasts hung beneath her, nipples a perfect dusky rose. I reached underneath her and pinched her nipples, making her gasp.

“I asked a question.”

“Good,” she said. “Definitely good.”

“Now, let's see to that punishment.”

I allowed myself a moment to enjoy the anticipation of what I was about to do. I might not have been her first lover, but I planned on being her first in other ways, and I would revel in every second of it.

I started easy, a light smack that would sting a bit, but not really hurt. A second one to the other side and she shivered. I did it again, harder this time, and she made a small sound, then arched her back, pushing her ass back toward me. Two more that left pink marks on her skin.

“Do you understand why you're being punished, love?” I asked as I smacked her ass again, her cheeks heating up beneath my palm.

“Because I tried to take your pants off,” she said.

Another pair of cracks hard enough to make my hand sting. “Because you didn't ask permission. I'm in charge, love.”

I slipped my hand down between her legs, groaning as her arousal dripped onto my fingers. Some women took a while to get warmed up, and maybe what she'd watched at the club had gotten her going, but I was sure a part of it was just her.

“When we're like this, I'm in charge of your body.” I slipped my finger into her pussy. “Of your pain.” I used my free hand to spank her hard enough to make her gasp. “Of your pleasure.” I let my finger brush over her clit, and she shuddered.

“Yes, Sir.”

I closed my eyes. Fuck. She was such a beautifully strong woman that to hear her submit so perfectly was intoxicating. I took a step back and admired the bright pink shade of her skin as I finished undressing.

“Come with me.” I held out a hand to her and smiled as she took it.

Her eyes widened as I led her over to the large picture window that looked out over the city. I'd never let anyone else see her like this, but I kept that to myself for the moment and waited to see what she'd do or say next. I could see the anxiety on her face as I pressed the button to open the curtains, revealing the deep blue sky.

“Over here, love. Hands on the glass.”

I took her right up to the window and moved behind her so that I could see her full reflection in the glass. When she still didn't use her safe word or protest, I rewarded her by telling her the whole truth.

“The windows are tinted so that even if someone was high up enough to see in, they couldn't see anything.” She relaxed slightly, and I kissed the side of her neck. “Don't worry, love. No one gets to see you like this but me.”

I slid my arms around her waist, one hand going up to her breast, the other moving down between her legs. I pressed my body against hers, my cock resting at the small of her back. The skin of her ass was hot, and she hissed as I rubbed against her.

“You're going to come on my fingers,” I said as I pushed one between her folds to find her clit. “But not until I give you permission. If you come before, we'll move to the bedroom where we'll work on your self-control as punishment.”

“And if I'm good?” The question was breathless.

“Then I'll take you right here, and let you come again.”

I watched her reflection as I rolled her nipple between my fingers. Her eyes fluttered, and I began to make small circles over her clit, making her squirm against me. I tightened my arms around her, holding her in place as my fingers moved in sync with each other, one above and one below, each hand stimulating the sensitive points.

“Don't come until I tell you, love,” I whispered in her ear.

“How can I stop?”

I could hear the stress in her voice and knew that she was getting close. I pinched her nipple, hard, and she cried out.

“Do you want to please me?” I put my mouth against the place where her

neck met her shoulder and sucked skin between my teeth. She moaned as I worried at the spot, marking her.

“Yes,” she gasped. “Yes, I want to please you.”

“Good lass,” I said. “Then I want you to think about how glad I’ll be when you obey me. When you wait until I give you permission to come.”

“I can’t,” she whined, her body practically shaking as she fought back its natural impulse.

“You can,” I said. I covered her breast with my whole hand, squeezing it until I heard her sharp intake of breath. Sometimes keeping a Sub silent was fun, but I’d always thought that when I was learning a new Sub’s limits, allowing them to make as much noise as they wanted was a good way to learn what they liked and disliked.

“Dean,” she moaned my name, her nails scraping against the window.

“Kyndall.” I kissed her cheek. “Ask me, love. Ask me the right way.”

“Please, Sir, may I come?”

The response was automatic, and it took my breath away. *She* took my breath away.

“Please, Sir. Please let me come. I need it. Please. Please. I’m so close. I can’t. Not anymore. Please,” she begged.

I waited one beat longer before granting her request. “Come, love.”

Her entire body went stiff, and she let out a wail as she climaxed. I held her up when her knees gave out, keeping the hand between her legs pressed against her so that every time she moved, she created new friction against my palm, sending aftershocks through her.

“There’s a good lass,” I said, kissing the mark I’d left on her neck. “Now, it’s my turn.”

I groaned as I buried myself inside her. I wasn’t going to last long, not with her pussy spasming around me like that. I grabbed her hair with the hand that had been on her breast, and she moaned.

“You can come again whenever you want,” I said. “Because this is going to be quick. We’ll take our time later.”

She nodded, her head starting to fall forward. I yanked it back up and moved the hand between her legs so that my fingers were on her clit again. Using those two points for leverage, I pounded into her with deep, hard strokes meant to reach every inch of her. Her eyes met mine in our reflection, and I could see the glassy haze of pleasure that told me she was enjoying this as much as I was.

“Come for me, love.” I scraped my teeth across her shoulder blade. “I want to feel your cunt squeeze me when I come.”

She shuddered.

“Be a good girl,” I moved the hand from her clit back around between us. “Come for me.”

I pushed my finger into her ass, and she went over the edge with a scream. Her pussy clamped down around me, and I was gone. An explosion of pleasure coursed through my body, and I clutched her to me, wanting to keep us in this moment forever. It wasn't possible, I knew, but I'd take the time I had.

Chapter Sixteen

KYNDALL

I'd been living in LA for over two weeks, I realized suddenly as I washed up the dishes I dirtied today. I'd gone grocery shopping yesterday afternoon, then spent most of this morning making meals for the week. While I had the money to eat out at nice restaurants every day, I didn't have the inclination. The occasional splurge was one thing, as was spending the money when out on a date, but I'd always preferred to make things myself. I was no chef, but I was a fair enough cook, especially when it came to eating healthy. Plus, I enjoyed it.

I could still remember my mother and Lia in the kitchen when I was little, the two of them bonding over dinner or some special holiday cooking. I'd been too young for a long time, and then too much in the way. The few times I'd been allowed to help out, it'd been all of the mundane sort of things that hadn't really taught me much of anything.

After living in the dorms at MIT for two years, I'd been sick enough of college food that I'd bought cookbooks, watched shows, and taught myself how to cook. My old apartment hadn't contained a very large kitchen, but now that I was here, I intended to put this new, beautiful kitchen to good use.

I had a dishwasher, and I used it most of the time, but today, I needed the sort of mindless monotony that came with doing some kind of work. A little over two weeks here and I felt like I hadn't really had time to take the time to settle in, to relax.

Not that I wasn't enjoying my new life here.

I absolutely adored my nephew, as well as my new sister-in-law. I liked Hanna and Cross well enough and knew that we'd become true friends as we

spent more time together. My apartment was perfect, and I'd already made money at a game. I was sure I could find more.

And then there was Dean.

I couldn't think about the good parts of being here without him. He was the best part of it. An apartment. Poker. Those things I could've had back in Cambridge, or somewhere else for that matter. Dean, I knew, was one of a kind. Just like this thing between us.

I'd never believed in luck when it came to poker, so I definitely didn't believe in it when it came to anything else in life. Being with Dean, however, made me look at things in a different light. How else was I supposed to explain all of the things that had to come into play to bring the two of us together? Coincidence? Fate? Destiny?

Whatever it was, I was grateful for it, because things with him were going really well. I'd been wary about going on a date, and then more than a little nervous about going to the club, but both things had gone well. Better than well, actually.

True, Dalton was still being a bit of an ass and seeing him, and Juliette at the club had been awkward, but Hanna and Cross had been nice. I hadn't really interacted with anyone else there – well, except for the redhead who'd wanted to have a threesome – but they'd all seemed relatively normal.

What I felt wasn't normal. Or, rather, it hadn't been normal because it'd felt so normal. My whole life, I felt like I didn't fit. Not with my family, not at MIT. I'd always been too smart for most people. Too young. Too *different*. No one understood me, not really, and I'd never expected that anyone would.

I hadn't realized how resigned I was to that until now. Meeting Dean had sparked something inside me, but I hadn't completely accepted it until I'd walked into the club and realized what I'd needed all this time. Always being the smartest, and usually the youngest, person had left me with something to prove, something to maintain. At the club, though, I could give it all up, and no one would think less of me. It was natural to hand over that control and allow Dean to take the reins.

I'd gotten a glimpse of how it could be when Dean had tied my hands, but seeing the trio performing at the club had given me the courage I needed to accept what Dean was offering.

And it'd been fucking amazing.

The sex had been great, but that hadn't been the best part for me. That had come when I realized the relief of letting it all go, of letting Dean take care of

me. When I realized that I wasn't a weak person because of it.

That giving up control was a strength in and of itself.

If it hadn't been for the family issues I was experiencing, I would've been on cloud nine, thrilled at the prospect of my new life here. Even if it'd only been Dalton's attitude toward Dean, I would've felt better. I had people on my side, and I was sure they would help me wear Dalton down.

Without my brother, however, I didn't have anyone to help me out with our parents.

I knew they weren't happy with me moving to LA, but I hadn't realized that buying an apartment would set them off. I'd mentioned it to them in an email over the weekend, and they'd called me yesterday to tell me how irresponsible and reckless I was being. They'd actually put the phone on speaker and taken turns telling me what a bad idea it was, like some sort of surreal ping-pong match.

By the time I'd hung up, I'd needed a couple drinks and a hot bath.

And then phone sex with Dean.

It'd been just as amazing as every other sexual encounter I'd had with him. Plenty of orgasms and, even better, total relinquishing of control.

It'd helped clear my head enough to sleep, and when I'd woken up, I'd felt up to some work. Now that I was done with my cooking, it was time for me to start looking for games. I'd made enough last week to not have to worry about money for a little while, but I always liked to build up as much as I could whenever I could.

Especially now that I wasn't sure if I was going to continue playing poker.

I enjoyed doing it, the thrill, the challenge, but I'd been thinking about the future in new ways recently, and I wasn't sure counting cards to take money from seedy men was the best way to ensure that future.

The problem was that I didn't really know what else I wanted to do, which meant the smart thing would be to continue playing until I'd built up enough money that I could take my time figuring things out.

I sat down at my laptop, ready to start looking for the next game, but before I'd gotten very far, my phone rang. I frowned when Dalton's name flashed across the screen, but I picked it up anyway. No point in antagonizing him.

“Hey.” Okay, so maybe that was a bit abrupt, but after listening to our parents for more than an hour yesterday, I wasn't feeling much of anything positive toward family at the moment.

“Did I catch you on a break?”

I rolled my eyes. “What do you want, Dalton?”

“Juliette and I would like to invite you and Dean to dinner Friday night.”

The tone of his voice told me that the invitation hadn't been his idea.

“Really?” I asked dryly.

“Unless you and *Dean* have other plans.”

I closed my eyes and counted to five. “Do you want us to come? Or would it be easier if I gave you an excuse you could tell Juliette? The last thing I want is to make things difficult for you.”

Silence fell, but the call hadn't disconnected. I hoped my sarcasm was soaking in. I refused to feel guilty about talking to Dalton this way. Sure, his problems with Dean weren't completely out of line for a big brother, but he'd crossed a line with his money comments, and he hadn't apologized for those yet.

“Just tell her we already had plans,” I snapped. “We both know that's what you'd prefer.”

“Dammit, Kyndall!” Dalton sighed. “Just come for dinner and stop being such a brat.”

“So, first I'm a prostitute, and now I'm a brat. Nice to know what you think of me.”

“That's not what I...fuck!”

“What, Dalton? What, exactly, are you trying to say?”

He blew out a breath. “I shouldn't have said any of those things about where your money was coming from. That's your business, not mine. If you say there's no reason to worry, then I believe you.”

“And if I don't want to tell you how I got the money?”

A beat of silence before he answered, “Then I'll trust you to let me know if you need anything from me.”

“And Dean?”

Another drawn-out silence, but this time, I waited. The ball was in my brother's court now.

“I'll work on it. Getting used to you and Dean, I mean.”

That wasn't precisely what I was looking for, but it was better than nothing.

“We'll be there.”

“Six o'clock.”

I set my phone aside, giving myself a couple minutes to think about the

best way to present this to Dean. He'd tried to be nice to Dalton when we'd seen him at the club, but since then, we hadn't talked about him. How did a person start that sort of conversation?

Hey, so I know my brother's pissed at us, but how about we talk about how we can make things better, so he doesn't freak out about the two of us having hot, kinky sex?

Yeah, I could guess how well that would go over.

I reached up and pulled my hair out of the ponytail I'd thrown it in earlier. I wanted to go on Friday, wanted to see if Dalton could accept Dean and me together. I wanted to spend time with my brother's family. While I needed my independence, I hadn't realized how much I'd missed family until the wedding. And Dalton had been one of the reasons I'd chosen to stay in LA rather than finding some other place.

I rubbed my temples, the beginnings of a headache picking at the back of my brain. Most people would think that trying to have a relationship with someone like Dean would be complicated due to the different ways of looking at and experiencing sex. That, I accepted easily. The rest of it was what I found difficult. I'd heard someone say once that love was complicated and lust was simple. While I wasn't sure I wanted to use *love* to describe what Dean and I had, I couldn't deny that it was more complicated than simple lust.

I picked up my phone and made the call. He answered on the second ring. "What are you doing Friday evening?"

Chapter Seventeen

DEAN

Eating dinner with Dalton and Juliette was going to be beyond awkward. A part of me was still annoyed at Dalton for telling me to stay away from Kyndall, and more of me was pissed on her behalf because of the things he'd said to her about her finances.

Except when she called me to ask about going, she'd said he'd apologized for all that – her side of things, not mine – and I'd gotten the impression that she wanted to forgive him.

I wanted that too. I wanted her to be happy, to have a relationship with her brother that wasn't awkward and upsetting. And I wanted my friend back. In some ways, my friendship with Cross worked better with Dalton as a part of it. His usually easy-going personality was a nice counterbalance to our more aggressive, competitive way of doing things. Our occupations alone showed our different natures. Cross and I were two type-A businessmen who were focused on work, and whose charitable contributions normally consisted of writing checks, versus the elementary teacher who tutored underprivileged kids and took the occasional trip with Habitat for Humanity.

It was that last thought hitting me as I got into the car that made me understand why Dalton's disapproval bothered me so much.

Some part of me didn't think I was worthy of Kyndall, and having admired the man Dalton was, I feared he saw that about me too. He knew she deserved better. She deserved someone more like him. Selfless enough to sacrifice for someone else's good. Compassionate toward people the rest of the world rarely acknowledged. Generous even when he didn't have much to give.

It was a strange feeling. Unfamiliar. I never claimed to be a saint, but I'd never considered myself a bad guy either. No shady deals or kicking puppies. No playboy, love 'em and leave 'em tendencies. Only a moderate amount of youthful indiscretions, and none of them too bad.

I was a good guy.

Just not good enough for her.

Maybe Dalton was right. Maybe I should stay away from her. Let her find someone better, someone worthy of her.

Except I didn't think that was possible. No matter how many men out there were better than me, more charitable, more deserving, none of them would ever really be good enough for her.

And I wasn't selfless enough to walk away and let her find someone else.

Shit.

The part of domination that I liked the most was control. No matter how much power a Sub had to stop a scene, the time they relinquished their control to me was what made me want to be in this world. Everything was so pure, so simple. Giving pleasure brought me pleasure. There were no ulterior motives, no wondering about what the other person was thinking. A Sub gave up their power and trusted me to keep them safe. I maintained control to give them that safe space.

Kyndall had taken that from me without either of us realizing it. I could be in control of a scene with her, but her power over me went far beyond what a Sub usually had. Keeping her safe no longer only meant respecting her limits and bringing her sexual pleasure. I wanted her protected and happy in every aspect of her life, and there was no possible way for me to be in control of that.

I was unable to tell what bothered me more, not being able to control that aspect of her life, or that I wanted to. The fact that I'd chosen to spend time with her not for sex, nor for a scheduled event for which I needed a date, was new enough. Everything else was nearly overwhelming.

One thing I knew for certain, however, was that each passing day made Kyndall more important to me.

The driver opened the door for me, and I took a slow breath as I got out. The heat was oppressive for the minute it took me to walk from the car to the door, and I felt a brief longing for the cooler English climate. I wondered if Kyndall ever missed Cambridge like that. She'd never mentioned it, but then again, she didn't talk about much other than her family, and not even much

about them either.

I frowned as I took the elevator up to her floor. I hadn't realized it until now that Kyndall and I may have only spent a short time talking, but she'd never really said much about the last few years of her life. I'd told her about my parents, about my time at Oxford and the creation of my first online company. I hadn't said much about how much money I had, but I'd liked that she hadn't asked. I supposed my respecting her secrets about her own finances made her hesitant to ask about mine, but none of that explained why she didn't talk about MIT often. In fact, I suddenly realized, the only reason I knew she'd gone there was when she told me she lived in Cambridge for college and I'd asked which college she'd attended.

I promised myself that I'd remedy that. I wanted to know everything about her so I could understand her better, so I could better know the man I should be for her. And because I wanted to know everything there was to know about the woman I was falling for.

My parents had never been the sort to show much emotion, though I never doubted how much they loved me or each other. That meant I didn't have much of a grasp on the sorts of things one could expect in a relationship. They'd given me the sex talk, and had always made sure I knew to treat others with respect, but the concept of romantic love was something I wasn't sure I understood beyond the surface. Even the story of their own courtship had been told with minimal depth, made more with the head than the heart.

I didn't want the surface with Kyndall. I'd already told her that I wanted to try to pursue a relationship, but even now, I wasn't sure how deep that meant we would go. Or what that actually meant.

For the first time in my life, I felt like I was floundering, unable to determine which direction to go or what to do. I wasn't even entirely sure what I wanted, not beyond the immediate desire to be with Kyndall in the here and now. All of my plans for the non-profit were pushed to the background until I understood what else was going on.

When I was six or seven, my parents had taken me to a carnival outside of London. My first one. I'd been so excited that I hadn't known what ride I wanted to go on first, only that I wanted to experience all of them. Even the ones I wasn't yet old enough to ride. My parents had indulged me, letting me lead them from place to place, finding every single ride I was able to go on, talking with every carny in sight. I'd played every game and lost them all, but I hadn't cared.

On our way back to the car, I'd spotted a ride that I hadn't noticed before. It was one of those that spun around in circles, and I'd always been one of those kids who would spin themselves around in chairs until they couldn't walk straight. My parents hadn't liked the idea of me going on it, but they'd let me anyway. When I'd gotten older, I realized they hadn't thought I'd be tall enough to ride it, which was what had happened at a few of the other scarier rides. Except at this one, the height sign must've been pushed lower into the dirt because I just managed to reach the line.

I'd been thrilled, and even though my parents had predicted I'd throw up, I hadn't. What had happened, however, was that I hadn't been able to get through the exit gate on my own. I was dizzy than I'd ever been, barely able to stand up, much less walk. My father had ended up carrying me back to the car, and I'd had to close my eyes because the world had been tipping in all sorts of crazy directions. When I read *Alice in Wonderland* a couple years later, I remembered thinking that I could relate to what it must've felt like to fall down the rabbit hole.

Being with Kyndall made me feel like that all over again. Like I was a child, spinning out of control, loving it and fearing it at the same time, knowing that I'd never see the world the same way again. Like everything had been turned upside-down, and I didn't know which way was up...and I didn't care.

As I stopped in front of her door, I pushed those thoughts and feelings down, determined to make tonight work. While I wasn't ready to give my feelings for Kyndall a name, I would do whatever was in my power to make her happy, and tonight, that meant dinner with Dalton and Juliette.

She opened the door a few moments after I knocked, and the smile that spread across my face was both automatic and genuine.

“You look lovely,” I said as I ran my gaze down her body.

She gave me a skeptical look. “I'm wearing jeans and a plain shirt.”

I shrugged. “Doesn't make it any less true.”

She rolled her eyes but smiled, so I was pleased with the result. I loved the way her eyes lit up when she smiled, how that small dimple showed in her cheek. I held out my hand, and she took it. In the other hand, she held a wine bag.

“Was I supposed to bring something?”

“Nope,” she said as we walked to the elevator. “I wanted to bring the wine.”

I looked down at her, understanding. “You want to see if Dalton's going to ask you how you were able to afford an expensive bottle.”

She gave me a sideways look out of the corner of her eye. “If I say yes, will you think less of me?”

“Never.” I chuckled as I kissed the top of her head. “I think it's quite brilliant actually.”

When Juliette opened the door a couple minutes later, Kyndall gave my hand a quick squeeze, as if she knew how much I was dreading this, and then moved to give her sister-in-law a hug.

“Dean.”

I looked over Juliette's shoulder to see Dalton standing there with Anthony in his arms. I gave him a polite nod and followed Kyndall into the apartment. I knew I wasn't imagining the tension, but it definitely seemed different than it was at the club. Less animosity, more...awkward. It wasn't until Juliette made a comment about the club, however, that I figured it out.

Dalton was respecting Kyndall's decision to date me, and we could get past the age difference. What he was still struggling with wasn't even the fact that he knew Kyndall and I were having sex. It was that he knew the *kind* of sex we were having. Dalton was a Sub and had been for years. He wasn't new to this lifestyle so he could understand in a way that other people might not have been able to, exactly what it meant that his sister was sleeping with a Dom.

When he saw me putting my arm around Kyndall, touching her, smiling at her, he knew that she wasn't simply in my bed, but that I was teaching her about the sorts of kinks that I liked. And since Cross, Dalton, and I had discussed our preferences, he knew the parts of BDSM that I would be doing with his little sister. Spanking. Bondage. All sorts of things.

A wave of sympathy went through me. I might not have had a sister, but I could still understand how much stranger it had to be for him, having a completely different sort of understanding of my relationship with his sister than anyone else would.

“Anthony's about ready to go down,” Dalton said as he shifted his son from one shoulder to the other.

“Here, let me.” Kyndall held out her hands.

“Are you sure?”

She nodded. “He goes to sleep easily for me.”

“All right.” Dalton transferred Anthony into Kyndall's arms.

“I’ll be back in a few.” She glanced at me, and I gave her a nod to let her know that I’d be fine.

Juliette looked from Dalton to me and back again. “I’m going to check on the chicken.”

And just like that, Dalton and I were alone in the living room. I looked around, trying to figure out something to comment on, some way to make small talk until one of the women came back and filled the silence.

“I apologized to Kyndall for acting like an ass,” Dalton said.

“She told me.”

His eyes met mine, and there was a hardness in them that I’d rarely seen. “I also told her that I’d work on things with you.”

“I’d like that,” I said honestly. “Our friendship means a great deal to me.”

“But not enough to stay away from my sister,” he said baldly.

I shook my head and gave him a truthful reply. “I don’t think I can stay away from her unless she tells me to.”

A muscle in his jaw jumped as he shoved his hands into his pockets. “I suppose that should make me feel better, knowing that you’re not just screwing with her.”

“I’m not,” I said quickly. “I promise you that, Dalton. I’m not messing about with her. It’s not like that.”

“What’s it like then?” he asked.

As much as I would’ve preferred to keep my thoughts to myself, I knew that the only way Dalton would ever start to trust me with his sister was to be honest. “I’m not sure.”

“That doesn’t exactly inspire confidence, Dean,” he said dryly.

“I know.” I ran my hand through my hair. “We’re still trying to figure things out between us, but I swear, I want to see where this thing between us goes.”

As much as I was trying to be honest, I couldn’t bring myself to tell Dalton just how far I thought I was falling for Kyndall. Even if I wasn’t still adjusting to it all myself, I couldn’t tell him before I told her.

And I was nowhere near ready for that confession.

“All right,” he said, his tone grudging. “I can’t say it won’t be weird for me, especially if I see you two together at the club, but I’ll accept it.” His eyes narrowed as he gave me a hard look. “But if you hurt her, I’ll kick your ass.”

I nodded. “I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

He held out his hand, and I shook it. The best thing about most guys –

especially American ones – these sorts of conversations tended to be on the short side.

“One more thing,” Dalton added as he glanced over his shoulder toward the hallway. “A favor, actually.”

“What's that?”

The expression on his face changed to something almost like desperation. “Please don't bring her to the club in something too...*revealing*.” He paused a second before adding, “And please don't perform on stage. I couldn't handle that.”

I smiled, grateful it was something I wouldn't even have to think twice about. “No worries. I won't be letting anyone look at your sister like that.”

He scowled at me. “Except you.”

I grinned. “Except me.”

He sighed. “I suppose that will have to do.”

“What will have to do?” Kyndall asked as she came back into the living room.

“Nothing,” Dalton said quickly. “Dean and I were just having a discussion.”

“Really?” She raised an eyebrow.

“It's okay,” I said, holding my hand out to her. “We've worked things out.”

“You have?” She looked at Dalton.

“We have,” he said. “Now, let's go open that bottle of wine and help Juliette get dinner on the table.”

And that, apparently, was that.

Chapter Eighteen

KYNDALL

When I offered to put Anthony down for the night, I knew I was taking a risk leaving Dean and Dalton together without me, but they'd both promised to put forth an effort, so I figured it was worth it to see if it was possible for us to have a civilized meal together.

Then I came back into the living room to find them behaving as if nothing had happened. There was still a bit of awkwardness there, but none of the tension I'd felt before.

Men.

The three of us went into the kitchen to help Juliette finish up, and as the guys carried things into the kitchen, I pulled Juliette aside.

“Did you say something to them?”

She shook her head. “I thought you did.”

“No.” I looked toward the sound of their voices. “I have no clue what happened.”

She gave me a searching look. “Does it really matter?”

I thought about it for a moment before shaking my head. “Not really.” I picked up a plate of steamed vegetables. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“When I was here before, you and Dalton were arguing, but when I saw you at the club, you guys looked fine.” I flushed but forced myself to continue. I needed to know what happened, how they'd gotten past it. My own parents had rarely argued, at least not in front of us kids. “What happened?”

She leaned back against the counter, clearly considering my question.

“Eventually, he realized that he was out of line for what he said, and I acknowledged that he hadn't meant things to come out like they had. He apologized, I accepted, and we moved on.”

“So you two are okay?”

She smiled as she straightened. “We are.” She started past me, then stopped to look back. “Communication, honesty, and not holding grudges. Dalton and I may not have had the most traditional courtship, but those parts of any relationship are important, no matter what the other particulars are.”

“Thanks.” The last of the unease I'd felt melted away. I still didn't know where things were going to go with Dean, but I felt a lot better about the possibilities now.

The rest of the evening passed by without a hitch. We ate and joked and shared. It was the first time I'd truly felt like an adult when talking to my brother. We took care around subjects that could lead to anything controversial, but I knew that things would only get easier from here.

By the time Dean and I were walking toward the door, I felt like I was on cloud nine. I didn't want the night to end, and since we were only one floor up from my apartment, it'd be easy enough to make sure it didn't.

“Do you have any plans for tonight?” I asked as Dean and I stepped onto the elevator.

He put his hands on my hips and pulled me against him as the doors closed. “I was hoping to.”

He leaned down and nuzzled the spot under my ear that made my stomach flutter. The doors dinged open, and I took his hand, pulling him after me. The moment we were inside my apartment, his hands were on me, sliding under the back of my shirt, then down over my ass.

I kissed his throat, the scrape of stubble against my cheek and lips turning me on more than should have been possible. I wanted to feel that sensual abrasion against my inner thighs.

“Do you trust me?”

Dean's question had me raising my head to look at him. “I do.”

His fingers dug into my ass as he lifted me. I wrapped my legs around his waist, arms around his neck. As if I weighed nothing, he carried me through my bedroom and into my bathroom. He set me down and covered my mouth with his. His fingers twisted through my hair, sending small jolts of pain through my scalp as his movement tugged at my roots. I moaned as his tongue slipped across mine, exploring my mouth with a patience that didn't

match the urgency I felt in his body.

When he finally lifted his head, we were both breathless. He rested his forehead against mine for a moment, and I let myself enjoy simply being with him.

“Shower,” he said, his voice rough. “I’m going to get some things set up.”

I nodded, not understanding but not caring. I meant it when I said that I trusted him.

He took a step back, letting his fingers trail across my cheek before dropping to his side. “Be thorough.”

It took a moment for the meaning to register, and when it did, heat flooded my face. “Oh.”

One corner of his mouth tipped up. “I’ll take that to mean you’ll be prepared when you join me in the bedroom?”

I wasn’t sure *prepared* was the word I would’ve used, but I nodded and watched him leave. I turned toward the shower and hoped my heart would calm by the time I was done. If we were going to be doing what I thought, I didn’t want to have a heart attack in the middle of it.

Unfortunately, as I walked back into my bedroom a quarter of an hour later, my pulse was as rapid as before. I’d wrapped a towel around me, and the usually soft cotton felt rough against my skin. I felt like every cell in my body was vibrating with equal parts anxiety and anticipation, making me hyper aware of everything.

The scent of lavender should have soothed me, and I appreciated Dean having taken the time to light the scented candles I kept in my bedroom, but I was having difficulty focusing on any one thing long enough to react to it.

Not even Dean wearing only a pair of charcoal gray boxer-briefs could do much to capture my attention for more than a few seconds.

He frowned at me. “If you don’t want to do this, love, it’s all right. We don’t have to.”

“I want to.” My voice was steadier than my hands.

“If you want me to stop at any point—”

“Red,” I said. “I remember.”

“Good.” He gestured toward the towel. “Drop it.”

I did, enjoying the way his eyes darkened as he looked at me.

“On the bed.”

I noticed he’d put down one of the throws I kept in my linen closet, so I moved to it, stretching out on my stomach when he told me to roll over. I

folded my arms under my head and put my forehead on my hands.

This wasn't completely new, I reminded myself. I'd had his finger in my ass before, and I'd liked it. Besides, I trusted him to make me feel good, even if it hurt at first, like I knew it would.

"I can almost hear you thinking, love."

I felt the mattress shift as he settled between my knees.

"Let's see what we can do about that."

I tensed as he put his hands on my cheeks and pulled them apart. Then I felt something hot and wet move up my slit and over my anus. My entire body twitched, a gasp falling from my lips as he began to lick my ass. His tongue traced around the tight ring of muscle, and I made a soft sound. Once I'd gotten over how strange it was, I could concentrate on how it felt, and let myself enjoy it.

When he pressed his finger in, I was surprised at how relaxed I was. There was a slight pinch that quickly became a still-unfamiliar burn as he moved his finger in and out. A second finger made me suck in a breath, muscles clenching at the intrusion.

"Shh, love. Just relax." Dean pressed a kiss against the back of my thigh.

"Easy for you to say," I said in a shaky voice.

He chuckled, then used his free hand to lightly stroke my clit. The two sensations merged into something much more pleasant, and I slowly relaxed. He kept up the steady strokes over my clit as his fingers twisted inside me.

"Does a Sub ever get to do this to a Dom?" I asked.

His hands hesitated for only the briefest of moments, but I knew my question had surprised him.

"Depends on the Dom," he answered finally.

"What about you?"

Before he replied, a third finger pressed against my ass and I cried out. My hands clenched into fists, and I reminded myself that it'd only last a minute. I thought about the rhythmic movements over my clit, the way the blanket felt against my nipples, and the pain faded to a dull ache.

"Is that something you would want to do?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I just thought turnabout is fair play, right?"

He laughed, the low sound sending a wash of warmth over me. I didn't know how he did it, but his laugh turned me on and made me feel safe, even when it held that edge of something dark.

"Is that a yes?"

Dean's fingers disappeared, leaving me feeling oddly empty. The thumb on my clit kept moving though, spiraling me higher with quick, deliberate movements.

“Perhaps,” he said. “Now, love, I want you to come so I can fuck your ass.”

I nodded, as if my agreement was really needed to let the pleasure wash over me. I rode it out with a new sort of abandon, knowing that Dean would be there to catch me at the end. I could simply let go and fly.

He waited until my body had stilled, and then I felt the head of his cock between my cheeks. I closed my eyes as he began to push, whimpering at the stretch and burn. He was wider than three fingers, and the muscles in my legs started to quiver as he eased his way inside.

His hand rested on the small of my back, thumb making small soothing circles against my skin even as he held me still.

“Let me in, Kyndall.” His voice took on a calm, gentle tone. “Accept it, love. All of it. Let yourself feel all of it. Let me make you feel good.”

I bit my bottom lip, let his words flow over me. I concentrated on each one, on the lilt of his accent, the way he pronounced things, how it thickened the more aroused he was.

My world narrowed down to him. To his voice. To the heat of his hand on my back. The hard muscles of his legs. The feel of his thick shaft filling me in a way I'd never been filled before. The pain was there, but in the background, almost an afterthought to everything else.

“Kyndall,” he groaned my name as he leaned over me, his chest against my back. “Fuck, love, that's so tight.” He pushed my hair back from my face and kissed my cheek. “Are you okay?”

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. I had too much going on in my head, too many sensations my brain was trying to process all at once. But I didn't want him to stop. That much was clear.

So he didn't. He moved slowly at first, letting my muscles get used to the new way my body was being used. His hand moved underneath me, fingers brushing over my clit, the touch almost too light to register. He pulled my hips up until I rested on my knees and elbows, his thrusts coming deeper and faster, his fingers pressing harder against my clit. I rocked back against him, the pain becoming something else, something almost too intense to be called pleasure, but definitely no longer unpleasant.

The orgasm caught me off-guard, ripping through me with a strength I

hadn't imagined possible. My head dropped to the blanket, and I screamed, the thick fabric muffling the sound. Vaguely, I was aware of Dean shouting my name, along with a few curses. He slammed into me hard enough to make me scream again, pushing my climax higher until I blacked out.

When I came to, I was under my covers, Dean's body practically wrapped around me. I could feel the ache of muscles that weren't happy with me, and I knew sitting would be a bitch tomorrow, but I didn't regret it. Dean's slow, even breathing told me he was asleep, and I knew that should've made me nervous. I should have woken him up, maybe made some excuse to move around, let him excuse himself.

But I liked having his arms around me, his leg over mine. It wasn't claustrophobic or too warm. It felt safe. *He* felt safe.

So I didn't wake him up or even move. I closed my eyes and let sleep claim me again.

The next time I woke, he was gone, and I had a moment of disappointment before I smelled bacon. He'd stayed, and he was making breakfast. My stomach twisted, and I forced myself to go to the bathroom for a shower to give him the opportunity to sneak out if that was what he wanted to do. I didn't want to make any assumptions about where things were with us.

Or where I wanted them to be.

When I pulled on my robe and walked out to find him leaning against the counter with a plateful of bacon next to him, I couldn't deny the sharp longing that went through me. It might've been too much, too fast, but I had to admit that I'd fallen for him. Not just in a *let's see where this goes* kind of way, but the sort of falling that meant I wanted a future with this man.

The sort of falling that meant he had the ability to break my heart.

Chapter Nineteen

KYNDALL

Breakfast with Dean had been pleasant, almost too much so, and by the time I carried the dishes to the dishwasher, I'd started to get nervous. Fortunately, before I had to worry about how to handle things, Dean was ready to leave. I didn't know if it was because he'd felt my anxiety or because he had his own, and there could've been a third option as well. That it'd simply been a good time to go because we weren't at a place where we spent most of our free time together.

That hadn't stopped me from thinking about him as I worked on finding out where high stakes games were this weekend. Most people assumed that players found games through some sort of underground secret code spread by word of mouth. That might've been the case with a lot of them, but as technology had advanced, so had the way people communicated.

It wasn't like I could go online and do a search for *secret poker games in LA*, but there were certain things a person could look for...if they knew how. And I did. Old-fashioned games were enough of a boys club that I could use that to my advantage, but the newer ones were easier for a woman to get into.

Besides, young or old, most men were the same, especially when it came to a pretty, new face.

It was late afternoon by the time I found what I was looking for, but based on the buy-in, it was definitely going to be worth my while. So I dressed and headed out, trying not to think about what Dalton or Dean would say if they knew where I was going. Juliette would probably understand, but I wouldn't want to put her in that position.

Which meant I still didn't have anyone to talk to if I wanted some help in

figuring out what to do about my current 'occupation.' Not that I'd really expected anything different. I needed to figure things out, but I was going to do it the way I'd always done things.

On my own.

But not tonight.

Tonight, I had a game to play.

There were two men at the door of the club when I arrived, but only one of them stared at me as I walked toward them. The other one seemed more interested in glowering menacingly at a pair of obnoxious frat-boy types who were coming up behind me, but that was okay. I only needed to give the password to one of them.

“ID.”

I gave him a polite smile. “I'm here for the game.”

He didn't even try to hide his surprise. “Password?”

“Magenta.”

“All right.” He stepped away from the door, leaving the other guy to check IDs. “Follow me.”

We walked around the side of the building and down the narrow alley. There was another door there, tucked into the shadows, and he stopped next to it, punching a code into a hidden keypad. A moment later, a light blinked green, and he opened the door for me.

“First door on the left.”

“Thank you.”

The hallway was surprisingly well-lit, so I was able to find the door easy enough. I knocked, went through, and saw a familiar face watching as security did a quick check.

Stanley Maverick.

Wonderful.

I forced a smile and met his cold gaze. I might've been scared if I'd ever allowed myself to stop and think about our previous confrontation, but right now, looking at him, all I could think was that I was going to kick his ass again. And I was going to enjoy it.

I let my hips roll as I walked over to the table, let all of the men take their time leering at me. The more time they spent imagining me naked and in bed, the less attention they'd pay to their game. Some people might've thought it was a bit of an unethical distraction, but I believed in working with what I'd been given, and in this instance, it wasn't just my brain I was working.

“You're back,” Stanley said as I took the empty seat across from him.

I half-shrugged as I surveyed the room. The only exit was behind me, but I'd done a little research about the club and knew that it was considered high class. Which meant if something went south, it'd probably happen outside the club rather than here tonight. Not exactly a comforting thought, but it was always good to know where the danger was.

Other than Stanley, I didn't recognize anyone else at the table, but no one offered any names. That was good. It meant these guys were here to really gamble, not to play at being gangsters.

I handed over my buy-in and accepted my chips, waiting for the usual thrill to set in. There was nothing though. No excitement for the game. No eager anticipation. Just the same sort of resignation that I'd always associated with getting ready for a real job.

A card dropped in front of me, and I mentally cursed myself for losing track of things. I focused on the cards as they came now, rearranging them automatically as I started cataloging the others' mannerisms. I couldn't count if I didn't pay attention, and while I was a decent player that way, I wasn't playing for fun.

I lost the first two hands, but by the time the third came around, I'd caught up where the cards were and was able to start playing a little more safely. Still, I was missing the hyper awareness that had always come with the cold, and I found myself distracted in a way I'd never been.

And pretty much every time, that distraction had been Dean. Wondering what he was doing this evening. What he'd done when he'd left my place earlier today. If he'd met with anyone. If he was calling me while my phone was off. When I'd see him again.

If Stanley hadn't given me a smirk after he'd won a hand I'd folded on, I might've kept barely breaking even, but the moment I'd seen that bastard grin, my competitive nature kicked in, and that'd done what nothing else had accomplished. I stopped thinking about Dean and focused on kicking Stanley's ass.

I leaned forward, resting my elbows on the table and crossing my ankles under my chair. This son of a bitch had no idea what he'd gotten himself into. I was done holding back.

I played fast, running the table at my own pace instead of at the dealers. I forced hands, quick counting to know which ones I could risk and which I couldn't. Hand after hand went down, and I gave up small bets to get to the

cards I wanted. I didn't even bother to pretend that I wasn't counting. This wasn't a casino, so it wasn't anything more illegal than the game itself, and Stanley didn't strike me as the sort of guy who'd be willing to admit that someone like me was smart enough to do what I've been doing.

"I'm out." The dark-haired man next to me pushed his chair back from the table.

"Me too." The man on the other side of me was at least grinning when he stood. "I'm all tapped out for this week."

Stanley looked at the other players, and then back at me. "Anyone else going to take a hike?"

I smiled in a way that I was pretty sure looked more like baring my teeth than anything remotely pleasant. "I'm not going anywhere until I'm done."

And I wasn't going to be done until everyone else was wiped out, including Stanley Maverick. It might not have been the smart thing to do, but that smarmy little grin was too much.

"Was it your father or a boyfriend who taught you how to play?" Stanley asked.

"Who says anyone taught me?" I countered. "Much less a man."

"How long did it take you to figure out if you flash some tits and shake your ass that men start thinking with their dicks?"

I slid two cards toward the dealer and took the ones he offered. "Not long. Men aren't exactly the most complex creatures."

"None of that makes you a good card player."

"You're right," I agreed. "My *assets* aren't what make me good."

One of the other men called, and I showed my hand. Stanley's expression darkened as I pulled the chips to me.

"I'm just that good."

I hadn't had a difficult time being submissive to Dean, but that wasn't my natural personality, not in real life, no matter how nice I could be. Only Dean made me want to submit. Maverick brought out a whole different side of me, and that side wasn't very nice.

There would probably be consequences, but I'd deal with them when they came up. Right now, I had an arrogant bastard to put in his place.

Chapter Twenty

DEAN

I'd known Cross before he'd met and married Hanna, but only as a business sort of friend. Someone to look up when I was in town. It wasn't until I moved here that our friendship had solidified, and he'd gotten married a couple months before that. He'd introduced me to Juliette and Dalton then as well, and they'd just gotten engaged. None of them had ever made me feel out of place for being single, and I'd never thought much of it, but I couldn't help thinking that I liked this better, being part of a third couple.

A couple.

I smiled to myself as I strolled down the sidewalk. Kyndall and I hadn't discussed labels, but we were doing *couple* things. Sex was part of it, obviously, but more so staying over. Actually sleeping together. Having breakfast. Going out on dates. Spending time with family and friends.

I was still adjusting to the change, but it all felt more natural than I'd expected. After we had sex last night, Kyndall had fallen asleep – well, passed out was probably a better description – so I'd cleaned us both up and moved her under the covers. I could've left, and a part of me had thought about it. Then I remembered how much I enjoyed relaxing with her in my arms, so I climbed into bed with her. If she would've woken up and asked me to leave, I would've. But she hadn't. When I'd woken up this morning, she'd still been fast asleep.

It was while we were eating breakfast that I realized I could do this. I could sleep next to this woman, wake up with her, eat a meal with her. I could discuss plans for the day and know that I was coming home to her at

night. Not only *could* I do it, but I wanted to do it.

It was happening fast, I knew, and some people might've thought it was too fast, but that sort of thing was in my blood. Sort of. My parents had met and married within a seven month period of time, and they'd always been faithful to each other. They still enjoyed being together, and their marriage had always been a solid rock. So I knew marriages with short courtships could last.

But I also knew what my parents would say if I told them I was serious about a woman without having a list of logical reasons why a relationship with her would be the best thing for both of us. And if I told them that I hadn't even had a conversation with her about the important things that should go into planning a long-term commitment, they'd both tell me that I needed to think things through more. Not because they thought I was going too fast, but because it wasn't my brain that was leading the way.

In their opinion, following one's heart was as foolish as making decisions based on sex alone. While I agreed with the latter, I'd never been entirely sure about the former, and being with Kyndall was making me consider things in ways I'd never done before.

I wasn't going to go completely off the deep end though. There was a middle ground between too logical and no common sense, and that's where I intended to be. That meant finding out how Kyndall felt about us being an exclusive couple before anything else.

Something out of the corner of my eye caught my attention and I stopped. It was getting late, and most of the shops would be closing within the next hour, but I hadn't come down here to buy. This was one of my favorite places in LA to come walk. Lots of little shops owned by families or individuals, each one unique rather than the commercialized sort of thing one found elsewhere.

This particular shop was a jewelry store. I'd passed it dozens of times over the last few months, but this was the first time I'd paid attention to the sign in the window.

One-of-a-kind, handcrafted pieces.

I pushed open the door and stepped into the cool air-conditioning. As the door closed behind me, ringing the bell a second time, all of the outside noise fell away. This area of the city wasn't as clogged with traffic as other parts, but it was still a city. In here, however, classical music played softly in the background.

Chopin.

I could still remember my piano teacher standing over me, his index finger poking hard between my shoulder-blades to get me to sit up straight. The metronome ticking away in front of me. And, of course, the rivalry between Mr. Woodley's piano and Mrs. Isler, who taught me violin on alternating days. I was good enough at both to be dragged out in front of guests but not enough to pursue it as a career or even for a scholarship. It'd been a while since I'd played, and I wondered how much I remembered.

“Can I help you?”

A young woman appeared from the back and gave me a charming smile. She was tall and thin, with dark hair and eyes, and the sort of features that could've made her a model.

“I hope so,” I said as I walked over to the counter. “I'm looking for something special, but I'm not certain of what that may be.”

“Well, sir, we have a fine selection of traditional jewelry, as well as one-of-a-kind pieces ready to go. We also offer custom-made jewelry should you wish to design your own.”

The words came easily, as if she'd said them a million times before. I doubted all of her customers received such appreciative looks, however.

“Nothing traditional,” I said. I gave her a polite smile but refrained from putting any extra warmth into it. I didn't want her to get the wrong idea.

“Do you know the sort of jewelry you'd like?” she asked, moving down a case. “Necklace? Bracelet? Ring?”

“Not a ring.” My neck grew warm as I practically blurted out the words. It was one thing to think that something long-term was possible, but it was something else entirely to be ring shopping.

“Our necklaces and bracelets are here.” She stopped behind a case and gestured for me to look. “If I may ask, what's your relationship with the lady in question? Sister? Mother? Girlfriend?”

I knew I didn't imagine the pause before the last one. Better to nip this in the bud than to let things get away from me. “Girlfriend.”

Disappointment flashed across her face, but it was gone in only a matter of seconds, replaced by a cordial, professional mask. “Do you have an idea in mind, or would you like some assistance choosing?”

I was impressed. A lot of women would've been abrupt or petty after a rejection, no matter how polite, but she took it all in stride. Then again, working at a jewelry store, I supposed she was accustomed to waiting on

unavailable men.

I was unavailable.

The thought didn't bother me as much as I once would've thought.

I looked down at the two dozen necklaces, and then back up at the saleswoman. "Any insight you could offer would be much appreciated."

"How long have you and your girlfriend been together?" I must've made a face because she chuckled. "Early in a relationship, a man may want to impress a woman with a flashy gift. Later, he may want something flashy to make up for not buying a ring."

I decided to address her comments rather than her question. "Nothing too flashy."

"All right." She looked down at the necklaces, eyes moving from one to the next. "Hair and eye color?"

"Blonde," I said. "Like honey-colored. Dark blue eyes. Almost black."

She nodded again. "What about her style?" Her head came up. "You want to complement how she usually dresses and accessorizes."

I thought for a moment. I hadn't realized so much would go into picking out a necklace. If it did come to a point where I was ring shopping, I was going to have to ask Juliette or Hanna to go with me because I'd be at a complete loss.

"She doesn't wear jewelry a lot," I said. "Short necklaces most of the time. Pretty straightforward. Nothing ostentatious."

The saleswoman was silent for a minute, a look of concentration on her face. Finally, she reached into the case and pulled out something. She draped it across her hand and turned it toward me.

If I'd had the vision and skill to craft something that perfectly represented Kyndall, this would be it. Elegant platinum woven together in a rope-like chain, with a single gem at its center. A deep blue sapphire that gleamed in the store light.

"I'll take it."

If the woman was surprised that I didn't ask for a price, she didn't show it. I took her up on her offer to wrap it and stood by the register while I waited. After previous disastrous attempts to produce something with smooth, elegant lines, I'd given up. By the time I was twenty, I'd had to accept that everything I wrapped looked like a small child had done it. That was cute when I was a kid, but as an adult, it was more or less embarrassing.

After I paid and thanked the saleswoman, I headed back out into the

night's heat. How soon, I wondered, would be too soon to make plans to see Kyndall again? I'd always enjoyed giving gifts, but I was excited enough to see her face when she opened it that I was seriously considering going over tonight and surprising her.

First, I wanted to enjoy watching her expression change when she opened the box...and then I wanted to have her strip off everything except the necklace and take her in every room in her apartment. Living room floor. Kitchen counter. Dining room table. Guest room. Both bathrooms.

I'd never considered doing the whole collar thing as a Dom, but now I could see the appeal of having Kyndall wearing something that would let everyone else know that she was taken. I might not have been ready for the ring thing yet, but if we went back to the club, I definitely planned on asking her to wear the necklace. It'd be close enough to a collar that it'd keep most of the other men at bay.

I was so caught up in thinking about her that when I heard a woman's voice telling someone to keep the change, I thought it was my mind making the woman sound like Kyndall. Except when I looked over, I saw those familiar tousled waves and those amazing curves. In a dress that looked a bit too fancy for shopping.

And she was shopping, because as I watched, she disappeared into a toy store.

Curious, I followed. I hadn't been in this store before, but as I walked in, I couldn't help but be impressed. This wasn't some chain store that had all the latest in electronics and gadgets. These were the sorts of carved and sewn gifts that people passed down through generations.

"Yes, that one, thank you."

Kyndall's voice drew me toward her, and I watched as an elderly man picked up a wooden rocking horse and put it on the counter. I wasn't an expert in woodworking, but I'd spent enough time in various wealthy mansions growing up to know that the dark wood making up the toy wasn't cheap.

"Anthony will love that," I said.

Kyndall jumped, startled, but then smiled when she saw me. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"Likewise." I smiled at her as I stepped up next to her. "I enjoy walking around here. Lovely shops."

"They are," she agreed. "Juliette mentioned this place to me last week,

and I figured I'd come by and see if there was anything here for Anthony.” She gestured toward the window. “When I saw that one, I knew I had to see if they had one available.”

“Will you be taking it with you, miss?” The man gave me a smile before turning his attention back to her.

“Do you deliver?” she asked. “I'd rather not have to take it in a cab if I don't have to.”

“We do offer next day delivery at a cost.”

“Perfect.” She opened her purse. “Ring it up.”

I knew she'd paid a pretty price for her apartment, but it was still a surprise to see her pull out an envelope of cash rather than a credit card. She didn't even blink when the man told her how much it would be, simply counted out bills and handed them over.

I frowned. Where had she gotten that sort of cash? Most people carried around checks and debit or credit cards for large purchases. And if a company didn't do direct deposit, most people put their checks in with very little cash taken out.

Suddenly, Dalton's suspicions about where his sister was getting her money seemed a lot less intrusive.

“I didn't realize that they only took cash.”

The statement was out of my mouth before I'd really thought about it. As I followed her outside, she threw a hard look over her shoulder at me. I should've stopped, but now that I'd said it, there didn't seem to be any taking it back.

“I don't know if they do or not.” She stopped on the sidewalk and turned toward me, arms folding over her chest.

“I suppose I'm still not used to the way things are here,” I said, trying to keep my voice light. “Most Londoners don't carry much cash.”

She sighed, a tired expression settling on her face. “Just ask what you want to ask, Dean.”

I didn't want to ask it. Not when I knew how pissed she'd be. But she was dressed up and had pulled out an envelope of cash. As much as I loathed the idea, I couldn't help but wonder if she was an escort or something like that. Maybe not the kind who always had sex with clients, but a woman who was paid to look nice and go on dates and provide *companionship*. I hated myself for thinking it, but it was the only thing that made any sense. At least as far as I could see, and if she had a reasonable explanation, then I needed her to tell

me because I couldn't think of one.

“Where were you tonight, Kyndall?”

She glared at me, but even her anger couldn't disguise her hurt. “I don't think that's really what you want to know, is it? You want to know what I was doing tonight. How I got that money, right? How I *earned* it.”

I crossed my arms. “Yes, I do.”

“I'm getting really sick of people thinking that what I do is any of their damn business.” She held up a hand when I opened my mouth to argue. “But since I suppose asking for people to trust me is out of the question, I guess I'll just tell you.”

I held my breath, waiting for the bombshell that would destroy this thing we were building. But when it came, it wasn't what I'd expected at all.

“I play poker, Dean. That's how I make money.”

What the hell?

Chapter Twenty-One

KYNDALL

I kept my eyes on Dean's face as I told him the truth. The fact that he'd been pushing me had me on edge, and my temper wasn't doing me any favors at the moment either, but I was trying to give him the benefit of the doubt. It was strange, I knew, to be able to spend as much money as I did without a job anyone could see. We were supposed to be working on having a relationship. That meant I couldn't just pull back like I would normally. I had to give him a chance to prove that he could handle the truth about me.

"Poker?" he finally said.

His face was blank, but it was the sort of careful expressionlessness that came with not wanting someone else to know what was going on inside. The problem was, I'd managed to see the things that had flashed across his eyes before he'd stopped himself, and I knew what he was thinking.

"Yes, Dean, poker." I didn't bother holding back any of the sarcasm. "That game with the cards and the betting of money."

"You're saying that you've made enough money at poker games to afford that apartment of yours." His voice was flat. "That's why you have all that cash."

"Do you have a better theory as to how I've been making money?" I took a step toward him. "What is it? What do you think I've been doing?"

His gaze slid away from mine, like he didn't want me to read in his eyes what I'd somehow managed to divine from his face. And that told me all I needed to know.

A sharp flash of emotion went through me, hurt quickly followed by anger.

“You're thinking the same thing my brother thought. That I'm a whore.”
His head snapped back, eyes wide. “That's not what I think.”

“It's not? You aren't wondering who I've been fucking to pay for my expensive apartment?”

He flinched, and for a moment, I thought I was mistaken, that I'd misread him. Then I saw the flash of guilt, and I knew he wasn't protesting because he hadn't been thinking any of those things. He was arguing because he'd been thinking *exactly* those sorts of things.

I twisted my mouth up into a bitter sort of smile. “Why don't you just ask me everything you want to know? I'm sure you've got a ton of questions. Do I work a hotel bar, or just down on the corner? How much do I charge? Do I take it on my back, on all fours, or whatever the trick wants?”

“Kyn—”

“Oh, no, come on, Dean, I know you're dying to know all the dirty details. How many men do I fuck a night? Was I doing anyone after I was done with you?”

Each question came out harsher than the last.

“Men.” I spit the word out. “Why is it none of you can believe that a woman can earn money from something that isn't sexual? If you didn't think I was a whore – or an escort if you want to be nice about it – you'd think I was stripping. A woman can still only make money if she sells her body in some way.”

“I don't think that.” He finally managed to get a word in. “Not about any woman.”

“Then it's only me?”

“That's not what I said,” he snapped.

“But it's how you're acting, and you know what they say: actions speak louder than words.” I took a step back. “You asked me for the truth, so I gave it to you. I told you that I've been earning money playing poker, and instead of believing me and maybe being pissed at me for that, you can't seem to fathom that it's even possible for a woman.”

“I can't understand how anyone can make a living playing cards,” he said. “Men or women. How could you earn that much money like that?”

I rolled my eyes. “Because I'm a fucking genius.”

He stared at me as if he was waiting for me to say something else.

“This is why I don't tell people. Not because I'm ashamed, but because no one takes me seriously. You have no idea...” I shook my head. “I graduated

from high school when I was sixteen. Got a doctorate from MIT in mathematics, emphasizing statistics. My IQ's not at the Einstein level, but it's high. Is that smart enough for you?"

"I don't know what you want me to say." He ran his hand through his hair.

"I don't know either, Dean." I turned away, looked around us. "In fact, I don't even know why I bothered telling you. I should've just told you it was none of your damn business and walked away."

"You are my business," he said, stepping around so that he was in front of me again. "And if we're going to make this work between us, then we need to be honest with each other."

"That seems to be working out well for us," I said dryly.

"I believe you, okay," he said. "Does that make you happy?"

I scowled. "Ecstatic."

"You can't seriously expect to drop this on me, and then act like I should be okay with you doing something so...*stupid*."

I wasn't sure if it was his word choice or the tone he used, but it did more than rub me the wrong way. "I told you the truth and asked for you to believe me. I never asked you to like it or agree with it. I sure as hell don't require you to *be okay* with it."

"I don't understand you," he said. "We're supposed to be in a relationship, but you clearly don't care what I think."

"*That's* what you got out of this whole thing? That because you decided we were going to start dating, you got to control every part of my life?" A little voice at the back of my head said that I might've been being a little hard on him, but I was too riled to back off. "I've done fine taking care of myself for years. I don't need you telling me what to do."

His eyes narrowed. "Considering I've already seen one man who wasn't pleased with your skill set, I don't believe it's a stretch to assume that you aren't exactly doing a bang-up job."

I was starting to wish I'd been born a lesbian.

"I already have one big brother, Dean. I don't need another one."

He took a step toward me, dropping his voice a register. "I don't want to be your brother."

"Then stop acting like him," I shot back.

"I just want you to be safe."

"No," I argued. "You may want me to be safe, but there's no *just* about it."

You think you know best, so you want me to do things your way. But I had a life before I met you, made my own choices. How would you feel if I expected you to completely change up everything you've done in your life simply because I told you that you should do things my way?"

A muscle in his jaw clenched, and my shoulders slumped. I sighed, all of the fight leaving me. I was too tired to keep doing this. I'd come to LA for a new life, not new complications.

"I don't know why I thought this could work." I moved around Dean to flag down an approaching taxi. "We're too different."

I didn't wait for him to argue, didn't wait to see if he even *would* argue. He had to see it too, had to realize that we'd been fooling ourselves thinking that we could turn a few sexual experiences into something more. Great sex didn't necessarily translate into anything else, and starting a relationship founded on sex was rarely a good idea.

I was supposed to be smart. Hell, I'd just been bragging to Dean about my IQ. Then again, smart didn't always mean wise, so I supposed that trying to make things work with Dean was one of those moments. Now, I would do the smart thing.

We'd gone three blocks before I realized that I didn't want to go home yet. "Can you take me to Santa Monica Pier instead?"

"Sure thing." The cabbie made a turn. "You from LA?"

"No," I said absently. "Up north."

"Ever been to the Pier?"

"Once, when I was five or six," I said. "Never this late though."

"It's a whole other thing at night," he said. "They've got some indie bands doing a battle of the bands kind of thing tonight."

Between the music and the people, there'd be constant noise. Lights. All sorts of distractions. I'd barely be able to hear myself think.

"Perfect."

Chapter Twenty-Two

DEAN

“*Told you I was good at this.*”

I glared at her across the table as I hooked my thumbs underneath the waistband of my boxer-briefs. Okay, so maybe challenging her to a game of strip poker hadn't been as good of an idea as I'd originally thought, but it was the first thing I'd thought of when she'd said that she made money playing cards.

“Are you going to welch on a bet, Stokes?” She raised an eyebrow. “You owe me a pair of underwear.”

I muttered a few choice curses under my breath, then pushed off my last stitch of clothing. Kyndall, on the other hand, hadn't even lost her shoes. She'd taken those off on her own when she said her feet were hurting.

“Tell me again why you chose LA over Vegas?” I put my hands on my hips and tried not to think about the fact that I was standing here stark naked.

“Because counting cards is illegal.” She grinned at me.

“But you count cards anyway, right?” I tried not to let her hear how concerned I was. “Isn't that dangerous?”

“Not if I'm smart.” She reached behind her and unzipped her dress. “And I may have mentioned that I'm very smart.”

I swallowed hard as she slipped the straps of her dress from her shoulders and let them fall. “You won.”

“So I did.” She stood, showing off that glorious body of hers. Her bra could barely hold her breasts, and her panties covered very little. The tease was somehow more alluring than flat-out nudity, and the sight sent blood straight to my cock.

“I'd like to collect my winnings.”

“I'm fairly certain you've taken all I have, love.”

She turned and walked into the living room, swinging her hips as she went. I watched, my hand wrapping around my cock almost unconsciously. She sat on one of the overstuffed chairs, licking her lips as her gaze dropped to where I was now stroking myself to a full erection.

“I think there should be some sort of penalty for losing every single hand.”

“Is that so?”

She draped one leg over one of the chair's arms, then the other. “Come here.” She crooked a finger at me.

I went to my knees in front of her, the irony of the position not lost on me. She was supposed to be the submissive here, but I was in the position of the subservient. I didn't mind though. I would give up my control for now, then take it back later in a way that was equally pleasing.

Her skin was like silk as I ran my hands up her legs, brushed my thumbs over the crease of her thighs. When I leaned forward, I ran my tongue over the dark lace covering her pussy, and she moaned. Smiling, I pulled the crotch of her panties to the side and licked her slow and deep.

Damn, she tasted good.

I took my time with her, circling her clit, teasing her entrance. I coaxed one orgasm after the other from her, reveling in the sounds she made, the way her fingers dug into my hair. All that existed for me was her.

I didn't know when it happened, but at some point, she'd become my world.

My center.

When I finally slid inside her, I knew my home was no longer London where my parents were or LA where my new business pursuits had taken me. It was wherever she was.

This sucked.

All I'd been able to do all night was think about all the ways I'd royally fucked up. All the way things could've gone better because they couldn't have gotten worse. I supposed that wasn't possible since things had gone so sideways. But thinking of what I should have said, or shouldn't have said, just made things worse. Knowing – or guessing, I supposed – how things could have been was something akin to taunting someone with something they wanted, while at the same time, telling them they could never have it.

Kyndall was what I wanted the most, and I was all too certain that I had lost her for good.

I'd witnessed firsthand what a similar accusation had done to her relationship with her brother, and I knew she valued him a whole hell of a lot more than she valued me.

Fuck it.

I threw off the covers and finally climbed out of bed. It was still morning, but later than I usually got up. I shouldn't have been laying around, daydreaming about what-might-have-been or what I wished I'd done. I needed to make things right, even if she didn't forgive me, even if she decided that the two of us had too much shit between us to ever be anything but cordial. I couldn't let her go with her thinking of me this way.

Hell, who was I trying to fool?

She'd gotten so far under my skin that I didn't believe I could ever walk away, not under my own strength. If she asked it of me, though, I would try. If it meant her happiness, I'd try.

But first, I'd try everything in my power to fix what I'd broken.

Actually, before I headed over to Kyndall's place, I needed to shower. An unpleasant aroma would not be the best way to ingratiate myself. I didn't believe that Kyndall was the sort of woman who focused on physicality, but it wouldn't hurt to, as the Americans said, cover my bases.

Twenty minutes later, I was bathed, clothed, and still trying to figure out what to say beyond *I'm sorry*.

I smiled at the doorman when I passed by, but I didn't really feel it. I wouldn't feel like smiling until Kyndall forgave me. *If* she forgave me.

I'd never felt less in control, less sure of myself than I did when I stopped in front of her door. I knocked and tried not to look as impatient as I felt while I waited for her to answer. A minute passed. Then a second. I knocked again, working on keeping a frown off my face. I didn't want her to think I was upset with her.

Still nothing.

I hated to think of her being so petty as to ignore me when I was right here, but I tried one more time. When she still didn't answer, I pulled out my phone. I didn't like the idea of calling her rather than having our entire conversation face-to-face, but I needed to know where she was before I could do that.

The call rang through, but midway through the second ring, I was sent to

voicemail. I scowled at the screen, knowing that meant she'd purposefully declined my call. After our argument, I could understand her reluctance to speak with me, but that didn't mean I had to like it.

I headed toward the elevator and told myself that I wasn't retreating, merely regrouping and analyzing my approach. Clearly what I'd originally planned wasn't working, so I needed to think of something else. Giving up wasn't an option.

A small café around the corner from the building was the perfect place for some thinking, so I went inside, grateful to be back in the air-conditioning. I was wearing shorts and a t-shirt, but the day was already promising to be a hot one. I ordered an iced coffee and found a seat in the farthest back corner I could find.

Kyndall was ignoring me, but that could be because she didn't know I was calling to apologize, so I needed to try to get that message across before anything else. If she still chose to ignore me, I'd take things from there. Where I'd take them, I had no idea, but it was, at the very least, a place to begin.

I kept my text simple: *I was a complete and utter ass. Please call me so I can apologize properly.*

Send.

And then I waited, watching as my phone showed the message delivered, then read.

But no response came through.

I checked my email, typed out a few replies, and finished my drink. Still nothing. I went back to the counter for another iced coffee, hoping that if I dawdled long enough, Kyndall would finally respond and I could go back to her place and start on making things right.

“Excuse me.”

I half-turned toward the tall blonde standing next to me at the counter.

“Are you English?”

I gave her a polite smile. “I am.”

I'd hoped my brief answer would convey a lack of interest, but she either didn't get it or didn't care.

“I've always wanted to go to England,” she said, sidling closer. “Do you know the Queen?”

I stared at her, waiting for the punchline. Because that had to be a joke. No one was that naive. But she didn't laugh and say that she was joking.

Instead, she just looked up at me with wide hazel eyes, clearly anticipating my answer.

“I don't,” I said as I turned back to the counter and prayed that my drink was coming soon.

“I'd love to meet the Queen,” she continued as if I hadn't said anything at all. “I'd love to ask her what it's like to be in charge of everything and get to do whatever you wanted.”

I debated explaining to her that the Queen of England didn't actually rule the country like the kings and queens used to, and that good royalty rarely were able to do what they wished, but I suspected all that would do was make her think I wanted to talk to her. So I said nothing.

And it didn't help.

“My ex-boyfriend and I used to pretend that I was the Queen, and he was my handsome bodyguard who I ordered to—”

I walked away without waiting for my drink. That was one sentence I didn't need to hear finished. Even if I hadn't been preoccupied with thoughts of Kyndall, I wouldn't have been interested. The blonde was pretty enough, but even my one-night stands needed to have at least some intelligence about them. Either this woman was truly ignorant, or she convincingly played the part in an attempt to appeal to the sort of men who preferred beauty over brains. Whichever it was, she perpetuated the stereotype of the dumb blonde, and all that succeeded in doing was aggravate me.

I went back outside and walked a couple blocks before ducking inside a bodega to send off another text, this one much longer.

I would prefer to do this in person, but it needs to be said no matter what. I was wrong. Not only in my accusations but for the entire incident. I should have believed you immediately, and no matter what, I shouldn't have judged. I didn't intend to hurt you, and I want to fix things between us. That's what couples do, right? When something happens, they try to work it out. I don't want to lose you simply because I was a jackass. Please, call me or meet me. Text me. Anything that lets me know that you're open to making this work, or even only allowing me to apologize properly.

I couldn't just stand around in this little shop, staring at my phone like a pathetic fool. I needed to be doing something, anything. If she wasn't in her apartment – and I still didn't know for certain that she hadn't been ignoring me – then I needed to find her. The problem was, the only place I could think of where she would likely go was her brother's apartment. Then again, if she

was trying to avoid me, she probably would have wanted to stay away from any place I associated with her. Plus, I doubted she wanted Dalton involved in any of this. I knew I sure as hell didn't, especially if it meant Dalton discovering the conversation that had led to this fight. I'd probably earn a fist to the jaw for the things I'd said – no matter that he'd made essentially the same accusations – and Kyndall would be furious if I revealed the secret behind her income.

That was when I realized where she could be. Playing poker.

I checked my phone again, then tucked it into my pocket. I walked back outside with a new determination.

I had a poker game to find.

Chapter Twenty-Three

KYNDALL

Spending all night at Santa Monica Pier had done exactly what I wanted it to do: kept my mind from turning over how things had gone with Dean. Every time I felt my thoughts going back to the fight, back to his accusations, I'd been able to find something new to distract myself with.

Three of the bands had been amazing, each with their own unique and fresh sound so that they hadn't bled into one another. The fourth hadn't been quite as good, but by then, I'd essentially had a contact high courtesy of the numerous audience members around me who'd been smoking pot, so that might've had something to do with it.

I tried marijuana once in college but hadn't liked the hazy, out of control feeling I'd felt. It was why I rarely got drunk. A little buzzed wasn't too bad, but I'd never liked being completely trashed. No, the only time I ever liked feeling like I wasn't in control was when I'd allowed Dean to be in charge. That'd been a completely different story because I'd known he wouldn't let anything hurt me.

Once I realized how fuzzy everything had been getting, I wandered away from the concerts to see what else I could find. With it being summer, the place had been packed, both with locals and tourists. The air had been heavy with the mingled scents of myriad foods, sweat, and the ocean. It'd almost been overwhelming, but I'd taken the time to distinguish between the different aromas. Buttered popcorn. Something spicy that I was sure would burn my taste buds. Meat. Vegetables. Cotton candy. The salty, fishy smell of the ocean.

At some point, I found myself on the Ferris Wheel, and I'd ridden that for

hours, letting my mind wander. I didn't talk to anyone outside of what was necessary, smiling whenever a comment was directed my way but never engaging. Being surrounded by people was good for where my head was, but communication wasn't something I wanted at the moment.

As the sun rose, I found myself sitting at the end of the pier, watching the brilliant colors throwing themselves across the sky. I'd always been more of a night person, but since my nights sometimes ended at sunrise, watching it come up wasn't a new thing for me, but seeing it streak across the ocean was definitely something else. It was a reminder of all that was good and true and worth pursuing, and it twisted something deep inside of me.

My eyes stung, and I wiped at them, excusing the sudden welling up of tears as a reaction to the light and the brisk wind off of the water. I slipped on my sandals and got to my feet. I'd been out all night, and I was tired, but not as much as I would've thought. I didn't know if it was my second wind, or if my brain knew that I still wasn't ready to go home yet.

I took my time strolling down the boardwalk, watching as attractions and restaurants opened. I stopped by one of the food carts as it was being set up and purchased a drink, the sun already hot on my skin. It was going to be another scorcher, and I hadn't put on any sunblock yesterday, so I made another stop.

Five minutes later, smelling strongly of coconut oil, I emerged from the restroom and continued my walk. I'd always liked getting to see things in two different ways, observing juxtaposition in real-life. Seeing everything on the pier in the early morning light after having seen it all in the darkness a few hours ago was one of those things. Sunlight versus shadows. Beginning of the day versus the end of the night.

Being with Dean was like that, I realized suddenly. Some people would look at him and see only his money. Others would hear his proper accent, or see how he kept his emotions from his expression, and think he was cold.

He did have money, and he definitely knew how to keep his feelings close to his chest, but those were only two small parts of who he was.

People at the club Dean had taken me to knew him as a Dom, and associated those common characteristics with him. Granted, he had a lot of the same traits as other Doms – strength and charisma, among other things – but he was more than those things as well.

In the short time I'd known him, I'd gotten to see all that, but I'd also gotten to see Dean's kindness. His passion, as well as his overprotective

nature. I'd heard him laugh, and seen him vulnerable.

Even though all of the pieces that came together to make him seemed like they were opposites, I knew they were complementary pieces coming together to form a full picture. A picture that fascinated me in inexplicable ways.

I sighed as I made my way off the pier and down onto the beach. I paused to take my sandals off again and let my toes sink into the warm sand. The mid-morning sun was coming down strong, so I lifted my hair off my neck and let the breeze coming in off the water cool the sheen of perspiration on my skin.

One of the few things I did miss about where I'd grown up was that my family's home had been in a relatively rural area. I did love most things about living in cities, but every once in a while, it was nice to just appreciate the quiet. Aside from my apartment, there were very few places or times in LA when something this tranquil was possible, so I allowed myself to enjoy it while it lasted.

A child's shout made me open my eyes, and I smiled as a little Hispanic boy ran past me and into the water. Toddling a few feet behind him was a little girl with pigtailed curls bouncing on her head. I couldn't help but smile as they both squealed in delight when the waves crashed over their feet.

“Angelica! Marco!” A woman came into my line of sight. “Nothing over the ankles!” She looked up at me and sighed, shaking her head. “Where do they get the energy?”

Then she hurried off after the kids as they ran farther down the beach. She may have looked and sounded harried, but there was absolutely no doubt of her love for those kids.

Suddenly, it was like I could see a whole other scenario unfolding in front of me.

“Hayley! Owen! Don't go too far!”

I watched as the pair went running across the sand, shrieking as they made their mad dash into the water. Hayley's dark waves were wild today, and I knew they'd be even worse after a day in salt water, but it was always worth it to see the kids so happy. Owen's lighter hair was already sun-streaked, and both kids were tanned. We'd spent a lot of time at the beach this summer.

“They get that from you, you know.”

A pair of strong arms slid around my waist, and I shivered when Dean's

lips pressed against the back of my neck. After all this time together, he still had the ability to make me weak in the knees. His fingers teased under the hem of my tank top, sending another shiver through me. He traced the scar on my stomach, my permanent physical reminder of the terrifying ordeal that had led to the birth of our son.

“What do they get from me?” I asked. “Besides their intelligence, of course.”

He chuckled, that same low sound that had led to the creation of our son in the first place. I couldn't pinpoint the exact encounter that had led to Hayley's conception, but Owen's, I knew for certain.

Dean, Cross, and Dalton had been away for a boys' weekend, and I'd gotten sick. I'd refused to call Dean to ask him to come home, and by the time he'd gotten home, I'd been nearly unconscious. I'd spent a week in the hospital, and then Dean had insisted on taking care of me for another week, which included resisting sex until one night when he'd laughed like that, and I'd practically jumped him.

“That wild streak,” he said. “They definitely get that from you.”

I tried to give him an offended look but couldn't manage to hold it for more than a few seconds before laughing. “I suppose the giveaway was when Hayley tried cheating at Uno last night.”

“Nope.” He kissed my temple. “It was when she tried to sell her baby brother to the old woman who just moved in downstairs.”

I found myself still laughing as the vision ended, but then the sound faded and I remembered that I was standing on the beach, alone. A bolt of longing went through me, something so sharp and so real that it almost made me bend over.

I wanted that life.

Shit.

I wanted all of it. A life with an unplanned pregnancy and an emergency c-section. A life with a dark-haired little girl and a blonde boy. Wild kids who drove me nuts. Kids who were scary smart or crazy creative or beautifully average. A man who loved me.

No, not a man.

Dean.

He was the man I wanted that life with, and the realization scared the hell out of me. Sure, I'd been thinking about a relationship with him, and some part of my brain made me think about what that would mean, but this was the

first time I'd thought something so clear, seen something so vivid.

I'd read his texts as they'd come in, and I'd been sure that, at some point, he would get tired of not getting a response, but he hadn't. He'd sounded concerned, but not angry. But I hadn't been able to bring myself to reply, no matter how much I wanted to.

My phone buzzed, and as I reached for it, I told myself that I was going to answer it this time. I would talk to Dean. Meet with him. Talk about what happened and make it work. I would be honest about all of this and see if the vision I'd had could become a reality.

Except when I looked at the screen of my phone, it wasn't Dean's name that came up. It was a picture from an unknown number.

A picture that stopped my heart and changed everything.

Chapter Twenty-Four

DEAN

*I*n the past few hours, I'd explored more parts of LA than I had in the previous six months I'd been here, and I still hadn't found Kyndall. I'd checked out all of the cafés, restaurants, and clubs that'd been open on a Sunday afternoon, then started on the stores. I hadn't really had a pattern or any real plan for searching, but as the day had worn on, I'd been forced to admit that I wouldn't find her this way. As much as I believed I knew her, when it came to deciphering where she would go to avoid someone, I didn't have the first clue.

Which meant the person with whom I needed to speak was the last person I wanted to talk to.

Dalton.

Still, I started back to Kyndall's apartment. I was hoping that, this time, when I knocked, she'd answer, that she'd simply been hiding there the whole time. Knowing that I'd been all over searching for her while she hadn't gone anywhere at all would be frustrating, but it was better than the alternative – that she was gone and I couldn't find her. If the latter was the case, however, I would swallow my pride and speak with Dalton and Juliette. Better to suffer through the embarrassment and other possible repercussions of getting them involved than continuing a fruitless search.

When I arrived at the apartment, however, all of that disappeared behind the knowledge that something had gone completely and horribly wrong.

Half a dozen marked police cars and plain cars with dash lights were parked around the building, and at least eight or nine uniformed officers were keeping a fair-sized crowd back. Two ambulances were up on the sidewalk,

lights flashing, but sirens off.

“Drop me off here.” I tossed some cash at the cabbie, telling him to keep the change even as I was climbing out of the car.

While still in college, I created my own online company, and I'd taken on the responsibility of being the public face for it as well. As a twenty-year-old, I'd spent time meeting with investors and other businessmen who were always quite a bit older than me, and as a result, I'd quickly learned that the best way to convince someone that I did indeed know what I was talking about wasn't necessarily to explain things. People responded almost instinctually when it came to falling in line behind a person who exuded confidence.

I'd been introduced to the BDSM scene my freshman year of college, and it hadn't taken me long to understand the Dominant personality traits inside me. Using some of those same characteristics in my business practices had simply made sense, and once I'd put them into practice, I'd seen how well it'd gone, and continued to do it even now. Some businessmen were like sharks: if they smelled blood, they attacked. Concealing any doubts and vulnerabilities had become second nature.

Kyndall was one of the few who'd ever gotten to see behind that persona, and I was thinking of her as I started to push my way through the crowd. I didn't apologize, didn't ask for permission. I walked with purpose, as if I expected people to move out of my way, and they did. Once I reached the police line, however, I knew I had to be careful. I had dual citizenship, but any sort of legal trouble could make it difficult for me to maintain my presence in America.

I glanced at the people on either side of me. To the right, I had an older gentleman with a bad comb-over and a pair of plaid pants that looked like something from a vintage porno. Based on the half-buttoned shirt, exposed chest hair, and thick gold chain, he'd probably directed and produced all sorts of b-movies, including those of the adult variety.

To my left was a middle-aged woman in a tiny, tight tiger-striped dress and heels that made her at least my height. She had thick makeup, teased hair, and a cigarette of which she occasionally took a drag. Her expression claimed she was utterly bored by everything unfolding in front of her, but the glint in her eyes said otherwise.

Neither one seemed liked someone with whom I wanted to have a conversation, but I needed to know what was happening. Instead of choosing

one, however, I decided to put the question out there and let them decide whether or not to answer.

“What's going on?”

“You'd think, with all that money, the place would be a little more secure,” the woman said.

“I heard it didn't happen in the building,” the man joined in. “I heard a van pulled up, guys with masks, guns...the whole Tarantino playbook.”

The woman glanced across me to the man, and then looked up at me. “I didn't know Tarantino did kidnapping flicks.”

I started to smile, then froze as the words sunk in.

Kidnapping.

My stomach churned, and my hands curled into fists. I forced a slow inhale, then exhale, but it did little to calm the anxiety that was rapidly building inside me. Just because I hadn't been able to find Kyndall, and now there were cops around her place. Cops who, according to my neighbors here, were investigating a kidnapping.

The woman was shaking her head now. “I couldn't imagine being those poor parents.”

Parents? A sick feeling washed over me.

“No.” I shook my head as I reached for my phone. “No, no, no...”

“What's wrong, man?” the guy asked.

Thoughts of Kyndall disappeared as I pulled up Dalton's number and dialed.

“Is Kyndall with you?”

The desperation in his voice told me that my secondary suspicion was right, and the nausea in my stomach grew.

“No. I haven't seen her all day.”

“Fuck,” Dalton muttered. “Where are you?”

“Out front.”

“I have a PI coming. Come up with him.”

He ended the call, and I let out a string of curses, earning stares from everyone around me. I ignored them and made my way down the police line to where a pair of suited men were talking to people in the crowd. As I reached them, I saw a stocky, light-haired man pushing his way through too.

“You can't come through,” the cop said as I tried to step past him.

“My friends—” I started to say.

The stocky guy arrived and pulled something out of his jacket. “Mars

Roster. I'm a PI working for Mr. Letlow. He called me.”

“I need to go with him,” I said quickly. “Dalton – Mr. Letlow, I mean – asked me to come up with Mr. Roster.”

“I don't know–”

“I can get Mr. Letlow's lawyer on the phone, if you'd like.” Roster gave the cop a stern look. “Or you can let my associate and me up so we can help.”

For a moment, I thought they were going to tell us to get back, but something about Mars must've told them he wouldn't hesitate to make their lives miserable if they didn't let him through, because a minute later, we were heading into the lobby.

“I'm truly hoping that you really do know Mr. Letlow,” Roster said quietly as we got onto the elevator.

“I do,” I assured him. “His sister and I...” I let my voice trail off as I realized I wasn't sure how to finish the sentence. I didn't know how to describe what Kyndall and I were to each other, but that didn't matter right now. “What happened, Mr. Roster?”

I knew what happened, somewhere deep inside, I knew, but I needed to hear it all before I could accept it.

The PI gave me a sideways look. “Earlier today, Mrs. Letlow was coming back from a walk with Anthony when a white, unmarked van pulled up to the curb and two masked men, armed with automatic weapons, got out, knocked Mrs. Letlow down, and grabbed the stroller.”

His voice may have been matter-of-fact, but I caught the anger in his dark eyes. He might've been hired as a PI, but this was definitely not just a job to him. Then again, I didn't know of many good people who'd be okay with a child being kidnapped.

“Is Juliette okay? I mean, physically. I'm assuming the answer is *no* to any other way.”

“I didn't get any details, but she wasn't taken to the hospital, so I'd go with okay.”

My relief was brief, but there. Once Anthony was found, Dalton and Juliette would be grateful that she was there to welcome him, but right now, I knew she would be feeling guilty that she hadn't been able to stop the kidnappers.

By the time we reached their floor, I'd managed to put my own issues aside and was focusing on being there for my friends.

The moment I stepped inside, however, I was faced with a new and

complete understanding of what it meant to be helpless. Dalton's face was drawn, like he'd been ill for a long time and wouldn't be getting better any point in the near future. Juliette leaned against him, the gash on her temple a deep, raw red against her pale skin. A paramedic stood nearby, and at least six cops and detectives were walking around the apartment.

"If there's anything I can do," I said as I approached, "please don't hesitate to ask."

"And you are?" A man in a rumpled suit stepped in front of me. A stocky man in his late forties, he had the look of someone who was counting the days until retirement. "Detective James Bison."

"Dean Stokes," I said. "I'm a friend."

"I appreciate that, Mr. Stokes, but we don't need any more civilians here." He sounded tired.

"He's dating my sister," Dalton interjected. "So he's more than a friend."

"Let him stay, Bison," a younger woman spoke up as she glanced my way. In one quick sweep, she seemed to size up and dismiss me before turning back to Mars Roster.

"As I was saying," the PI continued, "a source got back to me about fifteen minutes ago and said two local guys snatched a baby." Roster glanced at the detective, then at Juliette before turning back to Dalton. "I don't know for sure if their employer is behind it, but they work for the same guy so I wouldn't rule it out."

"Who do they work for?" Detective Bison asked.

"Stanley Maverick." Roster pulled out his phone and called up something on his screen. When he turned it, I could see it was a picture.

A familiar picture.

"Shit."

All eyes turned to me.

"Do you have something to say, Mr. Stokes?" the female detective asked.

Dalton was going to be pissed when he heard all of this, but now I had a horrific feeling that things had just taken a turn for the worse, and I knew I couldn't hold anything back. If I was wrong, or if Maverick wasn't involved in Anthony's disappearance, then I'd be betraying Kyndall's trust for nothing, but she wasn't here, so I had to do what I felt was right.

And that meant telling them everything.

Chapter Twenty-Five

KYNDALL

This was all my fault, and I knew it wasn't unjustified guilt I was feeling. Stanley Maverick had kidnapped my one-year-old nephew in partial retaliation, and partial blackmail, because I'd kicked his ass in poker twice. And the worst part of it was that I hadn't even had a good excuse to be gambling in the first place, and definitely not to clean him out. It wasn't like I'd been desperate for money for something important, or even something unimportant.

If I hadn't been screwing around with my life instead of finding a real job, instead of being a responsible adult, then I wouldn't have received a picture of my nephew four hours ago. A picture that showed him playing with today's newspaper and laughing at the masked man who held him. Before my brain had been able to fully process what I'd seen, I'd gotten another text with simple instructions and an address.

When I'd arrived here, Stanley Maverick had been waiting. He'd at least been clear about what was expected of me, and what the consequences would be should I decline or fail. Simply put, I was the one playing for the house today, and if I didn't take everything from everyone, my nephew would be the one to pay.

But I couldn't think about any of that right now. I'd been playing for three hours straight, and even a brain like mine needed a break now and then, especially with outside stressors. I couldn't ask for one though. Maverick had guys watching my every move, and I'd had to stay at the table when others had gone off so no one would notice that I had a little entourage.

Maverick was technically playing for the house so no one else could

know that I was too. While Stanley had money and power, he was hardly the only one at the table with it. I might not have recognized the other faces or names, but I knew expensive suits and watches.

And I knew how to spot a man who was used to scaring, buying, or bullying his way into whatever he wanted.

Every man at this table had that look.

The knot in my stomach tightened even more, and I was thankful – not for the first time – that I hadn't had much to eat today. I shot a sideways glance toward the heavy-set Puerto Rican to my right. He'd taken two cards and was now scratching his eyebrow.

A tell.

Which meant I'd counted correctly and he had three of a kind. Fives.

Good.

I flicked my gaze toward Stanley who was working overtime to try to keep his expression blank, but that was another tell. Some people thought that no reaction at all was the best sort of poker face, but I'd learned that most people leaned toward that with one extreme or the other, when they were either going to attempt a bluff or if they had a great hand. If their hand was mediocre, they'd relax a bit more.

According to the count I'd been keeping – including the dealer swapping out the deck once already – Maverick was holding a straight flush in hearts, from a six up. Tough to beat.

The quiet, dark-haired man on my left took three cards, then scowled. A pair of sixes.

I looked down at the cards in my hand. A ten and a Jack of diamonds. Three of a kind in clubs. I couldn't beat Stanley with what I had, so I could either keep it and bluff, fold and cut my losses for this hand, or I could trust that nothing had distracted me and ask for three cards.

I thought of Anthony and looked at the pile of chips on the table. If I took the risk, I was only a couple of hands away from ending the game and getting my nephew back. If I folded or if I was wrong, Stanley would win the current pot, but the game would keep going even longer.

I handed over three cards and tucked some hair behind my ear. I usually swapped around my style, and since I knew that the stress of the situation would hurt my ability to maintain the same expression for hours on end, I'd decided to go to the other extreme with excess tells. I played with my hair whether the hand was good or bad. Chewed my bottom lip. Smiled at four of

a kind one time, and then at a pair the next. Frowned when I had a straight and when I had a flush.

As I accepted my new cards, I braced myself for something unexpected, but they were exactly what I needed to make a straight flush with a nine, ten, Joker, Queen, and King of diamonds.

The insults the Puerto Rican sent my way weren't anything I hadn't heard before and were easy to ignore. The quiet guy, however, leaned over and grabbed my wrist, squeezing hard enough to make the bones grind together.

I gritted my teeth against the pain and glared at him. I had enough shit to deal with; I wasn't interested in whatever this guy's problem was.

"No one's as lucky as you've been," he said, a dangerous edge to his words. "I heard you walked out of two other games this month with big wins, and the only way that happens is if you cheated."

I kept my gaze steady. "You think I'm hiding cards? Take a good look at what I'm wearing. No sleeves. No collar. And my hands have been on the table the whole time. You want to roll up your sleeves so we can see if you've got something up them?"

"I'm no cheat," he said coldly.

"Neither am I." At least about that, I was telling the truth. Casinos might've thought of counting cards as cheating, but I never had. Using one's natural intelligence and talents to keep track of an entire fifty-two card deck was no more cheating than someone who had a knack for deceit and used it to bluff. That was my opinion anyway, though I doubted he'd share it.

"This is my game," Stanley cut in. "And I'm losing to the bitch too, but if I don't say she's cheating, then she ain't."

The quiet man kept staring at me for half a minute more, then released my wrist, giving Stanley a bored glance before settling back in his chair.

I pulled the chips toward me, pretending that my wrist wasn't throbbing. The man's fingers had left marks on my skin that I was sure would end up being bruises, but I wasn't worried about that. My own safety only mattered as it connected to Anthony. As long as he was okay, nothing else mattered.

As I watched the cards being dealt yet again, I made a promise to myself, and to whoever or whatever force was listening, that I would never put my family in danger again. When this was over, I would do whatever it took to make amends, even if it meant my brother never speaking to me again, never being able to be around my family. I deserved whatever consequences came as a result of my actions.

I'd go back to Cambridge, start an honest life back there. Or maybe someplace new on the East Coast. Boston or Philadelphia maybe. I'd take whatever job I could find. Throw myself into doing some good with the gifts I'd been given.

"I think we need a new deck," the quiet guy announced.

"I say when we change decks," Stanley said flatly. "If you've got a problem with how I run a game in my own house, then maybe you should cash out and get the hell off my property."

One of the goons behind the quiet guy took a step forward, and immediately, the room was thick with tension. Two of Stanley's guys came forward, all bulging muscles and thick, meaty hands. Panic tried to claw its way up my throat. If something happened to Maverick, I'd never get Anthony back.

"I'm fine with switching decks," I blurted out. Stanley turned to glare at me, but I forced myself to continue, "If it gets him to shut up and play, I don't see why it's an issue."

Everyone was looking at me now, but I kept my eyes on Maverick. No one was supposed to know we were working together, which meant we had to play this carefully. If it looked like he was giving in to me, then the others could get suspicious. But if he refused, things could get ugly with the quiet guy.

"Okay," Stanley said after several excruciating seconds. "I got a couple new decks I've been wanting to use. One-of-a-kind designs so nobody can try nothing fancy."

Almost nobody.

"Works for me," I said. "I have nothing to hide."

The quiet guy scowled but leaned back in his chair.

"Fuck, man, let's just get this going." The Puerto Rican sounded annoyed. "If I'd wanted to sit around all night listening to some *mamaos*, I'd have hired a couple whores, so I'd at least get my dick sucked." He leered at me. "Unless you're going to do that for me, *tipa*."

I bit back a smart retort and instead spoke to the table in general, "Let's get this new deck going. I have more money to win."

Stanley held out his hand, and one of his thugs handed him a deck of cards. The dealer took it and started to shuffle. I let myself close my eyes for a moment to try to refocus my thoughts. I was getting tired, but I knew better than to let anyone see it. I had a job to do, and I intended to see it through.

I opened my eyes and watched the first two cards dealt out. Before the third one had time to hit the table, people outside the room started yelling. I froze, a thousand possibilities rushing through my mind, each one worse than the last.

A business rival had decided to take Stanley and his entire operation out.

One of the other players had called in reinforcements.

Zombies were attacking.

Then I realized I could make out the words people were yelling and knew it was so much worse.

The police were here...and I'd just killed my nephew.

Chapter Twenty-Six

DEAN

“*Y*ou can't do this!! Please, listen to me!! Please!!”

When I'd insisted on going with the police to the club where they planned on arresting Stanley Maverick, I'd been told in no uncertain terms that I was there as a courtesy. Fortunately, Juliette had contacts high up in the police department, and she'd had no problem throwing her weight around.

Especially when we all knew there was a good possibility that Kyndall was there.

The anguished yells coming from inside the nightclub told me that I'd been right. I ignored the cop assigned to stay with me and ran toward the sound. The other officers I passed shouted at me to stop, but nothing short of divine intervention was going to keep me from getting to Kyndall.

“You don't understand! Please!”

“You need to stop, or I'll have to make you stop.”

A cop yanked an overly-muscled man in handcuffs out of my path, and that was when I saw Kyndall, tears streaming down her face, arms behind her back, pleading with a stone-faced cop. He yanked on her hands, nearly pulling her off her feet.

“Back off!” I grabbed his shoulder, just barely stopping myself from yanking him away from her.

He gave me a hard look. “You're going to want to take your hands off me right now.”

“Dean!” She was sobbing now, the most heart-wrenching sound I'd ever heard. “Anthony. Maverick has Anthony and now they arrested him, and he's

not going to tell them where—”

“Anthony's okay,” I interrupted as I stepped around in front of her.

Her eyes were still wide and wild, and I could see that she wasn't hearing me. I grabbed her upper arms.

“Look at me.” I kept my voice low, but firm. “Anthony is okay. He's safe.”

She stopped struggling, her gaze meeting mine. I watched awareness dawn, and then her shoulders slumped. Her head fell, and the officer behind her took a step back.

“He's okay?”

I reached out and hooked a finger under her chin, lifting her head until I could look at her face. “He's okay. The police found him. Juliette and Dalton are meeting him at the hospital so he can get checked over.” I brushed my knuckles across her cheek. “He's safe. You're safe.”

She nodded, then looked over her shoulder at the cop behind her. “I'm sorry, Officer. I won't fight you anymore.”

It hadn't hit me until that moment that she was being arrested. I'd seen the cuffs and the cop, but I'd been focusing more on getting through to her than anything else.

“Why is she cuffed?”

The cop's eyebrows went up. “Because this is an illegal poker game being run by a kidnapper with known ties to organized crime. Everyone's getting arrested.”

I shook my head. “Not her. She was here under duress.”

“Above my pay grade.” He shrugged.

“It's okay, Dean,” she murmured.

All of the fight had gone out of her, and as much as her earlier pleas had broken my heart, this was so much worse. This wasn't sexual submission or an emotional vulnerability between two people who cared about each other. Her fire, her confidence, had vanished, and she looked beyond sad. She looked...broken.

“It's not okay.”

She raised her head, but wouldn't look at me. “It's my fault that I'm in this position. My fault that Anthony was kidnapped. I wouldn't waste your time.”

I ignored her for the moment. First, I was going to get her out of those handcuffs, then I'd work on the guilt issues while we were on our way to the hospital.

“She's the informant who led the cops to Stanley Maverick.” I tried again. “You can't arrest her.”

“Look, James Bond, I don't know how they do things across the pond, but here, we don't let private citizens tell us who we can and can't arrest.”

“How about the DA?” A woman's voice came from behind me. “Do I get a say?”

The cop sighed. “What are you doing here, Mueller?”

Aramina barely glanced at me as she stepped right up to the officer, but I didn't mind. We'd met only once and under very different circumstances. “Detective McAllister called me and said that we were taking down some bad guys.”

“Those bad guys.” I pointed toward the men who were being led out of the room. “She's not one of them.”

Again, the woman ignored me. “Kyndall Letlow?”

Kyndall nodded.

“District Attorney Aramina Mueller.” She held out a hand, then dropped it with a wry grin. “Right. Let's get her out of those cuffs.”

“No offense, but she got caught up in a raid. You don't have the authority to release her,” the cop said mulishly.

The DA's eyes narrowed, and I was suddenly glad that she wasn't looking at me that way. I had a feeling she was the sort of prosecutor who chewed up defense lawyers for breakfast.

“I'm the prosecutor handling this operation, so if I tell you to uncuff someone, you do it.” She took a step closer to him, eyes flashing. “And if I tell you to do the damn waltz, then you do the fucking waltz.”

The officer skulked off as soon as Kyndall's cuffs were off, muttering some less than complimentary things under his breath, but the DA didn't even blink.

“You didn't need to do that,” Kyndall said, turning away as I tried to put my arms around her.

I frowned. I knew there were a lot of people around, but I would've thought, after the day she'd had, that she'd want some comfort.

“Actually, I did.” Aramina glanced at me, then turned back to Kyndall. “I've been working to get Maverick behind bars for a long time, but we can't ever get anything to stick. You're going to change that.”

“Whatever you need,” Kyndall said immediately. “Just tell me.”

“What does she receive in return?” I asked, earning an appraising look

from Aramina.

“I don't need anything,” Kyndall said. “I'm the one who fucked up to begin with.”

“Everyone fucks up one time or another,” Aramina said. “I'm going to ignore any charges for being involved in gambling, which probably would've been impossible to prove anyway, and you're going to testify against Stanley Maverick for blackmail and kidnapping.”

Kyndall nodded. “Of course.”

A movement caught my attention, and I looked down to see Kyndall cradling her hand. A flash of anger went through me.

“Did that cop hurt you?” I reached for her hand, and she jerked it away. But not before I'd seen the finger-sized bruises on her wrist. “I'm going to kill that son of a bitch.”

“It wasn't him,” she snapped.

“Then who the hell was it?” I growled the question, my patience stretched to the breaking point. I took a step toward her. “Kyndall...”

“The asshole in the snazzy suit, okay?”

I started to turn when the DA took a half-step into my path.

“You can't do that, Dean.” Aramina looked up at me. “What kind of DA would I be if I let you go after a suspect?”

I didn't say anything because I wasn't sure I could manage a polite response, but I knew she was right. Besides, I needed to take care of Kyndall.

“Can I go?” she asked suddenly. “I need to see my family.”

Aramina nodded. “Of course. I'll expect to see you at the police station tomorrow to give your statement.”

Kyndall nodded, already walking toward the door. I caught up with her just as she stepped outside.

“Are you sure you're all right, love?”

“I'm fine. Just want to see my nephew.”

I cut in front of her. “I'm serious, Kyndall.” I started to reach for her, but she took a step back. “I just want to take care of you.”

She shook her head, finally looking up at me. Her eyes were haunted. “I don't deserve it, Dean. None of it. I just have to see that Anthony's okay for myself, and then I'm staying as far away from everyone as possible.”

She walked around me, leaving me staring after her.

Fuck. No.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

KYNDALL

I trusted Dean when he said that Anthony was okay, but a part of me still wouldn't believe it until I saw him for myself.

If Dalton and Juliette even let me anywhere near him.

A sharp pain went through my heart, far surpassing anything I felt in my throbbing wrist. The handcuffs hadn't helped, but I wasn't going to complain. I deserved it. I deserved so much worse.

Dean wasn't making things any easier. He kept wanting to hold me, to tell me that it was all okay. He wanted to comfort me, but I didn't want that.

No, that wasn't true. I wanted it. I just wasn't going to accept it.

Once I confirmed that Anthony was okay, I was going to leave, and giving in to Dean now would only make that harder. I was through thinking of myself first. I had to protect the people I loved.

And I did love him. I'd been reluctant to use that word, thinking that if I simply said I cared about him, or even that I was falling for him, it would keep things from getting too intense. It hadn't.

He was quiet on the ride over to the hospital, but I didn't think for a moment that he was going to let things go unsaid between us. I stared out the window, not trusting myself to be able to look at him and not give in to the solace he offered.

Two squad cars were parked near the emergency room entrance, and the sight of them made my heart skip a beat. I believed the DA when she'd said she wasn't going to have me arrested, so it wasn't fear of incarceration that sent my pulse racing, but rather the recent memory of what I'd experienced when the cops had come bursting into the room less than thirty minutes ago.

I hadn't cared that they were arresting me, only that Stanley had shouted out that I'd made a deadly mistake. Something in me had snapped at that point, and I'd started screaming that they had to let me go, that they didn't understand what they'd done. No one had listened to me, of course, but that hadn't stopped me from begging everyone to stop. Common sense would've told me that it wouldn't have mattered if the police had decided at that moment to walk away, that Maverick wouldn't have honored his promise to me, but I'd been so far beyond common sense at that point, I couldn't recognize the reality of the situation.

I'd barely registered Dean's arrival until he grabbed my arms and forced me to look at him. Still, he'd had to repeat what he'd said before it'd started to sink in that Anthony had been found. Even now, it continued to feel like I was in some sort of dream. A nightmare that I couldn't wake up from.

Dean did the talking when we got inside, and a minute later, we were walking past another cop, and into a small room where Dalton and Juliette were on either side of a bed. The moment I saw Anthony sleeping peacefully, the emotions I'd been holding back broke through, and I let out a small sob.

Dalton stood, and I waited for him to yell, to tell me how I'd put his son in danger, how I needed to leave and never come back.

Instead, I found myself wrapped in his arms, my face pressed against his chest, and I didn't have the strength to pull away. I could hear Juliette and Dean talking quietly in the background, but at that moment, all that mattered was that Dalton didn't hate me. It was possible he didn't know my role in what happened, but for the moment, I would take what he had to offer.

My tears soaked his shirt, and the knot in my stomach eased some with the release. He didn't say anything, and for that I was grateful. Eventually, my crying stopped, and my breathing became less ragged. The sounds and smells of the outside world came in, and I knew what I had to do.

I took a step back, wiped my cheeks, and forced myself to look up at my brother.

“I am so sorry.” My voice cracked. “This is all my fault.”

Dalton started to shake his head, but I didn't let him argue with me.

“You don't understand, that man only came after Anthony because of me.” I needed them to know everything, so I let it all pour out. “I started gambling at MIT, first to show off, and then because it was easy money. I liked it. By the time I was nineteen, I was at a poker game a week, counting cards, and earning more than any of my classmates were at their regular jobs.

That's where I got the money for the apartment. When I decided to stay here, I knew I could either look for a real job or keep playing. I didn't want to stop. The first game I went to, Stanley Maverick was there. I cleaned him out, and he was pissed. Then I did it again the other night. That's why Maverick took Anthony. To force me into playing for him.”

“We know,” Juliette said quietly.

I shook my head. “No, it's my fault. If I hadn't gone to those games, then none of this would've happened.”

“Kyndall.” Dalton's voice was gentle. “You screwed up, yes, but you never would have knowingly put Anthony into harm's way.”

“But—”

“No.” Juliette came over to me and took my hands. Her eyes were red, skin pale, but there was no animosity on her face. “You are not responsible for someone else's actions. That man could have let it go, but he chose to come after Anthony.”

“You don't under—”

“I do,” she interrupted. “I know exactly what it's like to have to distinguish between what I'm responsible for with unwise choices I've made, and taking the blame for what someone else chooses to do. I'm not saying what you were doing was smart, but it's not like you took Anthony with you to the game. I know it will take you a while before you're able to forgive yourself, but you need to know that Dalton and I don't blame you.”

She hugged me, and it wasn't a conciliatory sort of embrace. She meant what she was saying. I swallowed hard, unable to speak around the lump in my throat. It was one thing to hear family say that their love was unconditional, to hear someone talk about how they'd love you no matter what. It was something else entirely to have done something like this and see that love in action.

I knew that I didn't deserve it and that nothing I could do would ever make up for what happened, but I promised myself that I would do whatever it took to at least try.

“He's really okay?” I asked as Juliette released me.

“He is.” She put her arm around my shoulders and drew me toward the bed.

I could feel Dean watching me as I went, and I knew that he and I would need to talk soon. But Anthony came first.

“Those men gave him some cough syrup, and he basically just slept

through all of it. The doctors said he's completely fine. Not even dehydrated.” She ran her hand over his dark hair. “He won't remember anything.”

Something about the way she said it made me look at Dalton.

“Juliette was kidnapped before I met her.”

My eyes went wide.

“Former assistant and former lover teamed up,” she said without taking her eyes off of her son. “It happened right after Cross and Hanna met.”

“Have you considered investing in tracking devices for your family?” Dean asked as he came over to the bed.

Dalton chuckled, and the sound was contagious, loosening the last bit of what had been tight between us. I reached down and touched my nephew's hand. Someone sucked in a breath, and I looked up to see Juliette staring at my wrist.

“What happened?” Her eyes darkened when she looked back up at me.

“One of the men at the game thought I was cheating,” I said.

Dalton cursed. “You need to get that checked out.”

“I'm fine.”

“No, you're not.” Juliette's voice was firm. “You're going to get that x-rayed, and then after a doctor says it's okay, you're going home to get some sleep.”

“I'm staying here,” I argued.

“No, you're not.” Dalton had taken on that big brother tone that drove me crazy. “They want to keep Anthony overnight for observation as a precaution, but there's no reason for all of us to stay here.”

“Dalton,” I started to protest.

“Dean.” Juliette looked over at him. “Stay with her while she gets the x-ray and then take her back to her place. Don't take no for an answer.”

Dean gave me a steady look. “I won't.”

Apparently, I was going to have that talk with him tonight.

None of the bones in my wrist were broken or cracked, so the doctor gave me some pain meds and told me that I was free to go. I knew better than to try to go back to Anthony's room, so I didn't protest as Dean led me outside to a waiting car. And I didn't resist as he put his arm around my shoulders and pulled me to his side.

Neither of us spoke until we were back in my apartment, sitting on my

sofa, each with a glass of my favorite *pinot noir*.

“Can I ask you something?”

He nodded, shifting so that he was facing me, our knees touching. “Of course.”

“How did you find me?” I glanced up at him, and then down at my glass of wine. “I mean, how did the cops know where to find Anthony, and where to find me?”

“Dalton called some PI he knew, and the guy had a picture of Stanley Maverick. I put the pieces together. Enough of them, anyway. The police did the rest.”

I nodded. It made sense. “Dalton and Juliette didn't seem surprised when I told them about the gambling.”

A flash of guilt crossed his face. “I needed to give the police a reasonable explanation to justify them applying for warrants. I know it wasn't my place to tell them, but the situation—”

“Thank you,” I interrupted. “Thank you for helping the police find Anthony.”

“And you.” He put his hand on my knee. “Yes, I wanted them to find Anthony because I would have to be a monster to not have been thinking of him. But I wanted them to find you, too, because I knew you were in trouble.”

“What did it matter if they found me or not?” I slid away from his hand, unable to think when he was touching me. “Dalton and Juliette might've said that what happened to Anthony wasn't my fault, but me being at that game definitely was. Whatever could've happened would've been my own fault.”

After a moment of silence, Dean moved so that he was sitting right against me. His hand cupped my chin, holding my face in place as he spoke, “I want you to listen to me, so we have no misunderstanding. I will not accept harm coming to you. If it is in my power to protect you, I will, no matter the cost.”

My eyes burned with tears, guilt churning in my stomach. Not only for what I'd done, for what might have been, but for what I saw on Dean's face, what I heard in his voice.

“I looked for you all day,” he said. “I needed to apologize for the things I'd said, for the way I treated you.”

“You don't need to apologize.”

“Yes, I do, because that is what we do when we're wrong.” His thumb

brushed the corner of my mouth. "And then we forgive, and we move on."

"Of course I forgive you."

He smiled, but it wasn't a full one. "Thank you, love, but I wasn't only speaking of forgiveness to each other, but for ourselves as well."

I turned my head away. "I don't think I can."

"Look at me, love."

I closed my eyes, wishing I could leave, hide away from all of it.

"Kyndall. Look at me."

I shivered at his tone. There was no denying the authority in his voice. I hadn't been with him long, but everything in me wanted to respond to his command.

"Kyndall."

I looked at him, the heat in his eyes sending a wash of warmth over me. He studied me for a moment, then stood, holding out his hand.

"Come with me." When I hesitated, he added, "now."

He led me into my bedroom, his fingers clasped comfortably around mine. Once inside, he gave me another searching look.

"Do you trust me?"

The question held weight, I knew, and I took a moment to consider it. After what happened between us, did I still want him? Yes. And I loved him. But none of that would matter if I didn't trust him.

He told Dalton and Juliette about my gambling, but he'd done it to save Anthony's life. He'd known that I would've put Anthony above myself, that my nephew meant more to me than anything else.

"Yes."

"Bend over and put your hands on the edge of the bed."

I gave him a puzzled look but didn't argue. My hair fell around my face, shielding it. I stayed quiet as he unbuttoned my shorts, then pulled them down, taking my panties with them.

"You believe that you're guilty."

It wasn't a question, but I nodded anyway.

"When a person does something wrong, they should be punished."

Again, not a question.

"So here's what's going to happen." A strange sound followed his words, something not like metal on metal, but some sort of cloth. "I'm going to punish you until the guilt is gone, and then I'm going to make you come."

I had absolutely no response to any of that. Who would?

“Do you remember the safe word we set up?”

I knew the answer to that one. “Yes.”

His voice gentled. “This is going to hurt, love. That's the point. It isn't foreplay. But I promise that you'll feel better when it's done...and then I'll make you feel even better than that.”

“Okay.”

I heard a cracking sound, and suddenly realized what I was hearing. His belt. I figured out what was coming a moment before Dean's belt came down on my ass.

“Fuck!” I yelped. He hadn't been lying. That hurt. Not so much that I was going to ask him to stop, but it was *definitely* not foreplay.

A second one made my eyes water and my skin burn.

But that knot of anxiety and guilt inside me began to ease.

Another crack sent a fresh wave of pain racing along my nerves. I dug my fingers into my comforter.

“Let go, love,” Dean said. “Take the punishment. Accept it. Forgive yourself.”

Another crack. My skin started to feel like someone had taken sandpaper to it.

“Forgive yourself.”

My arms began to shake as the heavy leather came down on my ass again.

“Please, love. I need you to forgive yourself.”

His tone was almost pleading, as if what he was doing hurt him as much as it hurt me. It was the thought of causing him pain that finally did it. When the belt hit me again, the cry that ripped out of me had less to do with the physical pain and more to do with all of the pain I'd been holding onto since the moment I'd gotten that picture of Anthony.

Suddenly, Dean was there, pulling me onto his lap. He held me while I cried, and it was a different sort of cry than I'd had at the hospital. Dalton was my brother, and I trusted him as family, but Dean was the one who could take over my control, who could take everything I needed to give up.

“Shh,” he murmured against my ear, “I've got you. I love you.”

I pressed my face against his chest. “I love you too.”

And then we were quiet, just existing there, our declarations wrapping around us.

How long the two of us sat there, I wasn't sure, but at some point, the gentle caresses that had been soothing were now arousing. When I raised my

head, Dean was there, and I reached up to pull him down until our mouths touched.

The kiss fed the hunger burning inside me, and I knew Dean felt it too. He turned me, pulled my legs on either side of his waist. His jeans were rough against my overly sensitive skin, but the pain that had only hurt before now merged with other things.

“Need you,” I mumbled against his lips.

His hand slid between us, his knuckles rubbing against my curls as he worked his pants open. Hot, slick flesh slipped and slid, and then he was inside me, thick and full, pulsing and throbbing with me. Our bodies rocked against each other, the harsh sound of our breathing mingling in the otherwise silent room.

As pleasure consumed me, I knew that I wasn't going anywhere. Everything and everyone I needed was here. I'd figure the rest out.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

KYNDALL

The weather had finally started to cool, and it was about damn time. Halloween was on Monday, and the leather outfits Juliette, Hanna, and I had gotten for the party at the club would be a lot more comfortable if the temperature was lower. Either way, I was looking forward to seeing the expression on Dean's face when he saw me in it. Juliette and I had already planned on making sure my brother was busy because there was no way either he or I wanted to deal with the awkwardness of that encounter.

The very thought had me laughing out loud.

“Something you'd like to share?”

I smiled at Dean, reaching across the table to put my hand over his. “Nothing important. It's been a busy week. Tonight is about the two of us.”

A busy week was an understatement. I'd started working at Dean's non-profit almost as soon as he'd gotten it up and running, and it felt like we'd been running ever since. We'd both thought that Dean's idea of focusing on research for alternative energy and cleaner technology had been a good one, but neither of us had predicted just how big it would be. I'd been hired as a fill-in, reviewing the research as it was done, asking questions, checking numbers. But we'd had so many people applying to take part in our program that Dean and I had both spent the last few months putting together teams, figuring out who would work best where.

Before he'd moved into my apartment last month, we'd barely seen each other outside of work, but even afterward, most of our time at our now-shared home was spent falling asleep, often in the middle of a sentence.

When we hadn't even made it to the couch earlier this week before

exhaustion had taken over, Dean had decided that the two of us needed a date night. I'd left work an hour early so I could be ready, and I'd taken my time to make sure I looked my best. I'd never forget the expression on his face when I walked out of the bedroom in a slinky, smokey blue dress, my favorite pair of heels, and the necklace he'd given me the day after everything happened with Anthony.

“You know that I'm always interested in what you're thinking.” He lifted my hand and brushed his lips across my knuckles. “Did something happen with the case?”

I shook my head. “Nothing new. Aramina said Stanley took the deal to flip on some people high up in the organization. As long as he testifies when he's supposed to, he won't be going to trial, so I won't need to testify.”

The DA had been surprised when Maverick had wanted to make a deal, but I hadn't been. He wasn't interested in looking out for anyone but himself, and if he could get a cushy deal in Witness Protection by selling out, I knew he'd do it. And he had. There was always the chance that he'd back out and I'd have to hold up my part of the unofficial deal I'd made with Aramina, but I had a feeling he was worried enough about possible repercussions and having to live in jail than he did anything else.

The waiter returned to refill our wine, and I pushed aside thoughts of Stanley Maverick. I didn't want to think about any of that tonight. I'd forgiven myself for what happened, but that didn't mean I wanted to think about it. I hadn't picked up a deck of cards since that night, and I didn't miss it. I had enough to challenge me, and it turned out that was all I needed.

“Are you happy?”

I blinked, startled by the sudden change of subject. “Are you?”

“I know Dalton thinks we're moving too fast. Moving in together after only a couple months.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “My brother had a one night stand with a dominatrix, got her pregnant, then decided to date her, and marry her. I don't think he really has much of a right to say what's too fast.”

Dean laughed, but his eyes were still serious. “Do you think that things are going too fast between us?”

My stomach twisted. I wasn't sure I liked the way this conversation was going. “Do you? I mean, you moving in made sense because you were living at a hotel but were at my place half the time—”

“Kyndall, Kyndall, love,” Dean cut in. He moved around the table and

knelt in front of me, taking both my hands in his. “That's not what I was trying to say. I don't want to move out.”

I smiled, trying not to let him see how relieved I was. “That's good, because I was just starting to get used to having a roommate.”

I waited for a sarcastic comment, or for him to laugh as he moved back to his chair, but none of that happened.

“Would you be willing to change, perhaps, to something different?”

For someone who often joked about how I needed to learn how to properly speak English, as opposed to American, he wasn't doing a very good job with the precision of language himself.

“I think I need you to be a bit more specific,” I said. “Because I'm really not understanding where this conversation is going.”

He pulled one hand away from mine and reached into his jacket pocket. When he held it up, the small box made my heart skip a beat.

When he asked about moving too fast, this was definitely not what I'd been thinking.

“From the moment we bumped into each other that night outside Cross and Hanna's house, I haven't been able to get you out of my head. And while I'm uncertain when you made your way into my heart, I know that you have always been meant to be there.” His damp eyes shone. “I'm not an impulsive man, but when I know what I want, I don't believe in unnecessary waiting.”

He opened the box to reveal a beautiful platinum ring with a single diamond between two sapphires. It matched my necklace exactly.

“I love you, Kyndall, and I'm asking if you will allow me to love you forever. Will you marry me?”

I didn't even have to think about it. “Yes.” I nodded, smiling wide enough to make my cheeks hurt. “Yes, I'll marry you.”

As he slipped the ring onto my finger, I felt a deeper peace than I had ever felt before. He knew me. Knew what I needed, even when I didn't. He would always take care of me, protect me, even from myself. But he would let me be strong too, let me be who I was, and not ask me to become less.

He was the man I loved, and the man I was going to marry.

“Fiancé,” I said, leaning down to brush my lips across his. “That sounds so much better than roommate.”

“What about husband?” he asked as he cupped the side of my face. “How does husband sound?”

“Perfect,” I whispered the word against his lips. “Absolutely perfect.”

The End

FREE Bonus Epilogue:

As a special gift to my wonderful newsletter subscribers, I'm writing a free epilogue/short story with Kyndall and Dean, called "The Wedding". If you would like me to email it to you when it's done in a couple of weeks, be sure you are signed up to my newsletter. You can sign up here: [MS Parker's Newsletter](#).

BONUS 1: A LEGAL AFFAIR

Club Prive - Leslie's Story

M. S. PARKER

M.S. PARKER
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR



A LEGAL
AFFAIR

VOL. 1

Chapter One

LESLIE

Eying the clock, I tried not to think about everything I needed to do between now and the time I could leave.

Maybe I didn't punch in and out, but I did have to work so many hours in order to bill my clients, and since Calvin and Associates didn't actually have any associates, I did a hell of a lot of overtime.

I needed another me.

Actually, I needed another lawyer or at the very least, a paralegal.

I had an administrative assistant, and Haley was amazing, but I needed help with more than just administrative tasks. I needed a paralegal and a lot more than the intern I got on a limited basis too.

I'd been trying to find help for a while, but so far, no dice.

The past couple of weeks had been crazy, but most of that was because I'd been trying to juggle a personal life on top of business more than normal.

My heart gave a girly sigh as I remembered the wedding I attended not that long ago.

Carrie and Gavin were ridiculously perfect together, and so happy.

Seeing Krissy had sent a pang through me, too, though not a good one. She'd seemed like she was holding together okay after her miscarriage, but how was I to know? I'd never wanted kids, couldn't even fathom the idea. Krissy, she'd been walking on cloud nine ever since she'd gotten the positive test result...and then it was just gone. She lost the baby, and she'd gone from cloud nine straight down to the lowest sort of hell.

Although we didn't talk as much as we had when we worked together, I knew how hard it'd been on her.

I missed my friends.

Which was why, in a couple of hours, I was hooking up with my closest friend.

It wouldn't be exactly the same as before, of course. Dena was living with her boyfriend – or rather, *he* was living with *her*. Arik was a defense attorney for the rich and powerful and wasn't *that* a joke. Dena had finally landed her dream job, which was usually working for the people who fought *against* the rich and powerful. The ADA and the defense attorney. It should've been a *Lifetime* movie.

But she was happy.

That meant a lot.

So far, I'd only spent a short amount of time in Arik's presence, but Dena seemed happier than I'd ever seen her, so that was all that mattered as far as I was concerned.

The song on the radio changed and I sighed, feeling more despondent than normal.

The love song rolling out of the surround sound had a knot welling up in my throat, and all I really wanted to do was put down my pen and shut down for the day.

No, what I really wanted to do was curl my knees to my chest and listen to the song, maybe sing along for a bar or two. As the woman wailed about how love had left her behind, I had to fight not to chime in.

Sing it, sister.

I needed to push this melancholy away before I hooked up with Dena.

Not that long ago, the two of us were the ones who'd meet up and reminisce over the good old days, when it had been the four of us – Carrie, Krissy, Dena and me – hitting the town and looking to raise hell and have as much fun as we could.

Then it was Krissy, Dena and me. Then Dena and me.

Now, it was just me.

The lone wolf...

"You morose bitch," I muttered. Throwing my pen down, I leaned back and rubbed at my temples. "Stop feeling sorry for yourself."

It wasn't like I wasn't *happy* for my friends. Sure, I'd expected some of them – okay, I'd always expected Carrie to settle down. Find a nice guy, fall in love, and get married. She was that sort of girl. The one we'd always had to drag out, push toward the hot guy.

But then Krissy had gone and fallen in love too.

Then, it happened to Dena.

I was the last girl standing.

I'd always thought Krissy and I would be partying and living the life for...well...

Making a face, I snatched my pen. "You thought you'd be on the prowl with your BFF right up until you were fifty or something." A mental picture settled in my mind, the two of us still running around like we'd always done, hooking up with men half my age. I hoped I aged as well in reality as I did in my daydreams.

The image shifted to just me, and I found myself wondering just what I'd be doing in five years, ten years. All my friends had fallen in love. They were getting married, talking about babies. Even Dena had a live-in boyfriend. In a couple of years, they might all be sitting around on playdates with their kids, and I'd be going out clubbing alone.

A year ago, I would have laughed at the idea, but now, it just left me feeling kind of down.

Sighing, I looked back at the paperwork in front of me.

Sadly, it hadn't diminished at all during my bout of self-pity, and that pile still stood between me and the door.

The bad part of being self-employed...there was nobody left to pick up the slack for a vacation or illness.

I needed to get my ass in gear too.

I had less than an hour to make serious headway if I didn't want to be late.

It was the first time we'd actually had a chance to go out in *forever* and I wasn't going to miss it.

Dena's boyfriend was hot.

Not pretty boy hot, just plain hot.

He also looked at her like she'd hung the moon.

They sat across from me, and when he wasn't talking to me, he was looking at her. There was a hint of possession, a hint of satisfaction, all mixed with a decidedly pleased smile.

It was like he was telling the world, *She's mine, everybody. Mine.*

Not bragging, really, just happy with it.

And that made him that much hotter.

There was something decidedly sexy about a man in love. Especially a man in love who didn't ignore everyone else.

When he looked over at me and asked how my practice was going, he seemed genuinely interested and talked about some of the cases – sans names, of course – some friends of his had worked back in Chicago. We made small talk, and Dena chatted about the move, and I wondered why in the hell I was feeling so down about the fact that my best friends were all happy.

“Man, service is so *slow* tonight,” I said, looking longingly toward the kitchen. I wasn't one of those women who worried about her figure. When I was hungry, I ate...unless I forgot. “I never got around to eating lunch.”

“Me, either.” Dena made a face. “I'm getting the crash course from hell now. The new DA is really putting me through my paces.”

“I bet you love it after that mess you had with the last boss.”

She grinned. “Damned straight. This lawyer actually seems to care...you know...about being a lawyer.”

“So he's not a total shark?” I said it lightly.

Dena stuck out her tongue. It was an ongoing joke between us. I hadn't gone into law for the same reasons my friends had. I had a good brain, I liked money, and I didn't like blood. When the time had come to start figuring out a career, a counselor in high school had said, *you know, you're smart enough. You could be a doctor or lawyer.*

Again, I didn't like blood.

I went with lawyer.

I liked helping people well enough, but that wasn't why I did it. For the most part, it didn't suck, and sometimes I even liked my job, but I doubted I found the satisfaction from it that Dena did. Maybe I was a shark, but I was a good lawyer, and my clients were typically satisfied with the job I did for them. Besides, I'd seen what happened when some people *didn't* have a shark, and it wasn't pretty.

“We live in a world full of barracudas, babe. Sometimes we need sharks.” Arik lifted Dena's hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles. He must have been doing something else under the table, because Dena's lids fluttered a bit, and I saw her breathing catch.

A moment later, she cleared her throat and smiled at me. “Yeah. Besides, sometimes sharks make good friends.”

“Spare me the kissing up.” I made a face at her, but was spared the chore of trying to find something else to talk about – the weather was up next – when the server appeared with our food.

I didn't know when it became so hard to talk to my best friend, but for some reason, the things we normally talked about, now just didn't seem to fit.

And there was no way in *hell* I was going to tell her that I was suddenly feeling the pangs of losing her and the others. Not while Arik was there, nuzzling on her knuckles and toying with her thigh – or other body parts – under the table.

I wouldn't do that to her.

“You've been quiet tonight.”

Looking over at Dena as we walked down the sidewalk, I managed a strained smile. It had been good seeing her, nice getting to know Arik a little better, but...yeah, I'd been quiet. “I'm just tired.” Managing a shrug, I added, “It's crazy at the office. I need to hire somebody to help out so I don't get behind the next time I need to go out of town, but in the meantime, I'm dealing with all the stuff that piled up while I was gone. My admin is great for paperwork and phones, but she's never worked with anybody in the legal area before, so I'd rather her not deal with anything important until I have time to teach her more.”

Dena seemed to accept that.

“Krissy looked...well, she looked good, didn't she?” Dena asked after a few moments.

“Yeah.” I felt a tug in my chest as I thought about the baby she lost. “She looked good. DeVon is taking care of her.”

“I think they're both taking care of each other,” Dena said. “He was pretty broken up too.”

“Yeah.” Blowing out a breath, I lifted my face to the sky. “I can't imagine what they went through.”

“I don't want to.”

We reached the end of the block and stopped. Dena was heading in one direction with Arik, me in another.

I wasn't just talking about heading home, either.

Feel sorry for yourself later, I reminded myself.

“Pizza in a couple of weeks?” Dena asked.

“Absolutely.” I pressed a quick kiss to her cheek and nodded at Arik.

After hugging Dena, we went our separate ways, and I found myself wondering if the night out had been a good idea after all.

I’d wanted to see my friend, yet somehow, I now felt more alone than before.

Chapter Two

LESLIE

The entire apartment smelled lemony clean and the surfaces of the appliances in my miniscule kitchen sparkled.

I, however, was sweaty and dusty.

After shoving the cleaning supplies into the small space at the top of my closet, I retreated to my bathroom – the shower stall sparkled too. I would have given my right arm for a long, hot soak, but my budget hadn't quite extended to where I could shell out the kind of cash it would take to afford an apartment that came with a tub.

At least not the kind of apartment I'd *want*.

If I'd stayed with Webster and Steinberg, I would have been able to upgrade already, but branching out on my own had taken a lot of cash. I was now seeing a slow, steady climb in my income, but it had taken cutting back on a lot of things and focusing on things that mattered.

Sadly, finding an apartment that came with a bathtub wasn't one of the things that mattered.

But it was in the plan.

In another year or so, I thought I'd be able to get a bigger place – and not just a *little* bigger.

I was waiting until I was secure enough to find *the* place.

I was nothing if not an excellent planner. And I had no problem with waiting to get what I really wanted.

Hot water from the shower pulsed down on tight shoulders, and I sighed, relaxing a little as sweat, dust and stress washed away down the drain. In a short while, I was going to be sweaty again and hopefully, I'd get rid of a lot

more stress.

I was heading to the club and the plan was to find a man and spend the night under him, over him, in front of him. I needed sex and I needed to forget about all the brooding I'd been doing.

My life was *good*.

I was beautiful, successful and I was doing exactly what I'd planned to be doing just a few short years ago.

That my friends had chosen other paths didn't really matter. I had my own path and I was happy with it.

Yet, as I climbed out of the shower a few minutes later and dried off, a small voice in the back of my head seemed to whisper...*if you were happy, you wouldn't have to work so hard to make yourself believe it.*

Club Privé was a study in elegant debauchery.

Sitting at the bar on the VIP level, I sipped my drink and waved at Carrie once she saw me.

I was surprised she could.

Her eyes seemed locked and focused on Gavin, as if nothing else existed.

They'd just gotten back from their honeymoon and one might think they'd be okay to go a few seconds without staring at the other, but I guess that was what love did to you.

I wouldn't know. I just didn't understand love.

I'd had a few boyfriends I'd *liked*, that I'd cared about, but love?

No.

Carrie grinned at me as she dropped down on the bar stool next to me. "Look what the cat dragged in," she said, leaning over to hug me.

"I'm pretty sure cats can't drag in this." Smugly, I glanced down at myself, pleased with the vivid green of my barely-there dress. I stood out among all the black and the red, which had been the whole point.

My life motto, ironically, came from Dr. Seuss. *Why fit in when you were born to stand out?*

Carrie rolled her eyes at me. "One day, you just might find a guy with an ego to match yours."

"Why would I want to?" Shrugging, I sipped my drink and studied the men on the VIP level.

Carrie's husband, Gavin, owned the club – well, technically, they both

did, I supposed. That was the only reason I had access to the VIP level. I couldn't afford it on my own – at least not yet. Although even once my own finances allowed it, I didn't plan on telling them I'd be happy to pay for it. If they were happy to give the membership to me, then I was happy to accommodate them. I wasn't cheap, per se. I just enjoyed nice things, and when I had somebody nice enough to provide me with such things free of charge, then who was I to argue?

Nobody on the VIP level was catching my eye, though. At least nobody who wasn't already paired up with somebody.

There was a sexy brunet at one table, who kept eying me, but he was with a woman, and while I might be shallow as hell, I didn't think much of a man who made eyes at me when he was clearly with somebody else.

Loyalty was one thing I *did* value.

In my opinion, it was something that was becoming more and more rare in the world. Even more so in my line of work.

“How has life been treating you?” Carrie asked.

“Busy.” Grimacing, I shifted my attention back to her. “I'm going to have to hire somebody to help in the office, and the way business is picking up, I might need to hire a partner before too long.”

“That's fantastic! You should be on cloud nine.” She flagged down a server and asked for a drink before turning back to me. Her eyes narrowed shrewdly as she asked, “So why aren't you?”

Since when had I become that transparent?

I didn't know, but I wasn't about to explain my sullen mood over the past few days. Carrie would either see too much into it, or just not get it. Then again, *I* didn't get it.

She was right. I should be on cloud nine. My practice was doing fantastic, especially considering I'd barely been at it for a year. I'd splurged on a beautiful Michael Kors tote a few days ago and last month, a new pair of Jimmy Choos. I was even on target to take a trip to Europe next summer and was in the planning stages of it. It wouldn't be too long before I could move to a bigger, nice apartment. I was right on track with my plan. I had everything I thought I wanted.

And yet...

I pasted a smile on my face as Gavin suddenly appeared at our sides.

“My beautiful wife,” he said, bending to kiss Carrie.

She leaned against him for a moment, and I busied myself with my nearly

empty drink. Then it was a completely empty drink, and I got busy flagging down the server to order another one. By the time I'd done that, they'd surfaced from a deep, intimate kiss. It wasn't that public displays of affection bothered me – if they did, then Club Privé was the last place I should be.

But there was something between people like Carrie and Gavin, Krissy and DeVon – and now Dena and Arik – that was too intimate to simply sit and watch. That deep sort of connection was more than just affection, and it made me uncomfortable to witness. Some things were *too* private.

“Leslie, you're looking lovely tonight.”

I swung my head around and smiled at Gavin, careful not to let anything I was thinking or feeling show on my face. Carrie had seen something. I could still see it in her eyes, but even if some part of me might have wanted to share with her, I wasn't about to do it with Gavin here.

Besides, what was I going to say?

It just dawned on me that I'm feeling kinda...

I didn't let myself finish that thought. If I didn't finish it, then I didn't have to deal with it.

Sometimes, the only way to deal with things was to *not* deal with things.

“And you're looking very...” I paused as I slid my eyes between him and Carrie. “Married.”

He chuckled as he slid his arm around her waist. “I'll take that as a compliment.”

“Do that,” I said sincerely. And I did mean it that way. They looked wonderful together.

The server appeared at my side with my drink, and I accepted with a smile before looking toward the railing. Restlessness burned inside me, but I couldn't just up and walk away.

I was saved from further questions, though, when one of the men from the club's security team appeared at Gavin's side and bent his head to murmur in Gavin's ear. Gavin nodded and touched Carrie's arm. “We're needed.”

Carrie gave me an apologetic smile and I waved her off. “Go. I want to dance anyway.”

“I'll try to find you later.”

“Please don't.” I wagged my brows. “I'm hoping to be busy.”

She laughed as Gavin took her hand. A moment later, they were gone, and I took my drink over to the railing. From the corner of my eye, I could see the man who'd been eying me finish his drink as the woman across the

table from him abruptly stood up and stormed off.

The skin between my shoulder blades crawled, letting me know he was still watching me. Shit. I really didn't want to deal with some creep tonight. I kept my gaze locked on the dancers below me. Tossing back my drink, I pushed back from the railing and saw the creep dropping a few bills on the table. He slid a look my way, followed by a slow smile. I ignored him as I gave my empty glass to the server and headed for the stairs.

Time to exit stage left.

He caught up with me just a few feet from the stairs. I couldn't say I was surprised. Irritated, yes. But not surprised. I knew his type.

“Are you heading out already? He gave me a quick, charming smile. “I was just coming to ask if I could buy you a drink.”

“I'm not thirsty.” Keeping my voice cool, I cut around him. He wasn't so easily dissuaded, though.

I had one foot on the steps leading down to the lower level when he joined me.

“A dance, then, perhaps?”

Instead of answering right away, I continued my way down the stairs, and on the landing between the levels, I moved over to the railing and tipped my head back to look up at him. His precisely styled hair didn't move at all as he dipped his head to meet my eyes.

“No dance,” I said levelly. “No drink. You're not my type.”

His lids flickered a bit at that and a muscle tightened in his jaw. He hadn't liked that. He recovered quickly, though, flashing me a smile that was without a doubt one of the best I'd ever seen.

It did absolutely nothing for me.

“Oh, come on...I bet I can prove you wrong. A drink...” He traced a fingertip down my cheek. “A dance. I bet we could have a lot of...fun.”

Deliberately I stepped away from him, working to control my temper. While I didn't believe in stereotyping, my own red curls and hot-headedness didn't go far to dispelling *that* particular myth.

I made my voice icy. “Somehow, I really doubt that.”

I pushed past him, and this time, when he tried to follow, I nodded to the security guard at the foot of the stairs. “If you don't step back now, I'm going to tell that guy down there you're putting your hands on me without permission. Don't be surprised if your VIP membership goes on instant probation.”

His face screwed up. “You lying bitch.”

“You touched my face.” Giving him a cat’s smile, I shrugged. “I didn’t invite your touch or give you permission. In fact, I’d told you *no*. I’m pretty sure that the rules clearly say when told *no*, you’re supposed to accept and move on.”

Sure, I was being extremely literal with the rules, but the guy was a sleaze. Chances were there were more than a few women here he’d already gotten too hands-on with. This time, he’d picked the wrong one. I didn’t *get* pushed around – I might push, and push hard, but nobody tried it with me.

His jaw clenched and his face flushed, but he didn’t say anything else, just cut around me, keeping a wide distance. He hesitated at the top of the steps and it didn’t take long to see why. The big guy clad in the discreet suit Gavin preferred his security team to wear was staring dead at him. The look wasn’t happy.

By the time I cleared the steps, the two of them were having a quiet conversation that he didn’t appear to be enjoying.

I didn’t spare him another look as I lost myself on the dance floor.

An hour later, I was finishing up a bottle of water when somebody bumped into me – and hard.

I crashed into the person next to me, felt my ankle giving out.

Already prepared to fall, I wind milled my arms anyway.

I didn’t fall though.

Strong forearms came around my waist and a heated body pressed against mine.

My heart skipped a beat in appreciation.

The scent of clean male sweat filled my head, and I looked up, not quite ready to get hopeful. But then I met his eyes and hope started to race alongside my pulse.

Dark brown eyes held mine.

“I...I’m sorry.” Feeling a little breathless, I smiled up at him. “Excuse me.”

“Please don’t.” He smiled and when he did, his teeth flashed white against the short, neat growth of his beard.

I had dirty images of just how that beard might feel against my girl parts and his response took a minute to process. “Um...what? Please don’t what?”

“Excuse yourself. As a matter of fact, feel free to fall into my arms anytime you want.” He helped steady me, but didn’t let go of my arms right away and I didn’t mind a bit. As a matter of fact, he could have held on a little longer.

“Well, aren't you a flirt.”

“Not much of a flirt. I just speak my mind. And if you hadn't fallen against me, I wouldn't have gotten a hold of you.” He held out a hand, that wicked, sexy smile still on his lips. “Maybe you'll dance with me and let me hold you again?”

I put my hand in his. “Maybe I’ll do just that.”

Chapter Three

PAXTON

“*W*e didn’t do too bad.”

Looking up, I met the eyes of Decker Marley, the man who’d played lead guitar for me ever since I’d first started singing. He was also my best friend, and I knew by the look in his eyes that he was being...polite.

“Hey, fuck that. I think we nailed it.” Joker Trammel spun his drumsticks around, grinning at us as he jogged down the steps to join us at the door. “We fucking kicked *ass*. We ought to tell.

Brinke to get sick more often.”

Get sick was delivered with a roll of his eyes.

The rest of the band laughed, save for Decker and me. Brinke was our main backup singer – and my wife. She told me she’d meet me at the studio this morning. She never had.

My texts had gone unanswered as well.

We needed to talk once I got back to the penthouse because this bullshit wasn’t going to keep happening.

“So, are we going to recut the songs we did today?” Decker asked, ignoring the rest of the crew.

“No.” Staring outside the double doors into the busy New York streets, I blew out a breath and then turned to look at everybody. They all looked more than a little surprised, but thankfully, none of them seemed upset. In fact, they looked relieved. “No. Brinke knows we’re on a deadline. She’ll understand.”

“The fans might not.” Joker was the one to voice what all of us were thinking.

Rubbing the back of my neck, I nodded. “Yeah. We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. But we can’t keep holding up work on the new album because of...”

I couldn’t even say the lie this time.

Brinke wasn’t sick – not physically at least – and I had a bad feeling I knew why she wasn’t there. She’d been out late last night, partying like we were still nineteen, without a care or responsibility. She didn’t get that our lives couldn’t go on like that anymore.

“Brinke.” Decker said it for me. Moving up, he clapped a big hand on my shoulder. “Dude, look, you love her. We get that. But this shit – it ain’t good for you. Ain’t good for the band. Ain’t good for your career – or ours.”

He didn’t even mention Brinke’s career, because, without me to keep her going, she probably wouldn’t have one. And I didn’t say the other thing, that I wasn’t even sure I did love her. Not like this.

The energy we’d had going today – *without* Brinke – I missed that. Just being able to lose myself in the music again, without being caught up in her drama had been amazing. But she was my wife – and more.

I sighed. “I gotta go. You all heading out?”

“Nah.” He shrugged and looked back at everybody else. “I think we’re going to head out, hit a club maybe. Guess you’re not up for it.”

“Not today.”

I hitched my gig bag over my shoulder, then pulled out a ball cap and a pair of sunglasses. The others were doing the same. It was surprisingly easy to stay somewhat anonymous in the city with just a little effort.

“Okay, man.” He punched me lightly on the shoulder. “Take it easy, Pax.”

A few minutes later, I was tucked up in the back of a cab with my eyes closed.

Some of the guys wondered how I could do that, relax in the back of a New York City taxi. But I’d ridden in cabs in Beijing, New Delhi, and Mexico City – so had they. I figured if I’d survived those, then a driver from the Big Apple was a cakewalk.

I came awake to the sound of a heavy fist pounding on the glass between the driver and me. Groggily, I blinked my eyes a few times, then looked over and saw the towering spire that housed my penthouse. It wasn’t exactly what I’d planned for a home here, but Brinke had fallen in love with it, and sometimes it was just easier to give in to her when it wasn’t something

important.

I'd gone along with it, and now I had to admit, the place was a lot more convenient than a house a little bit out of the city. Not to mention what a bitch it would've been to drive back and forth on the days we needed to be in the studio. Still, I wanted a *house*. Someplace with a yard and grass. Maybe we'd do that later. We could always keep the penthouse, stay here when we were recording, use it for guests and that sort of thing.

I pushed money into the slot to pay the fare, along with the tip, and mumbled thanks, still half-asleep.

By the time I hit the elevator bank, though, I was awake. Awake and hungry. We'd ordered in Chinese for lunch, and that had stuck with me for maybe an hour. I wanted a steak – one the size of Kansas. Maybe we could all –

The second I stepped out of the elevator, I knew I wouldn't be inviting Brinke out anywhere. Hell, she'd be lucky if I didn't *kick* her ass out.

Music blasted from the system we'd just installed last week.

Next to my right foot, a puddle of what looked like vomit spread across the polished hardwood floors that Brinke had cooed over. A bottle of wine was spilled on the antique Aubusson rug she'd insisted we *had* to have, and there was a box of half-eaten pizza on the couch *I* had wanted. The stains from tomato sauce looked like they were already smeared in.

Over the souring smell of vomit mingled with wine, I caught the familiar odor of marijuana and booze, food and cigarettes. The cigarette smoke was so thick it hung in a thick haze around the apartment, and I felt my jaw locking on me. There was a couple on the fat armchair I'd put by the windows so I could look outside at night, and I slammed my fist against the lights as I realized the two of them were screwing right there in my living room.

Two sets of glassy eyes turned toward me. The woman smiled, then giggled. "Heya, Pax...wanna join us?"

"Get out."

I recognized her vaguely. She was one of the girls Brinke liked to party with. "Get out," I said again. "And don't bother coming back. I'm telling building security you're not allowed in anymore."

While she continued to blink at me, confused, I grabbed the phone and waited for the front desk to pick up – another thing to like about the building.

I relayed my message while the couple by the window started to move again, low moans reaching my ears – and the guy on the phone. "Ah...Mr.

Gorham, do you require assistance?”

“I think I require a lot – but not the kind you can give me. Just remember what I said, and make sure *everybody* knows.” Then I slammed the phone down and strode to the chair.

Drawing back my foot, I kicked it hard enough that it skidded, even with the two of them screwing on it like wild rabbits.

When they looked at me this time, there was sense in their eyes. At least a little. “You’ve got two minutes to be out of here, or you’ll be arrested for trespassing.”

Every single person up here would be stopped on the way out, and none of them would be coming back. Brinke’s friend – Sanja? Sanya? I couldn’t remember – gaped at me, but her partner got it. He stood up, and she would’ve fallen if he hadn’t caught her.

“Come on, Pax,” she said, her voice slurred. “Why so mad?”

“Get out.”

“Come on, Jay,” he said, finally managing to zip his jeans. He had the decency to smooth her skirt down, never once lifting his head to acknowledge me.

It was Sanja then.

From the corner of my eyes, I saw somebody looking at me from the kitchen. I pointed at her – no, them. Another couple came slinking around. “Get out.”

Before moving away from the door, I pulled my phone out and pulled up the number for building security and called down, giving terse instructions to watch for the people leaving my penthouse. “First of them coming down now – remember, they are *never* allowed back in my place again. *Ever.*”

“Hey...” Sanja said, a whine entering her voice. “You can’t do that. Brinke and I are best friends. I come see her all the time.”

“Yeah. When you want to get high and don’t have any money.” Curling my lip at her, I stepped aside and pointed to the door. “I’m the one who paid for the place. It’s my name on all the papers. Now get out.”

Brinke couldn’t be trusted to sign for anything as important as our home. She’d given a two-hundred-thousand dollar car to cover some debts to a dealer a couple years back. I’d told her then that my name was going on everything, and that if I caught her trying to give away or sell any of it, I’d send her to jail for theft.

She’d cried, yelled, smacked me and thrown things.

I hadn't given in that time, and I'd never regretted it.

My stomach twisted as the door slammed shut behind the people I'd just kicked out. That better be the last...

Disgusted, I stopped in front of the guest bedroom and opened the door to find a mini-orgy going on. Four people took up the massive custom king bed. I hit the light and held up my phone. "You've got five minutes to get out or I call the cops."

Like Sanja and the others, they were so strung out, it took a few seconds for my words to penetrate. When it did, one tried to argue, but I cut her off. "Brinke doesn't own this place. I do. Get out or I'll have you arrested. *Now!*"

I didn't bother to see if they listened. I'd called the cops if they weren't gone. I had no problem with that.

I strode to the end of the hall and looked toward our bedroom. I saw Brinke lying on the floor of the guest bathroom just ahead of me, but I ignored her. She wasn't who I cared—

"Ah, hell, no..." The door to Carter's room was open. I took off at a run.

I burst inside, already processing the low moans. Hitting the lights, I stared at the couple on my little girl's canopy style bed. It was round and outfitted with sheer drape-like scarves that hung from the top. She'd seen it and the look on her face had sealed the deal without her asking. She'd wanted a princess bed, and my little girl had gotten her damn princess bed.

"Get out!" I didn't even remember crossing the room or grabbing the man.

He was just on the floor, staring at me. The woman screamed and I half-turned toward her.

"Where is my daughter?"

They gaped at me, confused.

"Dude...she..."

The guy rubbed at his face, and then reached down, scratched at the curls near his still swollen dick. Fury exploded through me. I grabbed him off the floor and hauled him out into the hall, slamming him against the wall. "Where is my daughter?"

"She went into the closet, dude! We told her we needed the bed...she seemed cool with it!" He blinked at me, looking confused.

A second later, he looked unconscious – and bloody –because I'd all but punched his teeth through the other side of his head.

They'd put my little girl in the closet so they could fuck in her bed.

I was going to...

Breathe...

I forced myself to do just that as I turned and looked at the woman. She was still screaming and sobbing, her hands scrabbling at Carter's pink and purple bedspread. She didn't matter. He didn't matter. Only my baby girl did.

"Get out of that bedroom now unless you want to be arrested," I said, barely able to squeeze the words out through my fury. "Get. Out. Now."

She half fell off the bed and started to reach for the blanket to cover herself.

"Touch that and spend the night in jail."

Her hand fell away and she crawled toward her clothes. Ignoring her, I moved toward the closet.

It was closed, but under it, I saw a thin beam of light. Carter kept flashlights everywhere. She was afraid of the dark. Maybe a lot of kids her age were.

What in the hell had they said to make her go into the closet?

I started to grab the handle but stopped at the sight of blood on my knuckles.

Swearing, I shrugged out of the black button-down I'd worn over my t-shirt and used it to clean the blood from my hand. It wasn't perfect, but I wasn't leaving my daughter in there a minute longer.

She was crouched there, sitting with her back against the wall, and the little camping styled lamp by her feet. It was decorated with Disney princesses, and she held a bow and arrow – Princess Merida, of course – tightly.

She peeked up at me. "There's monsters, Daddy."

My heart broke a little. "No, baby," I said, shaking my head.

"There's monsters. I was having nightmares, and then they came in, and I screamed, and they said I had to be quiet and hide or the monsters would get me. Is it zombies?" Carter's big eyes stared up at me and I wanted to punch something – or someone. Again.

Brinke let Carter watch zombie shows a couple weeks ago, and now, instead of whatever kind of monsters kids *should* dream of, Carter thought zombies were real and might come get her.

"I told you, sweetheart. Those zombies are just make-up and pretend. They aren't real. Come on. Whatever monsters were here? I got rid of them."

Carter lay sleeping on the big, beautiful bed of the Waldorf Astoria's presidential suite.

Brinke had been passed out when I finally checked on her, so deep under that I'd ended up letting hotel security contact a doctor – *he's discreet, I assure you.*

I hoped like hell whoever they'd called was discreet, but that wasn't my main concern.

Carter was.

And because I had to think about my baby, I'd been sitting in the chair by the window, staring outside for the past hour as I came to the understanding that I had to do something. I couldn't just push it aside anymore.

The woman I'd fallen in love with was pretty much gone.

And the guy I'd been then? He didn't even exist anymore.

When we found out she was pregnant –

Shit. No big mystery there. I'd grown up. Remembering the shit my parents had put me through, some of the stories that Brinke had told me about her folks, I'd known. The moment we'd looked at that little plus sign and realized we were going to have a baby, I'd known that things had to change.

Brinke had seemed to get it too. But either she hadn't meant it or she'd forgotten.

And I didn't care anymore.

Whatever we once had was over.

We were done.

Carter made a low noise under her breath, something that sounded almost like a little puppy whimpering.

Getting up, I went over to the big bed and settled down in the middle, pulling her in close to me. She snuggled up to me and the crying stopped immediately.

"It's okay, princess," I said softly. "Nobody's going to hurt you. You're safe."

I'd make sure of it too.

No matter what.

Chapter Four

LESLIE

I came awake in a bed that wasn't mine, tucked up next to a hard, warm male body, and I put together pieces of a puzzle I wasn't aware existed until I'd already solved it.

I wasn't at home.

I hadn't spent the night alone.

Also, it was a little later in the morning than I liked. I only realized that when I saw the glowing red numbers on the clock on the table next to my head.

It was almost ten.

I needed to get home.

When I stirred, the man next to me grunted and rolled onto his belly, but he didn't wake.

After a moment, I eased onto my side and stared at him, waiting for my mind to clear.

Bit by bit, it did.

The guy – we'd met at Club Privé. He'd stopped me from falling. We'd danced. Had a few drinks.

Then we ended up here.

A few random flashes pierced the haze of alcohol and good, hard sex. I ached in a nice way, but beyond that, I couldn't say much about the past night. Not the first time that'd happened.

Easing out of the bed, I looked around for my clothes and gathered them up.

My head pounded a little, and I grabbed my purse as well, hoping I'd

remembered to throw some sort of over the counter pain killer in there.

If not, I could always drown myself under the shower.

Twenty minutes later, I was showered, and after having dry-swallowed two ibuprofen tablets, I felt something closer to normal. My dress from last night was wrinkled, but it would do for now. My panties would not – they'd been ripped. I tossed them into the garbage, relieved to see numerous condom wrappers in there. That was always the risk when mixing alcohol and sex.

Spying my shoes by the bed, I bent to pick them up.

“Hey, beautiful.”

Shoes in hand, I looked back over my shoulder to see my partner from last night pushing up on his elbow. The hotel we'd chosen to come was across the street from Club Privé. It was pristine, discreet, elegant, and nicer than some other places I'd woken up.

A thin strip of sunlight came through the mostly closed drapes to fall across his face, highlighting the bronzed beauty of his features. Dreads secured in a neat tail at his neck left that fantastic face unframed, and I knew I'd enjoyed the view of that face from multiple angles most of the night.

But I needed to go.

He trailed a finger down my spine.

I looked away.

Dammit.

“When can I see you again?”

I'd done this often enough that I'd perfected my exit strategy. It helped that I never left the club with a creep. The security guys and I had developed our own little silent language. If I was with some guy who managed to slide under my radar, but who they knew was going to be a problem, they let me know. I'd only needed their intervention twice, though. I'd developed a pretty decent radar when it came to creeps.

This guy wasn't one.

He was, however, someone I needed to let down easy.

Swiveling around, I crawled across the bed and knelt over him.

Giving him a quick kiss, I pulled back and smiled down at him.

“Last night was fun...but that's all it was. I'm not looking for anything else.”

He grimaced at me. “Ouch.” One hand slid higher on my thigh. “Sure I

can't change your mind?"

I brushed my mouth across his. "Yes. But thanks for the offer."

He hauled me down for one more kiss and I had to admit, my heart was fluttering harder when he let go, but by the time I was on the street less than ten minutes later, I couldn't even quite remember the exact color of his eyes.

And I knew by the time I was home, I'd forgotten a lot more about my one-night stand.

It was sad, really, but it proved what I'd already known. Love wasn't for me.

The résumés on the left were going in the shredder as soon as I got up to refill my wine. The ones on the right, I'd go through again. I had a good feeling about two of them, and the others were decent possibilities.

One thing was certain – I was hiring somebody within the next few weeks, before I drowned in paperwork.

I could see my own obituary.

Leslie Calvin – she died buried under mounds of paperwork. Those who knew her best believe she would be pissed off – she always wanted to die dancing.

Leaving the firm that had given me my first job hadn't been a bad idea, but I hadn't been prepared for how much work came with going solo. The paperwork alone was enough to make me want to pull my hair out.

And not everything was even connected to cases.

Like advertising.

That was next on my list of things to conquer for the day, and it was my least favorite.

With a headache pounding at the base of my skull, I flipped to the final résumé in my pile. Within a split second, I wadded it up and hurled it across the room.

"No, I don't think somebody with two years working as a filing clerk will count as experience," I muttered. "Paralegal experience a *necessity*. Not optional. A *necessity*. Maybe I should've mentioned a basic understanding of the English language."

Leaning back in my chair, I stared up at the tray-ceiling overhead.

The ceiling fan spun in slow, lazy circles. Outside my windows, I heard the hum of the city. I wanted to get out there in that hum, leaving the

monotony of work for another day and just *do* something. That restlessness that had plagued me for days – weeks – longer – wasn't letting up, but I couldn't think of anything that might relieve it.

Nor could I understand why I was feeling it.

I had a great job.

I had a decent social life.

A year ago, I would have been completely happy to sit here and work my afternoon away. Work hard, play harder. Earn money, spend money.

What had changed? Had *I* changed?

I had a funny feeling the answer was yes. And I had an even funnier feeling that I knew when that change had started.

But I didn't want to think about any of that too much, didn't want to put a finger on it.

Naming it would just make it worse anyway.

Chapter Five

LESLIE

“*Y*ou look like you need this.”

Looking up, I saw my assistant, Haley, in the doorway, holding a cup in her hand. Steam wafted up from it, and the scent of coffee hit my system like a jolt of speed.

“Gimme. You can have my first born, my apartment or my 401k. Which do you want?”

“You’re too easy.” Haley winked at me and came in, putting the coffee down next to the filing I’d gotten earlier that morning from a courier. A client’s soon-to-be -ex was trying to drag things out with bullshit delays. Haley grimaced when she saw what I was working on. “Ugh. The McAllisters. You should charge them hazard pay.”

“Tell me about it.”

“I was going to see if you had a minute free to go over the résumés, but I’ll leave you to have all this fun.”

“No.” Pushing back from the desk, I took the coffee and flipped the filing facedown. “I need a break from their bullshit. Let’s do it now.”

“What are they fighting over now? Is she saying she wants the dog every Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday?”

I took a small sip of coffee before answering. As I circled around the desk, I thought about the crap I’d just finished reading and wondered what they’d do if I called them out for acting like a couple of children.

“No. This time, *he* is saying he should get the dog because she told him once ten years ago that she was allergic, and that he fears for the dog’s well being. Even though he bought her the dog.”

She laughed as we took the résumés over to the sitting area by the window and settled down with the sun on our backs. Coffee in hand, I listened as Haley gave me her opinion on two of the possible candidates for the job. “She looks good on paper, but...well, I get the impression her previous employer wouldn’t take her back if you *paid* them.”

“Okay. Bottom of the list. Next?”

Before Haley had a chance to answer, the phone on her desk buzzed. She kept it on vibrate, but Haley and I had an understanding about her phone. Her mother had recently been placed in hospice care and the nurses contacted her often. She didn't have to turn it off, but if it was anyone besides family, she left it alone.

“Go on.” I rubbed her shoulder. “As thorough as your notes are, I’m sure I can handle this.”

Haley gave me a tight smile and answered the phone half between the second and third buzz.

As she stepped into the small area we used for our employee lounge, I focused on the next résumé. His name was Daniel Carfax, and he was practically fresh out of school, but he did have nine months of experience, and he hadn’t left his last employer per se. He’d worked for an older divorce attorney named Max Bennett. Max had died in a rather public venue – in court – cross-examining the lover of his client’s husband. She’d been so shocked that she’d ended up confessing right there as the man staggered and fell to his knees in front of her, clutching at his chest.

I heard they’d ended up settling out of court.

Trust Bennett to get the best for his client in the end, even though he died on the floor of the courthouse.

The door opened and I said, “I think we need to give this guy a call.”

“Excuse me?”

The sound of that voice, low and rough and raw, sent a shiver down my spine.

Slowly, I looked up.

It hadn’t been the door to the lounge. Rather, it had been the front door, and now I had somebody in my office.

A hot and sexy somebody too.

Scruffy and hiding behind a pair of sunglasses and a hat, but he was still a hot and sexy piece of work. My heart kicked up a beat or ten even as the professional in me offered a polite smile.

I didn't have any appointments until this afternoon so I didn't think he was here to see me. Except I was very much *hoping* he wasn't here to see me.

Because that would mean he was married, and married guys were off limits.

"If you're looking for the modeling agency, they're on the third floor." I really hoped he was there for the modeling agency, because if he was, I could get his name as I took a few minutes to walk him up. Give him mine. Maybe ask him about a drink later on...?

"No." He looked around, a bit lost before shifting his attention back to me. "I...you're Leslie Calvin."

And just like that, my heart sank. If he wasn't here for the modeling agency and he knew my name, then that meant one thing.

He'd come here looking for me.

Damn it to hell.

A piece of work like this scruffy pretty boy might've had just what I needed...

He tugged off the hat and looked around. "Do you have any free time for a...um...what do you call it, a consult?"

"Are you needing an attorney?" I asked calmly. "I specialize in divorce."

"I know." He gave a short nod. "Do you have time? Is there anybody else here?"

"Just my – "

Another door, just to his left, opened and Haley came out. She looked a little surprised at the sight of him, and more than a little dazed. Her eyes were damp as she looked over at me. "Leslie, I..."

Shit. She didn't even need to finish.

"Go." I managed a smile as I got up and went to her, pausing to collect her purse and keys from the drawer where she always kept them. "Call me when you can."

She nodded jerkily. "I'll call Agnes about covering for me. I might... well."

Agnes was my part-time assistant before I'd hired Haley full-time and she still came in to help out as needed, although she was moving closer and closer to retirement.

"Don't worry about it," I said immediately. "I'll take care of it. You do what you need to do."

"Thank you." After I turned over her purse and keys, I hugged her. She

clung to me tightly for a second and left, not saying another word. I didn't know what happened, but I knew Haley, and it wasn't anything good.

Once the door closed behind her, I focused on the man who'd lapsed into silence the moment he'd seen Haley. "Now there's nobody else here." It was a little unsettling that he'd asked, but he didn't really look like the psycho killer type.

Then again, they never did...

"Although I do need to make that call to my temp," I added.

"Okay. I...uh...well..." He swore and all but ripped his sunglasses off.

Then it was my turn to swear, although luckily for me, I managed to bite my tongue in time to keep the words from actually making it out into the open. Shit. I knew who he was now.

"Paxton Gorham."

His jaw went tight at his name. "Everything I say is confidential, right? Nobody is allowed to say anything about me being here, even your assistant?"

"Absolutely." My heart was racing at full throttle now. The sight of those blue eyes, so seductive and haunting, and the streaky blond hair that tumbled into his beautiful face – he had the kind of features that had probably launched a thousand wet dreams.

And he was here to *hire* me?

"I'll tell you what..." I moved toward him, taking a deep slow breath. "Let me lock the door. My assistant has a family emergency going on, and I'll wait until after you leave to call in my temp, so no one else will be around to hear us talk."

As I stood next to him, I caught a heady lungful of his scent and found myself thinking a hundred things, all at the same time.

He was here to get a divorce.

He'd be single.

He was so hot.

He was about to become my *client* – maybe.

This could be the kind of case that made my career.

Except...I really, really didn't want to represent him in court.

I wanted to ride him...or have him riding me.

Talk about a conundrum.

And it was worse than I thought.

He didn't just want a divorce. It sounded like he needed one, fast, and in the worst way because his wife, Brinke Maynard, mother of his child, was a complete disaster *and* a danger to their little girl.

"Is this the first time such a thing has happened?" I asked, making furious notes.

"Fuck, yes!" he snapped.

I met his blue eyes, saw the rage snapping there and understood it. At least as much as somebody who didn't have kids could. "Mr. Gorham, I'm not implying anything with these questions, but you need to prepare for the fact that if you go through with a divorce, and she fights it, these questions are just the tip of the iceberg. And I have to ask them so I know the answers and can plan for them."

The heat in those blue eyes didn't change, but he muttered something under his breath before heaving out a hard sigh. He dropped down and my heart banged hard against my ribs at the nearness of him. Why did he have to sit next to *me*? On the couch?

My heart raced and fluttered, and I gripped the pen tightly, staring at the notes I was taking. It didn't help, because from the corner of my eye, I could see the way his jeans stretched tight over long, lean legs. I wanted to feel those legs moving against mine. Wanted to feel that hard body against mine.

Why in the *hell* did he have to come to *me* for a divorce?

Of course, if he hadn't, well...I wouldn't be sitting here daydreaming about having that beautiful mouth pressed to mine, now would I?

"I'm sorry."

The short, succinct phrase caught me off guard, and I looked up to see him staring off at absolutely nothing. He looked...lost.

It wasn't the first time I'd seen that expression on a man's – or woman's – face here in my office. Sadly, people either came in here furious or hurt, or both. I couldn't think of anybody who ever came in looking for a divorce *smiling* over it. It didn't get to me. Usually. This was business for me, after all. While I'd gone into law for the money, there were times when I actually enjoyed my job. Especially when somebody was married to a real sleaze and I was able to help them get away.

When I was able to help somebody decent keep from getting screwed over, I liked that too. I had a feeling that would be the case with Paxton Gorham when it came time. His wife would push hard. I still didn't have all

the information, but I'd bet my new Jimmy Choos that he was the only reason she was even still singing. If he didn't keep her on as his backup singer, would anybody else ever give her a chance? She'd look at him as her meal ticket, even if it was unconsciously.

Drug addicts were notorious users. It might even be an unconscious behavior, but it was a deeply ingrained one, and until it was acknowledged and addressed, it would continue.

My job was going to be all about making sure she didn't have a chance to do any more harm than she already had.

Reaching out to touch his shoulder, I gave him a reassuring smile.

I'd done this dozens of times.

This time, my reassuring, comforting smile fell flat.

Tension sparked between us.

Slowly, he shifted his gaze my way, his eyes lingering first on my hand and then coming up to meet mine.

My breath hitched in my chest and I pulled back, my fingers curling into my palm, as if to hold in the memory of the heat that had arced between us. *Wow...*

I wondered if he'd felt it.

He stood up, moving away on jerky strides.

For some reason, it felt like a rejection – like a blow. Of course, he was a hot musician who had hundreds of groupies hanging all over him. Gorgeous eighteen year olds who'd drop to their knees in a second. Blood rushed to my face as I stared back down at the notes I'd made.

“What about my daughter? Should I be able to get full custody?”

He was staring outside. I didn't think it was my imagination that he was taking deliberate care to avoid looking at me. I hadn't meant for the touch to be anything but professional.

I cleared my throat and gave myself a moment to take a sip from the coffee on the table. “Well...” Drawing the word out, I deliberated on the answer. “The first thing we'd have to do is provide proof that it's in Carter's best interest not to be with her mother.”

“She was shoved into a closet so a couple of her mother's friends could screw on her bed while Brinke was passed out in the bathroom,” he said stiffly. “I'm pretty sure that Brinke's forgotten what Carter's best interests *are.*”

“I can see that,” I assured him. “But right now, it's your word against

hers.”

His shoulders rose up and down on a heavy breath, and I watched as he leaned forward, bracing his hands on the polished wooden window sill. I looked down at my notes again, double-checking what I had. He’d given me his contact information, but only after telling me repeatedly that he didn’t want me contacting him, not at home and not on his cell. I’d assured him I wouldn’t. The information he’d given me was for a place in Upper Manhattan. I didn’t know why he’d come looking for an attorney over in Queens, but maybe he’d wanted to avoid having Brinke see him or having anybody else run into him while he was here.

Moments passed as he continued to stare outside.

“How would you go about getting this...proof?” he asked softly.

“Same way it’s always gathered.” I shrugged, even though he wasn’t looking at me. “We hire private investigators. That cost is passed on to you, of course.”

“I’m not worried about how much this will cost.” He muttered again under his breath and swore quietly. “Son of a bitch.” Finally, he turned and looked at me. “Okay. I need to think about all of this. If I decide to go through with it, I’ll give you a call. Thanks for the time.”

“No problem.” Feeling strangely awkward, I rose from the couch and moved forward, offering my hand. “I’m sorry about everything you’re going through, Mr. Gorham.”

He stared at my hand for a long moment and then slowly reached out.

He didn’t shake, though. He just held my hand, his fingers warm and strong around mine.

After he released me, he left without saying a word.

Once he was gone, I turned around and pressed my back to the door, staring up at the ceiling.

It felt empty in there without him.

But I was damn glad he was gone.

He was...intense.

Too intense, especially considering I was supposed to be looking at him as a *client*.

Chapter Six

PAXTON

“*W*hy did she have to be a redhead?”

My driver acted as though he hadn't heard a word, continuing to handle the streets of New York City like a pro. I sat in the backseat, trying not to think about the very sexy Leslie Calvin. It was hard, though. I hadn't had that sort of interest in a woman in a while.

I sure as hell hadn't had that kind of interest in my wife.

The wedding ring on my hand felt heavier than normal and I looked down, thought about taking it off.

But I didn't.

Not yet.

It wasn't because I wasn't ready to. I was. I already knew it was over. A part of me had known this was coming since before we'd left California, even though I'd told Brinke we were coming to New York for a fresh start.

There was just another part of me that wanted to talk to my wife first, explain. Maybe that part of me was still hoping she'd want to fight this out, fight *for* us. But I'd been doing that for the past seven years, ever since we'd found out we were having a baby. If Brinke didn't care enough about us, about our daughter, about our family to change how she was living by now, then she never would. For Brinke Maynard, she was number one and that wouldn't change.

Still, I didn't take the ring off. Not even as it gained weight on my hand as I found myself thinking about that pretty lawyer's sinful mouth, wondering how she'd taste, how she'd moan.

“We're here, Mr. Gorham.”

I looked up to see a doorman coming toward the car. “Thanks, Billy. I’ll be back in a few.”

“Yes, sir. I sent a message to Mr. Marley’s staff. He knows we’re here.”

“Good. Thanks.” I climbed out, nodding at the man who’d gotten the door. Even after years of that sort of thing, I still wasn’t used to it, but I’d gotten tired of telling people it wasn’t necessary. Besides, I was too busy dealing, and trying to lay out a battle plan for the night, to worry about doors and shit.

I hadn’t seen Brinke since Saturday. Hadn’t talked to her since then either. I needed time to think, and she didn’t make that possible.

Both Carter and I had spent the past two nights at the Waldorf and today, while I talked to the attorney, Carter had spent the day with my best friend and his kids. Decker and his wife, LaToya, were the picture of everything I’d wanted for Brinke and me. They were so fucking happy together, it was almost sickening, but I loved the two of them so much, I couldn’t hate them for having what I didn’t. I might’ve been petty enough to be jealous, but I could never hate them. They were both just so damn good.

I hadn’t even cleared the door when a couple of high-pitched squeals reached my ear. “Uncle *Pax*!”

I braced myself for the twin dervishes and just in time. The four -year-olds always managed to catch me in tender places, and I’d finally learned to protect myself – and my balls – from their unintentional head-butts. Catching each of them in one arm, I swung them up and around before putting them down. “Did you wear Carter out?”

“Don’t take her away!” they shouted in unison.

“I have to. We gotta go home and see her mama.” I kissed Pierce, then Pike, on their equally sticky cheeks, and then grinned up at Decker. “You don’t deserve these two, you know. Let me have them. I’ll bring them back when they’re old enough to teach how to play guitar.”

“I already play,” Pike said. No, wait. It wasn’t Pike. It was Pierce.

“I don’t wanna play guitar. I’m gonna play drums! And sing, like you! And Carter’s gonna sing with me and be my girlfriend!” Pierce half-shouted.

“Yuck!” Pike made a face.

“She can’t be your girlfriend,” Decker announced. He had my daughter sitting on his shoulders and she was smiling so wide, it was a wonder her face didn’t split. “Carter already told me she loved me the best.”

“But you’re Mommy’s boyfriend.”

“Carter can’t have boyfriends yet. Not until she’s thirty,” I informed them. They didn’t have to know that I was only half-kidding.

I put the boys down and went over to Decker. Holding out my hands, I beckoned for Carter. She came to me and curled her thin arms around my neck. My heart clutched in the weirdest damn way. After six years, I’d have thought I’d be used to it, but then again, after six years, I’d also have thought I’d be used to the fact that I would never get used to the overwhelming love I felt for this child. No matter what hell Brinke put me through, I could never regret my relationship with her, all because of the girl in my arms.

“How’s my girl?”

“I’m good, Daddy. Are we going home today?”

“You bet.” I nuzzled her neck and she laughed as the scruff I hadn’t gotten around to shaving tickled her neck and cheek.

“You need to shave.” She wrinkled her nose up at me, looking so much like her mother that it made my heart hurt.

“You need a bath,” I replied. She had marker on her cheek and all over her hands. “What did you all do, attack a rainbow?”

“No. We colored.” She shrugged and settled her head against my shoulder. “I’m hungry. Can we get dinner?”

“You bet.” Over her head, I met Decker’s eyes. “See you in the morning.”

“You got it. Call me later.”

I just gave him a nod. He was the only one who knew where I’d gone that day, and I knew he wanted to know what happened. I wasn’t sure yet what I was going to tell him.

A lot of that depended on Brinke, though, and what happened when I got home.

As we rode the elevator up to the penthouse, Carter squeezed my hand and bounced on the balls of her feet. “Do you think Alex is back yet? When is she going to be back, Daddy?”

Squeezing her hand back in return, I shrugged. “She’s coming back tonight. You talked to her yesterday, remember?”

Alex Howell was Carter’s nanny. She had been taking care of Carter practically since we’d brought her home, including going on tour with us and everything else. She’d even been willing to move across the country when we left California. She loved Carter like she was her own.

I'd bought the apartment one floor below and spent a fucking fortune making an entrance between her room and Carter's. I wanted Alex to have access to Carter and vice versa. Sometimes Carter's nightmares were horrible, and Alex was the one who handled them the best if I wasn't around. But Alex didn't need to be around to listen to Brinke's vitriol, either.

Plus, I liked my privacy. So did Alex, when she wasn't working – which was a grand total of one whole day a week. She'd assured me that was all she needed and I was grateful for it. I didn't know how I'd have survived without her.

A month ago, her mother had a stroke and went into a coma. Alex was an only child, and her father had died a few years back, so we'd given her all the time she'd needed to take care of her mom. Two weeks ago, her mother passed away and we'd told Alex to take all the time she needed.

I didn't begrudge her the time, but man, I missed having her around. When Alex was there, I worried far less about Carter. Brinke had become more and more flighty since we'd moved to the East Coast, staying back at the penthouse more often than not, coming into the studio maybe one or two days a week. This past month, without Alex around, I worried so much about our daughter that I didn't get much work done. If Brinke came with us, I had Carter go to Decker's place after summer school, and that took care of a lot of problems.

Fucking mess that having her be with her mom was more of a problem than anything else.

The elevator door slid open and right away, I knew one thing – Alex wasn't back yet. Music was blasting so loud, I could hear it from where I stood. Half the time, I felt like I was paying Alex to take care of *two* people – my wife and my daughter. I knew if I went through with the divorce that Alex would go with Carter – and there was no way in hell I was going to let Brinke get custody.

I pasted a smile on my face and swung Carter up into my arms.

“Come on. Let's go see Mommy.”

Carter cuddled in closer and curled her arms around my neck.

The front door wasn't locked and for a few seconds, nobody noticed as I stood there, looking from one face to another. None of them looked familiar and I had to give the building security credit – it didn't look like they'd admitted anybody who'd been here on Saturday. Unfortunately, Brinke was great at making new friends.

Once this mess was dealt with, I'd tell security that nobody was allowed up unless I specifically cleared them. I could already picture the meltdown Brinke would have, but I was done with her shit.

Finally, somebody noticed us and the music abruptly went silent.

Putting Carter down, I patted her on the rump and said, "Why don't you take your bag on up and put your stuff away? Take your time, okay? I need to talk to Mom and her friends."

"Okay, Daddy." Carter shot a quick look at her mother, half hopeful, half in dread.

Brinke was too busy staring into her glass to notice.

Closing a hand into a fist, I watched Carter's thin shoulders slump at her mother's obvious lack of interest. It broke my heart that after all the shit Brinke had put Carter through, she still wanted her mom's love. She turned toward the stairs and trudged up them, pulling a pair of ear buds out of her pocket.

Smart move, baby doll, I thought. Smart move.

"Heya, Pax!"

The overly cheerful greeting came from the man who'd been sitting way too close to Brinke when I came in. He moved away as soon as he'd seen me, and now he practically sat on the opposite end of the couch.

When I looked at him, he got up, coming toward me with a hand outstretched. "How ya doin', man?"

I stared at his hand for a long moment. Was he fucking kidding me?

Slowly, he lowered it, a nervous laugh escaping him.

As he backed away, I looked from him to everybody else in the room. "All of you...get out," I said grimly. "Do it now and do yourself a favor. Don't try to come back."

"You can't do that," Brinke snapped. "This is my home too."

"My name is on the paperwork," I reminded her. "Remind yourself why that is."

Her face flushed, but she didn't say anything. As people began to trail out, she emptied the rest of her glass and rose from the couch to storm into the kitchen, grumbling under her breath.

Once she came back into the living room, I looked around. "Is everybody gone?"

"I don't see anybody else." She looked around obnoxiously. "Do you?"

"Your friends don't always respect boundaries, Brinke." Without giving

her a chance to ask what I meant, I said, “You didn't say hi to your daughter.”

Brinke’s eyes slid toward the stairs. Jerking her shoulders in a shrug, she said, “I'm going to. I'm getting ready to go right on up there and talk to her. Where in the hell have you two been all weekend anyway?”

“Funny that you should ask that. The question you really need to be asking is where did I find her Saturday night.” Renewed rage began to beat inside me and I folded my arms, reminded myself that losing it now wasn't going to do anybody any good. “Kind of funny you're waiting until now to ask where we had taken off to – and you haven't even asked *why*. Care to explain that?”

“Please.” She drained her drink – again.

This time, when she went into the kitchen, her steps more than a little unsteady, I followed.

“I already know why you took off,” Brinke said. “You came home and found out that I was having a party and you got all uptight about it. I swear, ever since we had her, you forgot what it's like to have any fun.”

Her hand shook as she splashed a liberal amount of vodka into her glass, then added some cranberry juice. There was more alcohol than juice, and I tried to recall if that bottle had been full the last time I'd seen it. Or was it a new bottle altogether?

I had no idea.

She turned back to face me, glaring at me with a mix of rage and misery and I found myself trying to find the woman I'd fallen in love with in the face of the one staring back at me.

I couldn't. It was like no sign of her existed.

If she ever had at all.

She lifted the glass to her lips and drained half of it. She might have emptied it if I hadn't crossed to her and caught her wrist, forcing the glass down.

“Fuck, Brinke. Cut back already,” I said, aggravated. “I don't want to have to take you to the hospital again.”

“Don't tell me what to do!” she shouted.

“I'm...shit, is it that hard for you to let somebody be worried about you?” I wrestled the glass away and dumped it. Then, before she could stop me, I upended the vodka bottle too.

Brinke came at me, slamming her fists into my chest. “What the fuck is wrong with you?” She hit me again and I caught both wrists. “If I want a

fucking drink, I can have one!”

“And if you want to get so strung out, you lose consciousness while our little girl is hiding in a closet and strangers are fucking on her bed, you going to do that again too?” I demanded, forcing myself to keep my voice low. Carter might be listening to music, but I refused to let her hear me shout at her mother.

Brinke opened her mouth, then stopped. She licked her lips and said, “What?”

I sighed in frustration. “You heard me. You were strung out, dead to the world Saturday night when I got here. Two of your friends were fucking on Carter’s bed. I found her in her closet. Apparently, they’d ‘asked’ her if they could use her room, and she was just fine with hiding in her closet while they made free with her bed, Brinke. You were too busy with yourself to even notice.”

She went pale as she jerked away, and I let her go.

As she sagged against the counter, I shoved a hand through my hair and looked away. She looked guilt-stricken now, and sad, but I wasn’t going to let myself feel sorry for her. I was too mad, too frustrated. And it wasn’t just about me. I had to think of Carter.

“We’ve got to figure out what we’re going to do, Brinke. You can’t keep acting like this. You’re a mother and you need to grow up, damn it.”

She sniffled and I tried to shut out the sound.

There was a sound from out in the living room – the door opening. “Hey...anybody here?”

“Alex,” I said quietly.

A delighted shriek from upstairs had Brinke flinching. I was even more glad now that I hadn’t yelled at her. Carter had apparently been listening for Alex.

Brinke tried to reach for me as I passed, but I kept on moving. Right before I left, I said, “We need to figure this out, Brinke. This can’t continue.”

Two hours later, with a whole shitload left unresolved, I stood with my hands braced on the tiles of the shower stall while water blasted me from all sides.

When the door opened and I felt a blast of cooler air, I wasn’t surprised.

Brinke slid her arms around me and I caught her wrists before she could do anything else.

“This isn’t going to solve a damn thing,” I said bluntly, staring at the water as it beaded on the surface of the wall.

“Who said we’re trying to solve anything?” she asked, her lips moving against my skin.

My cock stirred despite my heart's lack of interest.

“I just want to fuck, baby.” She rubbed her breasts against my back. “All the crazy shit, it will be there later, right?”

Her words sparked the anger that had been just starting to fade and I spun around. Catching her shoulders, I pushed her against the wall of the shower. Her body was familiar. Small breasts, slender frame. She'd always looked like I could break her, but I knew she was more likely to break me. At least now she wouldn't break my heart.

“It’s been there a long time. You never want to deal with it. It’s just getting worse and worse,” I said, glaring down at her. I told myself to be smart about this, to remember how much I didn't want her.

She arched up on her toes and nipped at my lower lip as her hand slid across my chest. My muscles tightened. It'd been too long since I'd had anything except my hand, and even then, it'd been a while.

One hand wrapped around the back of my neck to pull me in for a kiss even as her other wrapped around my too-interested cock.

I bit her, hating myself for responding to her touch. I shouldn't want her, not after what she'd done, but she knew all the ways to touch me, how hard to grip me.

She groaned, pressing her hips forward so that the tip of my cock pushed against her bare flesh. “That’s it...please, baby.”

Swearing, I picked her up and carried her out of the stall. Blood rushed through my veins, the sound filling my head until it drowned out everything else.

Wet hair framed her face and she pouted. “Hey...I like shower sex.”

Ignoring her, I put her down on the counter and grabbed a box of condoms from the cabinet. I didn't want to hear her talk. Didn't want to think. I just needed relief from the pressure building inside me.

“We don’t need those, baby,” Brinke said.

I shot her a dark look. Like hell we didn't. I may have wanted to fuck her, but I didn't trust her. That was lost long ago. “We need it or we don’t do this.”

Brinke sulked but didn't argue. Once I had the condom on, I moved back

to her, and she curled her legs around my hips as I drove into her. She cried out, and the sound echoed around us, broken and rough.

Just like what we had become, I thought.

Broken and rough.

Chapter Seven

LESLIE

*P*arking in New York City was a bitch. Which was why most people didn't own cars and just relied on public transportation.

There were times when I really, really wished I'd never decided to buy a car, especially when parking cost more than the damn car. And then there are days like today, when somebody stole my *reserved* space, and I hated people as well as cars.

If I'd been a nice person, I'd have just found another space, but I wasn't a nice person when it came to the reserved space I paid out the ass for. If someone wanted a space, they could damn well pay for it themselves.

After contacting the twenty-four-hour number for the garage, I had to wait for them to call me back, and in the end, I was given a number to write down and stick in my window since I had to find another empty spot anyway – *you won't be charged, Ms. Calvin, you have my word. Yes, the car using your spot will be towed.* Damn right I wouldn't be charged and that car would get towed. I was a divorce lawyer, but I could still file a civil lawsuit if they pissed me off enough.

It took thirty minutes longer than it should have to get inside my apartment, and I was bitchy and tired.

More, I was also hot and bothered – the kind of hot and bothered that came from thinking about a certain man most of the day. My nipples were tight and swollen, rubbing against my bra, and I kept thinking that I should find a way to get in touch with him and tell him he needed to find a different attorney.

I wouldn't, though.

I knew I wouldn't.

I'd always loved playing with fire, and even though I'd never make a move in his direction, the thought of not spending at least a little bit of time around him was enough to drive me mad.

"You need to get laid," I told myself as I stood at the stove, making up a quick dinner of stir-fry. A glass of wine, sweet and cold, helped my parched throat, but it did absolutely nothing to relieve the mounting frustration.

And I'd just gotten laid Saturday night.

It didn't even matter either.

I'd had fun with... what's his name, but it had been like eating a handful of potato chips. A snack, nothing more, nothing less.

I needed something more.

My mind drifted. To the club – to Gavin and Carrie, Dena and her new guy Arik, DeVon and Krissy.

Then, inexplicably, I found myself thinking of Paxton again.

"More," I muttered, irritated with myself.

I was starting to think I didn't know *what* I needed.

Standing under the shower, trying unsuccessfully to drown out images of Paxton, trying not to wonder if he made love the way he sang, I brooded about what I was going to do if he ended up hiring me.

I was already way too attracted to him to be as objective as I needed to be, and I was too honest with myself not to realize that.

Maybe he wouldn't call.

Maybe it would all work out and he could talk his wife into rehab.

They could all live happily ever after, and I could dream happily ever after until my mind got tired of the fantasies and I found somebody to take my mind off of things. Or maybe I could even find some guy to get serious with.

My mind did a sharp one-eighty when that thought finally registered.

Get serious?

I'd always planned to enjoy the single life for as long as I could, and I'd never seen any reason why I couldn't enjoy it *forever*. I was beautiful and confident, and I'd be that way in ten years, twenty years. That had been my thought even just a year ago. Hell, six months ago.

Now, loneliness was an ache inside me.

Closing my eyes, I tried to banish the image of Paxton as he'd stood in my office, looking so lost. So many people had come in there looking like that. While I felt sympathy for almost all of them, I'd never felt the desire to comfort anybody until today.

Comfort...a sly inner bitch laughed at me. You want to do more than comfort.

I found myself thinking of his mouth, the beautiful masculinity of his face.

My nipples tightened and I shivered as water slid down the slope of my breasts. More rivulets ran down my belly and through the curls between my thighs. The shower had become a taunting exercise in erotic torture.

Groaning, I pressed my back against the shower wall and slid a hand down my abdomen, my fingers slipping through the folds between my thighs until my clitoris throbbed under my finger. Already hard and pulsing, I hissed at the quick, light contact. Biting my lip, I let myself pretend. It wasn't me caressing myself. It was Paxton. It wasn't the brush of fingers circling around the swollen knot, but his tongue.

My whimpers echoed off the walls as I bit my lip to keep from disturbing my neighbors. Damn the thin apartment walls.

I imagined what it would be like to look down and see his head between my legs, that unruly ash blond hair brushing my thighs. Have his gorgeous eyes meet mine. A strange shade of blue, like those flowers that weren't quite blue but not quite purple either. I wondered what they would look like, staring into mine as he pleased me with his mouth and fingers.

The climax came hard and fast, easing some of the tension inside me, but it wasn't fulfilling, the knot in my stomach coming back as soon as the pleasure faded.

Sighing, I opened my eyes and stared through the steam and spray of water.

I was in so much trouble if he did call back.

His lips slid down the curve of my neck. When he bit me there, I shivered. I couldn't help it. I loved it when a man did that. There was something almost primal about it that just turned me on.

"The first time I saw you," he whispered in my ear, his voice low and rough. "I knew that I was going to touch you like this."

Dazed, I tilted my head back and gazed at him.

“You look surprised.” Paxton bit my lower lip. “I don’t know why. You felt it too. I saw it in your eyes. Those big green eyes...staring at me. You wanted me the second you saw me.”

I blinked at him.

Had I stared at him?

“You did.” Paxton answered the question I’d only asked in my mind as he stroked a hand down my neck, along my collarbone before cupping my breast. “Your nipples were tight and you kept pressing your knees together, like you were already feeling me inside you. Did you imagine it?”

Sucking in a breath, I nodded.

He tugged up the short, silky night shirt I wore and I braced my hands against the wall. It was a shock when my hands touched rough, exposed brick. I didn’t have brick in my house. In my office, yes.

Confused, I looked around and saw that we were in my office.

And I was in my nightshirt. This didn't make sense.

Paxton pushed his thigh between mine, his erection hard and heavy against me. At the same time, he twisted his fingers in my hair. “Stop thinking and kiss me.”

I did, more than happy to go along with that idea. Shoving logic aside, I opened my mouth for him and bit his tongue when he slid it between my lips. He growled, boosting me up against the wall.

The rough brick scraped my skin as he drove inside me, hard and deep and fast. He stretched me and it hurt even as it delighted.

“Harder,” I demanded, clutching at his shoulders. “Harder.”

“Leslie...” He savaged my mouth, his fingers digging into my ass. The kiss so deep, so hungry, it was like he wanted to devour me. And I was going to let him.

I moaned his name when he pulled his mouth away from mine. I could feel the pulsing of his cock as he thrust up into me, the climax rushing at me with breathless, ruthless intensity.

“You’re going to come for me,” he said, voice rough and raw. “Come for me, Leslie. Come...” He eased back until just a couple inches were inside. Before I could protest, he caught my hand, guiding it between my thighs. “Touch yourself and let me watch you make yourself come, Leslie.”

“I don’t want to. I want you to make me come.” But then he pressed his fingers on mine at the place where we were joined. Groaning, I circled my

clit with my fingers and watched him, all but mesmerized by the intense blue of his eyes.

“That’s it,” Paxton rasped. “That’s it.”

I cried out his name.

That was the sound I woke up to. His name on my lips as I climaxed, one hand between my thighs. Seconds later, the intensity of the orgasm fading away, I rolled onto my back and stared up at the ceiling.

“Great.” Another aftershock rippled through me and a harsh breath shuddered past my lips. “I’m having wet dreams about a guy I just met. Paxton Gorham. World famous rock star. And a guy I just might be representing in court.”

Flinging an arm over my eyes, I blew out a breath. “You sure do know how to complicate your life, Leslie Calvin.”

Chapter Eight

LESLIE

“*M*s. Calvin?”

I looked up to see Haley standing in the doorway.

Her face was set in a professional line, although her eyes had a slightly dazed and glassy look to them. It'd been a rough day for her yesterday, but she'd insisted on coming in. Her mother was okay, but it wasn't looking good. She wanted to stay busy though.

“Yes?”

She glanced back over her shoulder and then edged inside. “Do you have a few moments available? You have...the guy from yesterday, he's back.” Her eyes widened, trying to communicate something she couldn't put into words.

But I didn't need her to. I figured it out the moment she said *last week*.

A shiver raced through me and I pressed my hands to the surface of the table, staring at the résumés for a moment, as though focused on finishing that task. “Ask him if he can wait a few minutes, please,” I said softly. “I believe I have an hour before my next appointment, yes?”

“An hour and a half.” She turned away and I heard them speaking, the low sound of Paxton's voice making me remember the dream from the night before.

Shit. That was the last thing I needed to be thinking about.

Haley turned back to me and nodded. “He's more than happy to wait until you're available.”

She closed the door and I dropped my head down on the desk. If it wouldn't have made a noise – and an ugly red mark on my forehead – I might have hit it a few times in an effort to knock some sense into me.

Go out there, the voice of reason said. Give him the name of your old firm and recommend a couple of people.

That was what I should do.

The lawyers at the firm I'd left were excellent. One or two had even branched out on their own and could offer more privacy than a large firm could.

But I knew I wouldn't send him away.

After another moment, I selected the two résumés from the pile and took them with me to the door so my hands would have something to do. Taking a deep breath, I opened it and stepped out with a brisk smile on my face. "Hello, Mr. Gorham."

He turned and met my eyes, offering a short nod in greeting. His eyes didn't linger on my mouth, and he didn't stare at me hungrily the way he had in my dreams.

I didn't let *myself* stare at *him*. But I wanted to.

Looking at Haley, I handed her the résumés. "See if they're available sometime this week for an in-person interview."

"Of course. Shall I bring in coffee?"

I looked at Paxton.

"No, thanks."

I desperately needed the caffeine fix, but I shook my head at Haley. It might be better if I didn't have anything to add to my nervousness.

As he passed by, I caught a headful of his scent and my mouth started to water. I closed the door and allowed myself a quick look at his ass before clenching my fingers and forcing myself to focus.

"Have a seat, please."

Calm and collected. Good for me.

He went to the chair near the window, so I settled on the couch and waited for him to start.

It took almost a minute for him to say anything and I had to force myself to hold my silence. It was harder than normal and the nerves were insane. I couldn't ever remember feeling like this around a client and again, I told myself I needed to suggest he find another attorney.

I could just picture him asking why and me being brutally honest.

Because you're too fucking hot and I keep picturing the two of us naked together.

"Okay, let's do it."

He spoke abruptly and the words, delivered right in the middle of my mental scenario, had heat rushing to my face. I covered by reaching for the ever-present notepad I kept on the table in front of the couch. “Just what are we doing, Mr. Gorham?”

“Paxton.”

It took all the professionalism I had not to react in a way that made it clear the thing I *wanted* to do was *him*. I smiled. It wasn’t the professional smile it needed to be, but it didn’t scream *let’s get naked* either.

“I’m sorry?”

“Don’t call me Mr. Gorham. It’s just Paxton.” He shrugged, looking restless as he leaned back in the seat. It drew the material of his jeans tight across his thighs – and other parts of him. For a quick moment, my gaze fell away and once more, heat began to rush through me.

Fortunately, he began to speak and it brought my mind out of the gutter. “I need to start filing proceedings for the divorce, figuring out what we need to do so I get custody of Carter.”

“Alright.” I made a couple of notes.

“I don’t want to keep Brinke away from her altogether.”

Glancing at him from under my lashes, I saw that he was staring past my shoulder, one fist pounding absently on the arm of the chair. “She loves our daughter, she’s just...not exactly a good influence, and I can’t risk her endangering Carter again.”

“Supervised visitations might be the best for a while, until she’s gone through rehab and shown she no longer presents a danger.”

Paxton opened his mouth, then closed it. A moment later he blew out a sigh. “Yeah, fine. Okay.” He rubbed his hands over his face and when he lowered them, he slid his eyes my way. “We have to keep this quiet. If Brinke finds out too soon, she’ll...” He tilted his head back against the chair. “She won’t take it well, okay?”

“Is she likely to do something that could pose a danger to Carter or herself? You?” It was a standard question, one I never liked having to voice, but that didn’t explain the unusual cold feeling I got in my belly at the thought of something happening to this man or his daughter.

“She won’t take it well.” Paxton got up to pace and ended up by the window, staring outside. “She’d never set out to do something that would hurt herself, our daughter, or even me, I don’t think. But she’s reckless and doesn’t think things through. When she gets mad, she gets a little stupid.”

“Very well.” I tightened my grip on the pen, staring hard at the paper until my brain settled. Then, after scratching out a few more notes, I looked up at him. “Keeping it quiet isn’t an issue. It’s fairly standard.”

I placed the notepad on the coffee table and stood. Sitting still wasn't doing my nerves any favors. Moving over to my desk, I took a sip from my water bottle and then glanced over at him.

Heat suffused my face when I realized he’d been staring at me – specifically, he’d been staring at my ass.

My heart started to pound hard and fast and I found myself oddly frozen, uncertain how to react. Slowly, his gaze slid up to meet my face. Before our eyes connected, I turned back to my desk and put the water down. My hand was shaking and some of it splashed out, but I ignored it.

“Let me explain what we’re going to do and how things work, as well as my fee.” Forcing a note of professional distance into my voice, I strode back to the couch and sat down, once more taking up the notepad as though it was some sort of barrier.

Generally, talking about money annoyed people, even though they knew they'd have to pay for my services, but Paxton didn't so much as blink an eye. My fees weren't on the outrageous end anyway, and there was no doubt he could afford it.

“Since custody is coming into play, specifically regarding the welfare of your daughter, we'll need a private investigator as well. The best ones come with a higher dollar tag.”

“Get the best, and make sure they know to keep things quiet, even if they want a bonus for extra discretion.” He’d gone back to staring outside. “I don’t want to run the risk of her realizing what’s going on. The cost doesn’t matter.”

“Very well.” I hated to do it, but I needed to make sure it was clear. “You do understand you’re responsible for those costs, not the firm.”

His lips quirked as he shot a look at me. “I assumed as much. Money isn’t an issue, Leslie.”

The sound of my name on his lips sent me straight back into my dream, and I found myself hearing his words, *let me watch you make yourself come, Leslie...*

“Understood. I just like to get that matter out of the way up front. While I imagine your...financial situation is different from most of my clients, I’ve had a number of people who are...unhappy with the bill in the end, regardless

of their financial situation.” I said all of this to my notepad instead of looking at him, because my body was undergoing a sensory overload, thanks to the memory of that very intense, very wicked dream. I needed a new pair of panties now – and a new brain. I couldn’t believe I was taking him on as a client. There were a million different ways I’d love to take him, and at least one way I shouldn’t. But I was going to be stupid.

Because I wasn't sure I trusted anyone else with it. Maybe if my friends were still practicing divorce law, but I wasn't even sure I would've passed him off then.

“What else do you need to get out of the way?”

Stop being a coward. Putting the notebook down, I looked up and met Paxton’s eyes. “Well, not to be a nag or anything...” I managed an easy enough smile. “But again...it’s finances. I’ll need to take a look at your current finances, and I need your okay to do that.”

His eyebrows drew down low over his eyes, but after a moment, he nodded. “You’ve got my okay to do whatever you need to do, as long as you’re discreet about it.”

“Discretion is part of the job, Mr. Gorham.”

“Paxton.” He said it with an air of authority as though he expected nothing but compliance. He didn't seem to be one of those rich people who thought they were entitled to the world, but there was no doubt in my mind that he didn't have a problem getting what he wanted most of the time.

Arching a brow at him, I inclined my head. Calling him by his first name wasn’t going to help me keep some much-needed distance between us, especially not when I was still reliving my dream, and the way my name sounded on his lips. But I wasn't going to get into an argument over it, either. I'd just try to avoid it altogether.

“There’s some paperwork I need you to sign. If you can give me a moment...”

I stepped out, using the time to compose myself, and when I came back in, he was standing in front of the window again, staring outside. He seemed oddly mesmerized by the rush of the city.

When I closed the door, he turned back, watching me. I sat back down and flipped open the file, tapping at the pages with a pen. “I just need your signature on the pages indicated. A few places, you just need to initial. I also have the information for the retainer. I don’t think we discussed it.”

He came back over and my heart skipped a few beats when he sat down

next to me instead of in the chair. His nearness could explain my sudden issue with drawing air into my lungs, probably even why my fingers seemed to have trouble holding the pen.

“How can you take payment? I don’t carry a checkbook.”

Turning my head, I found him just a few inches away.

Kisses. Your hands on me. You can work it off...

The words sprang to mind.

Out loud, I said calmly, “My assistant can run credit and debit cards. Or you can mail a check. I can’t begin work until...”

He shifted on the couch, and for one brief moment, he was even closer.

Then he held out a shiny, silver card. “Here. Put it on this. I’ll be leaving my studio number and cell number here too. If you need to call, use one of those numbers, and just leave your first name and the number. No message. I’ll get back to you. If you can, leave a cell number or something so if Brinke hears the message and calls back, she doesn’t get your assistant answering and find out that I’ve contacted a lawyer.”

“Yes. Of course.”

I grabbed his card and strode out of the room as quickly as I could.

If I stayed that close to him for even another thirty seconds, I probably would have done something stupid. Like reach up and scrape my nails down the scruffy stubble that darkened his jaw just the faintest.

Or kiss him.

Chapter Nine

LESLIE

“*I* can tell you this...” The slender, scholarly man sitting across from my desk placed a file down on the surface and shook his head.

Stanley Kowalski didn't look like much, but he was the best private investigator I'd ever worked with. He wasn't always in the price range my clientele could afford, but, fortunately, Paxton didn't seem to *have* a price range, so I'd gone for the best.

“While I'm not yet done collecting information, the past two days have already netted enough material, that if this woman was raising *my* child, I'd do everything in my power to keep her away.”

“Has she harmed the girl?” I asked, flipping the file open. My insides twisted at the thought. I'd worked some pretty nasty divorces, including some where the parents squabbled over kids, but I'd never had to work one where neglect or abuse had been involved.

“No. Not directly.” Kowalski grimaced and leaned forward, using a pen to tap somebody on the first picture. “However, she puts her in harm's way. This here...she went out with her daughter and the girl's nanny. While they were eating lunch, she got up to buy drugs from a known dealer. The dealer was fifteen feet away from her daughter.”

“A decent lawyer can argue that nothing happened.”

“Can't argue with the evidence I got.” Kowalski's serene smile had my eyebrows going up.

Intrigued, I flipped to the next picture and whistled sharply at the perfectly framed image of a bag being passed, then an envelope.

“How in the hell did you get a picture like this?” I asked, still gaping at it.

“I followed them into the bathroom. They never looked at me twice.”

Now my stunned surprise shifted to him. “If a man follows a woman into a bathroom, that usually catches attention, Mr. Kowalski.”

“I was dressed as a woman.” He sipped at his coffee. “A blind woman. I had a friend – a trusted one, confidentiality is guaranteed – acting as my escort. As I had a cane and shuffled around a bit, they were quite convinced I couldn’t see anything. They didn’t even wait until I went into a stall to finish. The camera on the outside of my bag caught every detail.”

“You’re a genius,” I said sincerely.

He gave a modest shrug and fixed his glasses. “I’m simply experienced, Ms. Calvin. Moving on...” He leaned forward and tapped the next picture. “At some point, she put the pills in her purse. I know this because when they left, I followed them. It was a simple matter of me shedding my skirt and losing the wig and cane. They were outside a toy store in Times Square when we saw this. It was very...troubling.”

He spread several images out and I had to look at them a few times before I pieced it together. “You were shooting video?” I asked quietly.

“Yes. I took the stills from the video. There’s a small unit of officers there at Times Square.”

“I know.” I studied the cute little kid Brinke had swept up to hug, wondered if she’d even noticed what her mom had done. If I hadn’t seen the proof of it, I probably wouldn’t have even believed it myself.

When the woman picked her child up, she’d been holding a small, silvery pouch in one hand. She’d transferred the pills into it, I’d bet anything on it. And when the nanny wasn’t looking, she’d tucked that pouch into her daughter’s backpack. There was a quick sidelong glance toward a cop standing a few feet away, his back to them. Then she took her daughter’s hand and led her right into the massive Toys R Us down on Times Square.

“She was using her daughter to carry the drugs.” I swallowed, feeling a little sick.

“Most cops won’t bother a child. She was definitely acting nervous. I could see it the moment she realized how many cops were there. She probably hasn’t gone down there much since she moved into the area. Maybe she’d even had a run-in with one of the cops before and was worried they’d recognize her.” Kowalski straightened the stills back into a tidy pile. “These images, while definitely damning, won’t be particularly useful on their own, but in just a few days, she’s already showed a...” He paused, pursing his lips

thoughtfully. “She has a recklessness to her, perhaps an inability to think about how her actions affect those around her.”

“I’d say so.” I accepted the stack of images from Kowalski and tucked them neatly inside the folder. “Are these mine?”

“Of course. There are also duplicates of the photos and my initial report, in case the husband wants to be kept apprised.”

Personally, I didn't want to have to tell Paxton any of this. It knew it would kill him to know that the mother of his child was doing this, but I also knew that he needed to know how bad things had gotten. “Thank you, Mr. Kowalski. I appreciate the time you've put into this.”

We both rose, shaking hands over the table. “I expect I’ll have more than enough evidence within another few days, a week at most.”

“Thanks.”

Once I was alone, I went through the rest of the photos and the report. Then I did it a second time, letting my mind take in all the information.

In a few more days, I’d put in a call to Paxton.

I couldn’t decide if I was excited about the chance to talk to him, or dreading it, because while these things would be good for our case, none of them were really good news.

It took a total of four more days, including the weekend.

The final report was left with Haley while I was in court, arguing for more child support from one of the biggest deadbeat dads I’d ever dealt with. Fortunately for my client, Kowalski wasn’t the only good private investigator I knew. Jeannie Graham was also one of the best – and cheapest – and she had a personal loathing for deadbeat dads, so she’d gone to the wall on this job, digging up all kinds of dirt.

Thanks to her, I’d left court feeling like a champion.

My client had been teary-eyed and sniffling, hugging me multiple times while her ex sent me threatening looks. I ignored him, but in a day or so, I would gently remind my client to be careful. Men like that didn't lose easily or well.

But for now, I'd take the win.

Paging through the final few photographs, I blew out a breath and leaned back in my chair. I had what I needed. Once, not too long ago, Brinke had gone out with Carter, and while they were at a restaurant, she’d gotten up and

left the little girl at the table by herself while she slipped outside into an alley. Kowalski had gotten time-stamped images of both the girl and the mother. Carter had been left alone for more than twenty minutes, long enough that the manager had eventually approached. Kowalski had been seated at a corner table, and had asked about the 'pretty girl sitting up front alone.' The manager assured him he was keeping an eye on her and would call the cops soon if her mother didn't return.

He'd made sure to take note of the manager's name, and I'd just called and gotten a statement from him myself. While he was reluctant to confirm the name of the patron – he had recognized who Brinke was – he was willing to admit that yes, a young minor had been alone in his place for an unusual length of time, especially considering her age.

Kowalski had noted that the child colored throughout the entire episode, making him think that she wasn't unused to that sort of thing. And I had the proof to support it. There were other times where the child's mother had failed to supervise, but most often, the nanny had been around to step in and take care of everything.

We had enough, though. Between the earlier report, the incident, the restaurant, and how much Kowalski had on Brinke *away* from the child, no judge in his or her right mind would see the woman as a fit guardian for the little girl. The very most Brinke could hope for was eventually getting joint custody after a long time of supervised visits.

I started to read through the report a third time when I abruptly snapped the manila folder shut and slapped it with my hand. "Quit stalling already," I muttered, annoyed with myself. "Just call him."

Before I could find another way to delay, I punched in a number I'd memorized within minutes of him giving it to me. The studio first. I figured I wouldn't reach him there right away, and I'd have time to prepare myself.

Nobody answered. I just left a simple message, as requested.

This message is for Paxton. This is Leslie calling. If you can get back to me, I'd appreciate it. I gave him my cell number and disconnected, slumping back in the seat and staring up at the ceiling.

A light knock sounded at the door.

"Come in!"

Haley came in, carrying two cups of coffee. "I hear you kicked butt in court."

"Grapevine news still travels fast." I smiled at her and straightened,

accepting the coffee gratefully.

“Think the bum will pay up this time?”

“If not, he’ll be in contempt, and he just might be looking at jail time. Since he got arrested for DUI, and that sentence was commuted to parole with community service, I don’t think he’ll want to risk it. If he’s found in contempt...”

Haley made a twisting motion with her wrist, then mimed throwing away a key.

“Yep. But damn, you should have seen the looks he was giving us.”

Haley’s response was cut off by the sound of my phone. I looked down and immediately, my throat constricted. It was one of the two numbers I’d memorized. Paxton’s cell phone.

“Ah...I need to take this. If you’ll excuse me?”

Haley didn’t bat an eyelash.

As I answered the phone, she was closing the door behind her.

“Hello.”

“Leslie, this is Paxton Gorham.”

“Hello, Mr. Gorham.”

“You know, you called me Paxton when you left the message,” he said, sounding amused.

My face went red. Shit. He was right. I’d also called him Paxton in several extremely hot and dirty dreams that I had absolutely no intention of talking about. That didn’t mean I was going to call him Paxton to his face. “Yes, well, that aside, I believe it’s time we set up another meeting. I’ve gotten a report back from the private investigator I hired.”

A taut silence followed and then he spoke softly, all humor gone. “Already? It’s barely been a week.”

“I’m aware.”

A few more moments of quiet tension pulsed between us and then he blew out a breath. “Yeah, okay. Look, things are at a crucial point here at the studio. I’m working ten, twelve, fourteen-hour days right now. Brinke...hell, she oughta be, but she’s blowing us off so she might not even show up in this album at all. I can’t risk her waltzing in and me not being here, though – hey, I know lawyers don’t really work on holidays, but is there any way we could meet on the Fourth?”

“The Fourth?” Blankly, I stared at my desk calendar. It hit me a second later. “The Fourth of July?” Today was the first, so that’d be this Friday.

“Yeah. Brinke’s promised she’d take Carter to go see a Broadway play earlier in the day, then hit some sort of street festival before heading down to where a friend of mine lives on the river. I’m meeting them in the evening for fireworks, but she’ll be busy all day, so I know she won’t show up here. I’ve got to get some work done – can you just meet me here?”

My head was still spinning with all the information he’d just thrown at me and I rubbed my temple, processing it.

“Or you might already have plans.”

“No,” I said absently. In the past, my friends and I usually spent the day together, but this year, they were all busy with their significant others. I’d toyed with the idea of going to a club, but I hadn’t made any decisions. “I don’t have plans. I’m just...thinking.”

“I know we need to get this done, but I’m needed at the studio too much right now.”

Grimacing at the phone, I looked down at the neatly written out schedule on my calendar that Haley always kept up to date. It wasn’t like my days were exactly *open*. If he was going to push for me to come to him, then actually, the Fourth of July was probably the best bet anyway.

“If you can’t make it to my office between then and now, I believe that’s probably the best solution,” I said after a moment. Grabbing a pen, I asked for the address.

He gave it, and then ended the call with a terse, “See you then.”

I was torn between irritation and the anticipation I knew I shouldn’t feel. The last thing I needed to feel was excitement over seeing him again, but there it was.

Chapter Ten

LESLIE

*A*bsolutely nobody but me and my mirror would ever know that I'd spent nearly an hour picking an outfit that wasn't too casual or too dressy. Since it *was* the Fourth, and I didn't plan on going to the office, I'd gone for a 'casual Friday' sort of feel, a pair of white capris and a dressy red camisole with a white waist-length jacket for when I was inside.

It was cute, comfortable and casual – and the capris showcased both my legs and my ass.

Not that I wanted Paxton to notice my ass.

He'd already noticed it.

Ignoring that voice, I turned my keys over to the valet, muttering a quick *hallelujah* that there *was* valet service available today. Trying to find a place to park on the Fourth was nightmarish.

Paxton had given me a code and told me to ask the valet for the studio entrance. There was an elevator that would take me straight up to the floor where the studio was, and I wouldn't have any trouble getting inside. I punched it in, and the door opened without a hitch.

Parking had been a breeze. Getting inside had been a breeze. I could only wish that someone had told my body. My nerves were going haywire, jumping and jittering around inside my belly. I hadn't felt this on edge about a meeting with a client since my very first one, and *that* case of butterflies had been for an entirely different reason.

The elevator had a second, separate code, and I punched it in, then stepped inside and closed my eyes.

I'm meeting a client. That's it. Just a client. I wasn't going on a date. So

far, he was oblivious to me as anything other than a lawyer. Well, other than the time I'd caught him checking out my ass. But that just meant he had a pulse.

I'd almost talked myself down when the elevator doors slid silently open, and I stepped out to find Paxton in the wide-open hallway. He was alone, or at least it looked like it.

He looked like he was waiting for me too.

"I'm not late, am I?"

Before a new set of nerves could settle in, Paxton shook his head. "No. Security is set up to alert me when somebody gets in the elevator. I heard you coming."

His eyes swept over me, seeming to linger in certain places, before moving to rest on the bulging file that I had tucked up against my side. I thought he was going to ask something, but instead, he abruptly turned on his heel, jerking his head to indicate that I should follow.

"I need coffee. You drink coffee?"

"Who doesn't?"

His response was a short laugh, and the sound of it warmed something inside me. I tried not to look at his ass as he turned the corner. When I caught up with him, I found myself in a bright, open kitchen area. I stared, feeling more than a little off balance. I'd had more than a few well-off clients, but Paxton Gorham wasn't well off.

He was *loaded*.

Half my apartment could fit in the spot alone. "Do you...own this studio?"

He shot me a look over his shoulder. "Partially. The guys who play with me, and a few other groups, we all went in together and bought it. We prefer to be in charge of our own music." He stopped at the counter and reached for a pot of coffee. It was half-full, and he lifted it to his nose, sniffed it, before lowering it with a shudder. "I'm making fresh. This stuff could power a diesel engine by now."

As he dumped it out, I said gamely, "You should probably just give it to me. I need the charge."

"Nobody should do that to their stomach."

I sat down at a table, watching as he went about making coffee with the competence of a pro. He didn't look uncomfortable with the task. It was surprising, I had to admit, but then I wanted to kick myself. Just because he

was a mega-rich rock star didn't mean he couldn't take care of basic tasks by himself. Besides, he hadn't been born with a silver spoon in his mouth. I'd done my research on him as well as Brinke.

It paid to do that when you were a lawyer. Cut down on the surprises. He'd grown up rough, both parents getting in trouble for possession and assault – on each other more often than not – plus resisting arrest and the typical petty criminal's laundry list of crimes. Paxton had a few issues of his own, some of them the same as his parents, including assault and drug charges, but he'd straightened his act up seven years ago. Right about the time he would have found out he was going to be a dad, if my calculations were correct. He'd gone in for rehab and when he'd come out, he hadn't gotten in any trouble, period. He was like an after-school special on turning your life around.

No, I shouldn't be surprised that he could fend for himself with typical things, like making a pot of coffee. He probably lived on the stuff, especially since he didn't do drugs anymore.

It didn't escape my notice that while he was comfortable with the task, he wasn't relaxed. There was a fine tension to his body, something that kept his shoulders rigid, and while he kept his face averted, I could see how it kept clenching and clenching his jaw.

“If you're not ready to do this, or if you're having second thoughts, we can reschedule this.”

Paxton shook his head. He shifted, reaching into a cabinet. With almost deliberate care, he took out a pair of mugs and set them on the counter. Once that was done, he braced his hands on the surface next to them, lowering his head. His wide shoulders strained the faded material of his t-shirt as he took one, then another, deep breath.

“I'm not going to change my mind, Leslie. I should've done this a long time ago. But that doesn't mean any of this is easy. Brinke and I have been together a long time.”

I couldn't say that I understood. I'd never had a relationship longer than a couple of months. Ever.

“Okay.” Looking away from him, I reached into my bag and pulled out the information Kowalski put together for me.

The woman must've been crazy, I couldn't help but think, to throw away a life with that man and a beautiful little girl. A part of me wondered how long he'd been trying to make it work, but it wasn't my place to ask. My job was to

facilitate a divorce and make it as smooth as I could for him.

And make sure his crazy ex didn't get custody of their daughter.

The scent of coffee filled the air after another moment, and I kept myself busy organizing, and then reorganizing everything I brought with me. By the time I finished, Paxton came over and placed a mug of coffee in front of me.

“You drink it black or do you take anything with it?”

“Black. I used to drink it loaded, but law school pretty much help me kick that habit. Cramming and a tight budget doesn't always...” I stopped and shrugged, forced a laugh. “Well, college students and budgets. Familiar story.”

What was wrong with me? When had I developed the habit of running off at the mouth like that? I liked to talk, but it was never babbling. Chatting with a client to make them feel more comfortable was one thing, but telling one of them bits and pieces of my life was a different matter altogether. I needed to pull myself together.

“Why don't you sit down so we can get started?”

“I don't do well sitting still. If you don't mind, I'll move around.” And he proceeded to do that, moving over to the window that faced out over the city.

In his defense, it was one hell of a view, but it wasn't going to shield him from the nastiness he was about to see. It would be easier if he'd sit and read the report, look at the pictures, so I didn't have to say any of it.

“Of course.” I took a sip of coffee, finding to my delight that it was extremely good. After putting it down, I reached for the report from Kowalski. “I have a pretty thorough report from the private investigator I hired. It might be easier if you just read it.”

Paxton lowered his head, and I had a feeling he didn't want to know what was in the report. I didn't blame him.

“Can you just cut to the chase and make it short?” He sounded so tired.

So much for hoping for the easy way. “Yes.” I needed to make it fast, like ripping off the Band-Aid. “The investigator's findings support my original opinion that it'd be best to immediately pursue full custody and request that the court limit her mother's rights to supervised visits, *only* after she's gone through a court-mandated, supervised drug rehabilitation program. After she's proven herself responsible, you can revisit the custody agreement.”

As he turned to stare at me, his eyes hard, I looked down. In this job, I often had to speak hard truths, but this was harder than usual.

“Mr. Gorham, I'm sorry, and I'm sure you're aware of this, but your wife

has a serious problem and she's placing your daughter in jeopardy.”

“Look,” he said, his voice rough. “Brinke loves our daughter. Yeah, I know she's got a fucking problem. Why else do you think I'm divorcing her? I already said I should've done it a long time ago. But she wouldn't do anything intentionally to hurt Carter.”

“In all likelihood, you're right.” I needed to be careful here. “The problem is, your wife's problem has made her reckless, very reckless. I'm not sure she even understands how careless, how thoughtless she has become.”

As his eyes continued to flash, I took a deep breath and reached for the pictures from the day at the toy store. “Perhaps you should look at this. Would you please sit down? Even just for a few moments? You need to understand what I'm talking about.”

Ten minutes later, the silence was starting to get to me. I'd explained everything that Kowalski had detailed in his report, everything he had explained to me. Paxton had gone through the pictures now three separate times. Now he held one. His fingers had brushed over the little girl's face before he'd plucked the picture up and now he was staring at it, a muscle pulsing in his jaw.

I knew exactly which image it was – the one where Brinke had picked up their daughter and hugged her, the silver pouch clearly visible above the partially opened zipper of the backpack. The picture that had showed his wife using their daughter to commit a crime.

As I watched, he slowly crumbled the photo in his fist. When he relaxed his fingers, the image fell to the floor and his gaze slid to mine.

I needed to fill the silence. Opening my mouth, uncertain what was going to come back out, I started with just his name.

That was where I really screwed up. I shouldn't have used his name. “Paxton...”

His pupils spiked, flared. “See. That wasn't so hard. You can say my name just fine.”

The sudden rush of color that flooded my cheeks was humiliating. I wasn't some naïve, inexperienced kid fresh out of high school. Although sometimes he made me feel like one. “Whether or not I can say your name isn't the point.”

“Trust me, I know what the fucking point is.”

He shot up, shoving a hand through already tumbled hair. His booted foot kicked something, the picture. He bent down and grabbed it, hurling it across

the room. It didn't go far.

“Where was Alex when all this was happening?”

Alex? Right, the nanny. “My PI said that these were times when Brinke sent Alex out to do something. That picture,” I gestured toward the floor, “was taken after Alex was sent back to get something for Carter that was left behind.”

Paxton started to pace. “So Brinke could put drugs in Carter’s backpack without Alex seeing.”

“More than likely. A good lawyer could argue that – ”

“Fuck arguments.” He turned, his eyes narrow. “That little silver clutch? She calls that her party bag. She’s had it forever. There were a few times when we both got wasted on the shit she’d have tucked inside there. I know damn well what she carries in it.” He shook his head, the pain obvious in his eyes. “I kept hoping after Carter that she’d get clean. I did. I wised up, knew I couldn’t live like that with a kid. But Brinke...”

He stopped and spun away, slamming a fist on the counter.

The ferocity of it startled me, but I understood it.

Using a child that way...your own child...

Even as I was trying to figure out something to say to him, he came back to the table and pulled out the chair, sitting back down. “I’m sorry,” he said, voice flat. “None of this is your fault. I just...”

Unable to stop myself, I reached out a hand.

Touching him would be a mistake, and I knew it even before I did it.

I did it anyway.

Brushing my fingers down his wrist, I tried to smile, to make it a harmless gesture, but it was too late. I’d already touched him, and the shock of it went through me like lightning.

Slowly, I withdrew my hand and busied myself with reorganizing the photos, hoping my face didn't show what I was feeling. “You don’t need to apologize. I don’t have children myself, but I can’t imagine how outraged I’d be if I were in your shoes.”

He didn’t say anything, and when I looked up, he was staring at me.

Look away.

I couldn’t do it though. Just like I hadn’t been able to not touch him.

His gaze lowered to my mouth.

My heart skipped a beat – then a few more. Again. As it started to race away inside my chest, I sucked in a deep breath.

Was he –?

The phone rang and the moment fractured, then splintered into a hundred pieces.

Chapter Eleven

PAXTON

That mouth of hers had driven me crazy almost from the very minute we'd met. If I was smart, I would have gone and found some boring, suit and tie lawyer, somebody who charged thousands on the hour and didn't make me think about bending her over her desk...

I'd chosen the attorney in Queens partly because she was in Queens, damn far from anywhere Brinke or her friends would be seen and because Leslie had looked...sharp. Her picture had jumped out at me from the ad in the phone book, looking like somebody who wouldn't be manipulated by Brinke's games. Like somebody who knew how to play those games herself and *win*.

But that mouth...

Yeah, if I'd been smart, I would have just found somebody else after the initial consult.

Now, a split second away from kissing her, I told myself again...*Fire her. Find somebody else.*

I wouldn't though. She was too damn good.

The phone rang.

Her eyes widened for a brief moment, then her lashes swept low, shielding the mesmerizing green. Standing, I pulled my phone out of my pocket and walked over to the window.

"Hey, Alex. What's up?"

"Paxton..."

Immediately, dread settled inside, a heavy, ugly weight, and I hooked a hand over my neck, staring outside. "What's she done now?"

“She left to go run a few errands...or so she said. She never came back. That was like three hours ago and Carter is getting pretty upset. I was going to take her to the play myself, but the tickets for the show aren’t here and... well. She was really looking forward to spending the day with her mom.”

Shit. I shifted my hand from my neck to my forehead, then pinched the bridge of my nose. So much for finishing up that last song. I was hoping to have something to show the guys on Monday, but that wasn’t going to happen. “Alright. Tell Carter I’ll be there soon. Look, if Brinke shows up... hell, just call me. And make sure you go with them if they go anywhere. I’ll catch up with you and take over, okay?”

“You got it. But you know she isn’t...” Alex didn’t finish.

She didn’t have to. “I know.” Brinke wasn’t going to show. She was out partying. She’d already forgotten the plans she’d made with our daughter.

After disconnecting, I turned to Leslie. She was already gathering up her stuff, her face a carefully blank mask. “I’ve gotta go. Is there...do I need to sign stuff or anything to move forward from here?”

“No.”

She gave me a quick smile – the professional one she used almost every damn time she looked at me. I knew why she used it too. She felt the same tug I felt, only I was better at hiding it.

It was those eyes that gave her away.

“From here on out, a lot of the work is going to be mine. Well, up until it comes time to go to court.”

Court. It left a bad taste in my mouth. “I...look, I don’t want to keep Brinke away from Carter completely. She does love her.”

“I’m sure she does. But she’s also unstable. She...” Leslie sighed and set her bag on a chair.

This time, when she looked at me, there was no pretext or false smiles, nothing but seriousness – and concern, I realized. For a kid she didn’t even know. My kid. My heart gave an unsteady thump.

“You have to understand that she’s committed illegal acts that have placed your daughter in danger. I mean, I know you understand that. That’s what drove you to take action, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“Then you need to take that action. Who knows, maybe this will be the thing that forces your wife to realize just how badly she needs help.”

I turned away. I guess a guy could hope. It might be like hoping for snow

in July in New York City, but hey, anything was possible, right?

“This is fucking impossible.”

Staring at the dashboard of the 1962 Shelby Cobra I’d bought at auction the first time we’d gone platinum, I threw my head back against the butter soft leather and proceeded to mutter a long and steady stream of curses. Then I did it in Spanish. I was trying to help Carter become bilingual and I figured I’d do the same thing. All the fun words were cuss words. Not that I’d taught her any of those.

Climbing out of the car, I debated between throwing up the hood and kicking the tire. In the end, I kicked the tire, because there was no way I was going to touch the engine. That car was my baby and she was more temperamental than Brinke. No one but a pro touched her.

At the sound of a car stopping close by, I looked up, saw the valet just across the lot passing the key over to Leslie. She glanced up, smiled at me, but then the smile faltered. She said something to the valet and then trotted across the road to where I stood.

“Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, the piece of shit engine won’t turn over.”

Leslie slid her eyes behind me. There was a gleam of appreciation in them as she studied the silver coat. “I don’t think you can call that car a piece of shit.”

“You’re right. The car is fine. The engine is a temperamental piece of shit. It won’t turn over when I need it to. The damn car loves to screw with me.”

“I’m surprised you don’t have a driver who takes you wherever you want to go.”

Restless, I shrugged, tossing my keys into the air before catching them. “I do have one. He’s got kids, a wife. It’s a holiday. Besides, if I use him all the time, how am I ever going to drive my baby?”

“And that’s your baby...the car that’s screwing with you?” A smile curved her lips up.

I wanted to kiss that mouth, bad.

“Yeah.” With a curt nod, I sidestepped around her and headed toward the valet. It was Joey working today, so at least my luck didn’t totally suck. “Hey, can you call your brother? Tell him she’s acting up again?”

He gave me a pained look. “I can, Mr. Gorham, but he’s out of town for

the Fourth. I know a couple of the guys are on call, though. Good guys, really. Tony doesn't put up with losers."

"That's cool. If you keep an eye on her until somebody can get her to the garage, I'd appreciate it." I pulled a few bills out of my pocket and passed them. Joey's older brother Tony ran a high-end repair shop, just for people who had cars like mine, expensive relics that liked to test their owners' patience. It was in good hands. "Thanks, kid."

Turning, I saw Leslie still standing there. Figuring she needed to get her keys, I stepped away. "Enjoy the rest of your holiday."

"How will you get to your place?" she asked to my back.

"The way anybody else does in New York, I guess. Take a taxi."

She laughed and I heard the jingle of her keys. "On a holiday? You'd have better luck walking. Why don't you let me give you a lift?"

Don't do it.

I'd already reached the street and from where I stood, I saw two familiar yellow cars. One had their service light on, but as I watched, a woman with an arm full of bags flagged it down and she stepped up to the curb.

The other was parked off to the side of the road, light off.

Taking it as a sign, I turned back to her. "It's a drive from here."

"I'm not doing anything in particular."

Unable to stop myself, I let my eyes drift back down to her mouth.

Don't do it, Pax...

"Okay, yeah. Thanks."

Driving with Leslie was a damn sight better than riding in a cab, I had to give her that.

For one, she smelled fantastic.

The way she smelled made me think of sex and hot summer nights, spent out on the lake, spread out on a blanket. That made me think of having *her* on a hot summer night, spread out on a blanket, by a lake. I even had a lake in mind – my place up in the mountains. Where no one was around for miles.

That clear, pale skin of skin of hers would gleam under the glow of the moon. I could imagine her mouth falling open as I trailed my fingers down her neck, her torso –

"Do you think your wife made it home?"

Head out of your ass, I told myself.

As the car glided to a stop in front of my building, I debated on the answer. “No. If she made it home, Alex would have let me know.”

“The nanny lives with you, right?”

“Sort of. She’s got an apartment that’s connected to our penthouse, so yeah, I guess she does, more or less. Good memory.” I climbed out of the car and grabbed the messenger bag I used for work, and started to close it. Abruptly, I stopped and looked back inside. “You want to come up? You could...” I paused, faltering a bit, before deciding to just brazen it out. “You probably want to see that Carter’s happy and all, right? What’s the phrase... well-adjusted?”

“That’s a social worker, not me.” Her hands gripped the steering wheel. “I’m just here to help take care of the divorce.”

“Yeah, but at some point, she’ll drag a lawyer in it too, right? Maybe if you have a heads-up on whatever she plans to do to argue...” I was floundering bad here. *Let it go, Pax. Let it go.*

That smile again, quick and brilliant, and then she turned off the car. “You’re not the first client who’s ever suggested such a thing. It’s never made much of a difference, and I’m sure you’re a great father. But yes, I can come up for a few minutes. My car?”

“Valet will take care of it.” I held out my hand for her keys after she came around, even though the man heading the stand was already on his way over. Her fingers brushed my palm.

As much as I wanted to, I didn’t close my hand over hers.

She was coming upstairs. That was good enough.

Maybe if I spent a few more minutes around her, I could get her out of my head. Chances were, I was just obsessing because she was so...steady. Beautiful, hell, yes, but steady. So different from everything I was used to.

If I had any luck at all, she’d be lousy with kids and nothing was likely to sour me quicker than that.

Chapter Twelve

LESLIE

I hadn't lied.

I'd met the families of my clients several times in the past, but that wasn't why I'd agreed to go inside with Paxton Durham.

I was having a hard time separating my personal interest already, but I couldn't seem to stay away.

It's business, I reminded myself as we stepped inside the elevator. I needed to be professional. The doors slid silently closed and I settled back against the far wall with a quiet sigh, readjusting the bag on my shoulder and trying to convince myself this wasn't a huge mistake.

Then Paxton shot me a grin and I smiled back.

I was so screwed.

The elevator doors opened to a wide, airy entryway that was clearly private. As soon as I stepped out, I could see there was only one residence on this floor. A matching pair of elegant tropical plants framed both sides of a regal looking set of carved wooden doors.

"This way," Paxton said unnecessarily. He glanced at me, the expression on his face one I hadn't seen before.

He looked...nervous, although I couldn't understand why.

Unless he really was concerned that I might not think he was a good father.

He really did love his daughter. I could see that already, and I hadn't even seen the two of them together. Everything he did seem to be centered around her. It kind of blew my mind that someone like him would be so involved, but even as the thought occurred to me, shame slid through me.

He might be some big rock idol, but he was still a guy, a guy who clearly cared about his child.

“Come on,” he said, clearing his throat before reaching out and unlocking the door. He stepped inside but didn’t have a chance to take more than that one step before a small girl came barreling toward him.

“Daddy!”

He caught her up in a hug and stepped further into the penthouse, moving off to the side so I could come in.

“Hey, baby.” He pressed a kiss to her head, all his attention on her. She tucked her head against his throat and curled her arms around his neck like it was her favorite place in the world to be. “You maybe wanna go hang out with me today? I’m tired of being cooped up in the studio. I wanna go have fun with my best girl.”

She sniffed. “Me and Mommy were supposed to go do fun stuff. She left and forgot about me.”

Paxton’s eyes closed briefly, his expression clouding. “Mommy wouldn’t forget. I bet something happened and she’s probably lost or something. You remember how she got lost with you in SoHo and had to use somebody else’s phone to call me because she left hers at home?”

There was a faint pause and then she nodded. “Yeah.”

“Bet it’s something silly like that.”

“But what if she’s lost again, and she can’t find us to see the fireworks?” Carter said, her voice rising at the end.

“I’m taking my phone. And Alex will have hers on. If Mom tries to call one of us, we’ll be able to talk to her. Okay? Come on, princess. Don’t be all down. You’ve been so excited about today.”

I watched as she slowly eased back, her eyes locked on her dad’s face. My heart twisted a little, and I felt a flare of anger at a woman who could be so careless with her child’s feelings.

“Okay. But...we’re going to miss the show. It’s already started.”

“I’ll make it up to you. You and me, we’ll pick one out – or better yet, *you* can pick it out, and we’ll get the best seats. I’ll even see about getting you backstage too. It’ll be a date, just you and me.” He reached up and wiped at the tear on her cheek.

“Okay.” She sighed, a shaky little sound that was evidence that she had been crying harder than that earlier. She gave her dad another tight hug and then shoved at him, clearly ready to get down. She started to say something

else but caught sight of me.

Her eyes widened. “Who are you?”

The question took Paxton off guard, but I’d been expecting it. She was six. I might not be a parent, but the past few years had giving me some experience with kids, and I knew this was a curious age. I smiled at her. “I’m a friend of your father. I’ve been working with him on something. You’re Carter, right?”

“Yes.” She narrowed her eyes and studied me with the seriousness only a child can muster. “Why are you here? Are you going to the fireworks with us?”

Now it was my turn to be caught by surprise. I opened my mouth, then closed it, uncertain how to respond to that. Before I figured it out, Carter kept going.

“We still don’t know the city too good – too *well*...” She rolled her eyes like she was sixteen instead of six and looked over her shoulder.

That was when I noticed a tall, slim woman – she looked barely out of her teens, dressed in shorts and a t-shirt. The nanny, I assumed. Alex? Yes, that was it. The woman grinned at Carter and tapped her nose. Carter gave a long-suffering sigh before continuing.

“Alex does though. She’s been here before and even lived here for a little while when she went to college. She says she knows *all* about New York City. But she’s supposed to be off tonight, and she’s going to do stuff with her new boyfriend. She’ll probably kiss him a lot too. She does that when nobody is looking.” She lowered her voice and leaned in to whisper very loudly, “I see them kissing. It’s gross.”

I managed to disguise my laugh as a cough. Paxton just looked amused. Judging by the lovingly exasperated look on Alex’s face, this wasn’t anything she hadn’t heard before.

“Mommy was going to take me out into the city with a friend of hers, and *she* knows where all the good stuff is on the Fourth, but Mommy isn’t here. We’ve never done fireworks or nothing here. So...” She paused and took a deep breath, then rushed on. “Is that why you’re here? Do you live here? Do you know the city?”

“I...um...” I felt a little dazed. Okay, I *thought* I was used to kids, or at least experienced with them. Usually, though, they tended to be a bit quieter – or at least, not all but tripping over themselves with fifteen hundred questions a minute. Finally, I latched on the last clear bit of her explosive

dialogue and answered. “Yes, I live here.” I managed to smile a little. “I bet I know the city even better than...Alex, right?”

Alex inclined her head, smiling a little. She looked a little sympathetic. “She’s a talker.”

“I noticed.”

“I have lots of stuff to say,” Carter said matter-of-factly. “We’ve never done fireworks here. You should come with us then. You can help us find all the good stuff.”

“Ah, you know you can’t set fireworks off here, right?” I shot Paxton a quick look.

“Yeah, we know.” He tugged on Carter’s ponytail. “She’s talking about finding stuff to do in the city. We can’t set them off in California, either. We were going to find one of the street festivals or something, then we planned to head down to the Hudson this evening. A friend has a place on the river.”

Rubbing at my temple, I managed to smile. “You really haven’t done the Fourth here before, have you?”

Carter giggled. “I just *said* that. We only moved here a couple of months ago.” Some of the animation left her face and she wandered over to the couch, dropping down on it and picking up a ragged looking bear. “I don’t like New York. We lived in California before and I *love* California. This place is *boring*. My old house had a big yard and I had a tree house and a swimming pool and I could go outside and play – as long as I didn’t go by the pool. Now I live here and I’m stuck inside *all the time*.”

She shot her dad a mutinous look and Paxton blew out a breath before moving over to sit on the coffee table in front of her. “Honey, you go to the park with Alex all the time. And the zoo, the museums...you’ve made a bunch of new friends at school.”

“No, I haven’t. Some of the kids are mean and they think I’m stupid because I’m in summer school.” She sniffed, looking dejected.

“You’re not stupid,” he said in a firm ‘father’ voice. It was clear this was a discussion they’d had before.

She buried her face in her bear.

“I miss my old friends,” she said softly. “It’s no fun here.”

Heart tugging, I moved closer without realizing I’d even done so.

Paxton glanced up as I sat on the edge of the arm of the couch. “There’s lots of fun things here, Carter,” I said. “I bet I can show you.”

She looked up at me, a quick, nervous look. “Are you going to come with

us? Take us to some of the fun stuff in the city?”

Paxton cocked an eyebrow at me.

“Ah...well, I’m not sure how your dad feels about that.”

“He doesn’t mind,” Paxton said neutrally.

Hours later, I collapsed on a lounge and stared out at the river.

“I’m going to say this...I don’t think I’ve ever had a view like this for the Fourth of July,” I said when Paxton settled down on the lounge next to mine and offered me a frosty cold bottle of some dark beer.

I couldn’t make heads or tails of the label, but I really didn’t care. I was hot and exhausted, but I’d had more fun than I’d had in a very long time.

Carter was curled up on a fat, round chair, sleeping. Nodding toward her, I asked, “Is she going to wake up for the fireworks?”

“I’ll wake her up after she’s had a chance for a nap. She won’t let me live it down otherwise.” He smiled at me before taking a sip from his bottle. When he lowered it, his eyes were still locked on mine, and my heart started to race, my blood burning inside my lungs.

It was enough to make my head feel all funny and light, especially combined with the exhaustion and heat of the day, and now, putting alcohol on top of it, I was practically buzzed. Maybe I should have stuck with water.

“Thanks for coming out with us,” he said. “I know that wasn’t what you had in mind, but Carter had fun.”

“So did I.” I smiled, then shifted my gaze away, looking down the crowded street. It was all shut down to vehicular traffic, standard for Independence Day. Once I explained how awful traffic would be, Paxton suggested I leave my car parked in the guest valet parking and we’d taken a taxi – Carter had loved it – for part of the day, then walked down here. He’d assured me he would have my car brought to me in the morning. He also promised to make sure I got home.

The wind kicked up, and I looked off into the distance, staring at the slowly building clouds. Bad weather was supposed to move in later, but the forecasters were saying it shouldn’t affect the fireworks.

The scent of ozone hung heavy in the air, and I could almost feel the promise of rain. I just hoped it held off so Carter could see the fireworks.

“Me too.” Paxton's voice was low.

I swung my gaze back to his, momentarily unsure of what he was

referring to. By the time I figured it out, he was up and moving away. I watched as he stopped maybe five feet from where I was, pulling his phone out.

He lifted it to his ear.

Although I couldn't hear the words, something about the tension creeping into his body told me who it was. When he glanced around and seemed to realize how many people were looking at him, he froze even more. That protective streak started to heat inside me and I got up, moving toward him.

He caught sight of me as well, stopping in mid-sentence.

I caught his arm and he frowned, clearly not understanding my intent. Still, he allowed me to lead him back to the relative privacy of the corner where we'd been. I nudged him down onto the lounge chair – farthest from the crowd – and then I moved to stand in the entryway of the small alcove, barring it and offering him whatever privacy I could.

A few people gave me appraising looks, but I ignored them, drinking my beer and playing deaf to the conversation going on behind me.

Not for the first time, I found myself thinking...*She must be crazy.*

Brinke had taken off. Even though I was trying not to listen, it was impossible not to pick up on that much. She was crazy. She had a guy like Paxton. How could she *not* appreciate him? And their daughter was amazing. I knew that from just one day.

If I had a family like this, I might not have minded the thought of settling down.

Chapter Thirteen

LESLIE

“Thanks for asking me to come with you, Carter.” I rubbed my cheek against her hair. Her shampoo was strawberry-scented. “I had a lot of fun.”

“Me, too. New York isn’t too ter’ble, I guess.” Her voice was a sleepy mumble, a smile on her face as we pulled up in front of their building.

“Gee, thanks.” I rolled my eyes at Paxton. He sat watching us, his expression unreadable. The car stopped and I eased Carter upright, stealing a look at the time. After midnight, whoa. No wonder she was all but asleep on top of me. “Well, sweetheart, it’s about time for me to go. I’ll turn into a pumpkin soon.”

The driver opened the door, but before I could slide out, Carter found her second wind, grabbing my hand. “You can’t go yet!”

“Carter, honey...” Smoothing a hand down her hair, I smiled at her. It was impossible not to fall in love with her. “It’s late. I need to go, and you need to sleep.”

“But...” She squeezed my hand and watched me with big, imploring eyes. “Just a few more minutes. You...you didn’t get to see my bedroom!”

Paxton remained silent throughout the exchange, and I finally shot him a look. I didn’t want to intrude, but I also wasn’t sure I could say no to Carter either.

Our gazes locked and he hitched up a shoulder. “It’s up to you, Leslie.”

Great. I gave Carter a smile. “Sure, honey. I’d love to see your room.”

Although I was exhausted, saying no seemed impossible. I could face the angriest people on the stand and face down the most hard-ass judges, but one

six-year-old child made me crumble. As we climbed out of the car, a thunderous crack tore through the sky overhead, bouncing off the buildings and echoing through the concrete canyons of New York City. Lightning followed closely after.

A split second later, the rain started. Although *rain* wasn't entirely accurate. It was a downpour.

We all rushed for the awning just a few feet away, making it under just in time to avoid being completely soaked as the skies opened up. A doorman rushed out to meet us halfway, an umbrella already open in his hand.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Gorham." The doorman lowered the umbrella once we were all under the awning. "That blew up out of nowhere."

Paxton shook his head, flicking some rain out of his eyes. He'd shoved Carter and me under the umbrella, racing to the awning ahead of us in the rain, so he got the brunt of it. With an easy smile, he shrugged at the doorman. "No problem, Pete. It's just rain. We don't melt. At least, Carter and I don't." He slanted a look in my direction.

I rolled my eyes. "I'm pretty sure I'm still intact."

Carter giggled. "People don't melt, Daddy."

"People don't," he said. "Witches do. Haven't you seen *The Wizard of Oz*?"

Following them into the elevator, I made a face at him, making Carter laugh again. "Are you calling me a witch?" I made my voice sound indignant.

"What makes you think that?" he asked easily, leaning back against the wall and meeting my eyes.

My heart lurched, then started to race. Licking my lips, I dragged my gaze away and looked at Carter. "Okay, let's see this awesome room of yours."

As we exited the elevator, the lights flickered. Carter barely noticed, her hand clasping mine as she tried to drag me to the door, but both Paxton and I stared out the window as rain lashed and wind howled.

Dread curled inside me as I thought about driving through this, and I struggled to keep my voice calm as I told Carter that we would have to make the trip to her room a fast one.

She sounded unconcerned as she called back, "Okay," over her shoulder.

We were halfway up the steps when Paxton caught my hand, tugging me to a halt. Sensations raced across my nerves. Damn.

"Why don't you stay?" he asked, his voice low.

I gaped at him, but he just shoved his phone into my hand.

Bemused, I looked down. It took two read-throughs to make sense of the message. By the time I'd read through a second time, my phone was buzzing, and I suspected it was an identical message, a severe weather alert text.

Severe weather blah blah blah torrential rains blah blah blah flash flooding could occur blah blah.

I pushed the phone back into his hand. "That's kind of you." I was damn proud of myself, the way I was able to look at him and hold his gaze without completely melting. The rain wouldn't do it, but Paxton Gorham could. "But I'll be okay. I'll catch the subway instead."

"You want to go outside, down into the subway, with a flash flood warning going on?" He raised an eyebrow. "Thought you were a native New Yorker. You know what can happen in the subway during a flash flood, right?"

Groaning, I turned around and continued on up the steps after Carter. "It's not going to keep up long enough for that to happen." Although the subways *had* flooded not that long ago, it wouldn't happen again.

But the rain continued to pound down and lightning flickered in sporadic intervals as I rounded the corner where Carter had disappeared.

It would stop soon enough, I told myself. Just enough time for Carter to show me her room.

Except, twenty minutes later, it was still coming down.

Torrential rains indeed.

Brooding, I stood downstairs at the floor to ceiling windows while Paxton finished tucking Carter in.

I should have just taken the subway from where we'd watched the fireworks. I would have already been home before the rains hit. My car would have been fine here in valet parking. But Carter had been curled up against me and it'd been too hard to let her go.

I'd hoped the rain would lighten up. It had, for maybe five minutes, but now it was coming down in a hard, driving rhythm, showing no signs of letting up. My stomach sank with the realization that this storm wasn't going to pass any time soon.

The lights had flickered a few more times, but Paxton told me there was no danger of them going out. The building, naturally, had backup power.

"Have you seen reason yet?"

Looking back, I saw him jogging down the stairs, his feet bare.

For some reason, the sight struck me as unbearably sexy. He had a light growth of stubble on his face, and his hair was messy. I wanted to mess it up even more.

Dammit.

“Reason?” I asked.

“Yeah.” A smirk curled his pretty mouth and he shrugged. “You would think that a lawyer, of all people, would be reasonable.”

I shot him a dark look before turning back to the window less than a foot in front of me. “Staying here would be, well, let's just say beyond the boundaries of what would be considered professional.”

In the reflective service of the window, I could see him as he moved up behind me, so I had some warning. Still I had to take a steadying breath, disguised as a sigh, as Paxton came to stand next to me, muscled arms crossed over his chest.

Jutting his chin out toward the lightening show taking place outside the window, he said, “In my opinion, it may not be professional, but this is what I think would be considered extenuating circumstances.”

I had to admit, he was probably right. Still...

Shaking my head, I said, “When Brinke comes home, the cat may be out of the bag.”

At least that was a better reason than *I don't trust myself not to jump you*.

“She's not coming home.” His voice was flat. Without saying anything else, he turned on his heel and strode away.

After a moment, my brain processed, and I turned to follow.

I caught up with him in the kitchen, found him standing at the counter, splashing some whiskey into a glass. He tossed it back and then lowered the glass to the counter, setting it down hard enough that I was almost afraid it'd break.

“Was that Brinke who'd called earlier?”

His eyes narrowed to slits. “Yeah.” He turned those angry eyes toward me before he continued, “Apparently, my dear wife had to rush to a friend's side due to an emergency. Her friend had to have an appendectomy, and she doesn't have any family so somebody just had to be there for her.”

The look on his face was so cold and cutting, it almost hurt *me* – and he wasn't even angry with me.

“Any chance it's the truth?” I asked.

“Hardly.” He lifted his empty glass and studied it, almost mesmerized.

“Unless of course her friend has the ability to regenerate body organs. She fed me the same excuse, with the same friend less than a year ago. That time, it was Carter’s first day of kindergarten. Carter was heartbroken.”

Silence fell between us, and he slowly lowered the glass. I watched as his eyes moved back to the bottle.

For a moment I thought he was going to pour himself more, but to my surprise, he simply put the bottle away. Then, with slow, methodical precision, he washed the glass out and put it in the dish rack.

“I know what it’s like to be addicted.” His voice was a monotone. “I know how hard it is to fight that demon. I also know you can beat it...if you want it enough. Brinke doesn’t want it enough – want *us* – enough.”

I had been staring at the cabinet where he’d put the whiskey. He turned and saw me watching. My face flushed as I looked at him.

He asked softly, “You think I’m tempting fate?”

“Yes,” I said bluntly.

“Alcohol was never my poison,” he responded with a shrug. “Cocaine was my addiction. Tried heroin once or twice. Hell, it’s a wonder I’m even still alive.” He paused, and then added, “It’s a wonder Brinke is still alive.”

This was one thing that I could discuss from a professional standpoint, I knew that. But why didn’t I feel like I was doing it for those reasons?

“You know, for Carter’s sake, you probably shouldn’t drink it all. At least not in the house.”

Paxton’s eyes narrow to slits. Lifting a hand, I held his gaze. “Look, she’s got a rough deal already. You know that. Some part of her knows that her mother is lying to her, and as she gets older, she’ll understand more and more. It would be better for her if her father didn’t drink around her.”

“Do you see her down here?” Paxton glared at me.

Choosing my words carefully, I took two more steps into the kitchen and stood behind the island. “No. But that doesn’t mean she doesn’t know. Kids see more than people think. I’ve been a lawyer long enough to learn that lesson, and I see it time and again in court.” I hesitated then, not wanting to add to the weight he already carried, but he needed to know. “Look, there’s another thing you need to consider. Let’s look at this from another angle. Let’s say I was representing Brinke. If you were trying to claim you were the steadier parental figure, and yet you drank while you had her in the house, I would dig into your history, and use it against you.”

Something flashed in his eyes – it almost looked like hurt.

He took another step toward me while that hurt burned into anger. “I’m not a fucking drunk,” he growled.

“You’re not listening to me,” I said gently but firmly. “I’m telling you how a good lawyer would argue it. I’m a damn good lawyer, and that’s what I’d do. Whether you have a problem or not – and I don’t think you do – that wouldn’t be the issue. Divorce is all about mud-slinging.”

“I’m not planning on slinging mud!”

“You won’t have to.” Sighing, I braced my hands on the counter. “She’s covered in it, and she likely knows that. And I’m sure she’s not an idiot, am I right?”

“What’s your point?” he demanded.

“She’ll find a good lawyer. Her lawyer is going to know that Brinke is a disaster, and the *only* chance Brinke has is to make you look like even more of a mess than she is.” His face tightened and I held up a hand. “The opposing counsel will have to go to the wire to even have a fighting chance. Trust me, I’m good at my job. But, you can’t have *any* dirt for them to find right now. Period. In court, all it can take is the *suspicion* of doubt. Especially for the father. Is that what you want?”

A moment later, he turned away and moved back to the cabinet. As he did so, the t-shirt he wore rode up, baring a flat, lean belly. My fingers itched to touch the cut muscles, and I busied myself with the fascinating surface of the island’s smooth surface. Marble, I wondered?

Something splashed.

Jerking my head up, I saw him pouring the whiskey down the drain.

His eyes held mine the entire time.

When he headed in my direction, I started to back away, but he cornered me against the island. Frozen in place, I stood there, unable to move. The heat of his body reached out and caressed me.

Something clunked.

Then he was gone, striding out of the room.

Dazed, I looked down and realized he’d dumped the bottle in a recycler. Over his shoulder, he called out, “Are you going to stay?”

There was another thunderous crack.

The lights flickered.

Lifting my eyes to the skylight far overhead, I blew out a breath.

Despite my better judgment, I said, “Yes.”

Chapter Fourteen

LESLIE

The room Paxton showed me to was along the lines of what I might have found if I'd given in and indulged myself to a five-star hotel. But unlike a hotel, this place was clearly a home. A guy's home. I'd almost swear that no woman lived here. Well, other than Alex, but she was Carter's nanny, and her apartment was one floor below. That was different. I knew she was off for the next few days too. She'd had a recent death in her family and he hadn't wanted to push. Paxton apparently believed in treating his employees well.

And his guests. There had been fresh, brand new pajamas for both men and women in several sizes in the closet, as well as toiletries, and now I was back to standing in front of yet another window. "He does like his views," I murmured, watching as rain pounded the city.

Such a panoramic scene usually would have made me smile, especially in this weather. I liked storms.

Tonight, however, it made me melancholy, and I turned away, staring at the bed. I needed to get some sleep, but I was strangely energized. "Strangely." I snorted at the fanciful thought because there was really nothing strange about it. I was too worked up at the thought of sleeping so close to Paxton.

So close, but so far away...

"At this rate, I'll never sleep." As I turned away, my purse sitting on the chair caught my eye, and I remembered the antihistamines I kept in there in case my allergies flared up. There was bottled water in the fridge. I'd go get some, take the medicine, and in thirty minutes, I'd be out. And probably

dreaming of Paxton, but at least I'd sleep. Then I could wake up, leave this living temptation before I got myself into trouble.

It was the first smart thought I planned on following all day. Opening the door, I listened, but everything seemed quiet. Slowly, I made my way down the hall. The penthouse was large, the layout relatively simple, but I'd never been here before, and with all the lights out, it was definitely confusing.

Once I found the kitchen, I got myself some water from the mammoth refrigerator, then took a moment to crack the bottle open and take a drink. And on the way back to my room, I promptly got lost.

Swearing under my breath, I backtracked, and stood at the hall I thought led to the guest quarters. It didn't look familiar, though.

A door opened and I spun around, heart racing.

Paxton stood framed in a wedge of light, a bathroom behind him, and a towel slung around his hips. Water rolled down his chest and I found myself thirsty, as if I'd been wandering the desert for days.

"Um..."

I couldn't get anything else out.

"Everything okay?"

All my life, words had come easy to me, but now they seemed frozen in my throat and all I could do was lift the bottle of water. "Got lost."

Paxton stepped forward, and my gaze followed a bead of water as it rolled down his throat to his chest. I stared, mesmerized, before jerking my gaze up to realize he was staring at me just as intently.

I didn't think it was my imagination that his voice was a little rough when he spoke. "Back to the end of the hall, right, then past the living room, and left."

"Right." I swallowed. "Right, then left."

His lips curved. "Don't go right twice."

"What? No, I was just..."

He jerked his head. "Come on. I'll walk you."

"I don't..." But he was already walking, and if I stared after him, I'd be tempted to grab that towel and yank. My hands were practically itching.

Catching up with him, I busied myself with taking the lid off the water, cooling my burning throat with another sip.

"Thanks for being so cool with Carter. Alex is great with her, but she... well, Brinke is really starting to do a number on her head. Her teachers have talked about how needy she is." His jaw clenched a little.

“She’s a sweetheart. It’s not hard to have fun with her.” I stared straight ahead, seeing the open door of my room.

“You wouldn’t be able to tell by the way her mom acts.” His bitterness laced every word.

“Her mom has problems. You know that.” I made the mistake of pausing in front of my door, looking up at him as I spoke.

He looked down at me, that cold anger flashing in his eyes. It faded as he reached toward me. When he touched my cheek, all the oxygen in my lungs seemed to disappear.

“Paxton…”

His eyes darkened, and he pushed his hand into my hair, dislodging the loose knot I’d twisted up. When he lowered his head, I had one split second of sanity telling me not to do it.

But then sanity died a quick, violent death the moment his lips touched mine. I dropped my water bottle to the floor as heat flooded my entire body. Cold liquid spilled over our feet as he backed me up against the wall. The water bottle wasn’t the only thing that fell either. Paxton’s towel was gone, and the only thing that separated us now was my panties and the thin cotton of the pajama top I had on.

I felt the heat of his body through the thin cotton, and I knew I was going to burn for this. His hand tightened on my hair, arching my head back and I whimpered as he raked his teeth down my neck.

“Leslie,” he growled out my name before biting me, then sucking lightly on my skin.

He moved lower and lower, one hand working between us to unbutton the pajama top ahead of his mouth, baring more and more of my torso. When his lips closed over my right nipple, electrical shocks jolted through me, the pleasure more intense than anything I’d ever felt. I arched against him and he swore, grabbing my wrists and slamming them against the wall beside my head. He lifted his head, glaring down at me.

Hot, hungry blue eyes met mine and my knees started to quiver as I realized just how much hunger there was burning inside him. Oh, shit. I was in trouble. If he didn’t pull back, I didn’t think I’d be able to.

“This is stupid,” he said, voice raw, all but throbbing.

My heart, my blood, my pussy pulsed in tandem. I nodded. “Yes.”

“Tell me to stop.” It was a demand.

This time, I shook my head. “I can’t.”

“Damn us both.” His mouth crushed back down on mine as he scooped me up.

I wrapped my legs around his hips, moaned as I felt his erection through my wet panties. The feel of his cock throbbing against me was almost enough to make me come right there. He laid me down on the bed and I felt a jerk, heard fabric tear. The cool air brushed across my damp skin.

It looked like I was heading home tomorrow without underwear.

“Don’t move,” he warned me.

He didn't have to worry about it. I wasn't planning on going anywhere. My entire body was a giant, pulsing need.

He moved around and I heard a drawer open. I already knew what he was doing. He was a very thorough host – condoms provided for his guests. In reality, I knew it didn't take long, but it felt like forever before he came back to me, and some part of me was afraid that he wouldn't.

Catching my wrists, he drew them over my head. His searing eyes held mine and he asked roughly, “You certain?”

I gave him a sultry smile. “No. But if you stop, I think I might kill you.”

He drove into me hard and fast, and I arched up, crying out in shock and pleasure. Electric waves echoed through me, reaching every last part of me, and I jerked against his hold. There'd been enough foreplay to make me wet, but I was still tight.

He pulled out and thrust into me again, deeper this time, claiming me fully. With a sob, I arched my hips, trying to hold him inside me. It did no good. With my hands pinned above my head, I couldn't touch him, couldn't make him do anything I wanted. He controlled the depth and rhythm. He controlled the way his cock dragged against my skin, how much my nipples pressed into his chest.

Just as I was ready to come, he pulled out, and before I had a chance to protest, he flipped me onto my belly, dragging my hips up. I scrambled at the bedclothes beneath me, barely getting my arms under me before he filled me again. I gasped, my eyes closing. It was too much. He was so deep now, I thought I could feel him pulsing somewhere near my heart.

His hand fisted in my hair, tugging me upright until my spine was arched at a near impossible angle. I didn't care. In fact, the pain set off a new set of fireworks inside me. He settled into a slower rhythm now, and I had no choice but to take it – take him – or let him take me. Impaled on his cock, I moaned and twisted, seeking the release that was just out of reach.

“For someone who isn't a witch, you sure cast one hell of a spell,” he said, fingers flexing on my waist.

Then he swiveled his hips, reaching around and down with his free hand. His fingers sought out my aching clit, and I jolted, first in shock, then in delicious satisfaction as his touch set off the most explosive climax of my life. I clenched around him and heard him curse.

His hips jerked against me, losing his rhythm as he slammed into me twice more, each stroke sending another burst of pleasure through me. Then he stiffened, his cock pulsing inside me as he came. His fingers pressed even harder against my clit and I cried out, my arms giving out on me as a second orgasm crashed into me even harder than the first.

Face down on the bed, as my high ebbed, I tried to level out my breathing because I was pretty sure no oxygen was making it to my head. And I needed oxygen because I had to think. I was almost certain I'd done the stupidest thing of my life, and I had to figure out what to do.

But I was still having trouble with that breathing thing.

I needed to get up.

If I got up and moved, I'd put some distance between Paxton and me, and then thinking would probably come easier. Then I could maybe figure out what to do next.

Before I could do that, though, he moved.

Was he going back to his room?

I figured out the answer pretty fast. The bathroom. He'd go back to his room now, though. Then I could think. That was a good thing –

Hard hands rolled me over.

He came down on top of me and smoothed my tumbled hair back. “Again,” he said.

No, he demanded.

That was all. Then he was inside me again, and I was clinging to him as he started to drive us both toward climax again.

Thinking was sometimes really overrated.

I didn't know what time it was when he stirred, but it had finally stopped raining. We'd both dozed after the second – or had it been the third round? I wasn't entirely sure of anything other than the fact that I'd come more times than I ever had before.

Muscles inside my body ached and pulled in the sweetest way, and if it hadn't been for the doubts – and a different sort of ache that was starting to settle in my heart – I could have been quite happy.

But when he rolled out of bed, I wanted to curl up on myself and wish the rest of the world away.

He bent over me and I looked up at him as he kissed my cheek. He didn't say anything and was gone a moment later.

After the door closed behind him, I brought my legs up to my chest and reached for the pillow.

I'd been wrong. It wasn't any easier to think with him gone. It wasn't any easier at all.

Chapter Fifteen

PAXTON

Out in the hallway, I grabbed the towel I'd dropped.

I saw the water on the floor and swore, cleaning up the mess before picking up the bottle and striding back toward the room where I'd been sleeping for the past month.

Brinke's stamp was all over the master bedroom, and I'd gotten tired of her stumbling in, drunk out of her mind or high, often both. Her waking me up and dealing with all that shit had been bad enough, but it was more than that. I worried one morning I'd wake up to find her dead of an overdose, right there in the bed next to me.

Now, at least, I had something else to brood about.

Leslie.

Finally alone in my room, I slammed the door and hurled the water bottle across it. "How could you be so stupid?"

There wasn't any answer, but I hadn't expected one. I walked over to the bed and dropped down, flinging an arm over my eyes. If I was hoping to block out any memory of the past few hours, then I was out of luck. I could smell her on my skin, taste her. She'd tasted so fucking amazing, and watching her come apart on my tongue had almost been as good as feeling her around my cock.

Son of a bitch.

What in the hell had I been thinking?

My cock pulsed against my belly, and I slid my hand down, fisted my still aching dick. I had the answer to my problem right there – in hand, even. Sometimes men really did think with their cocks. I'd wanted her pretty much

from the second I saw her, and after spending a whole day with her, I realized I didn't just *want* her – I *liked* her.

I'd forgotten what it was like, to actually be attracted to a woman *and* like her. To not just want to fuck someone, but to want to spend time with her.

There was plenty there to like, too, and not just those long legs or big green eyes. She was smart and sexy and funny and sweet. I had a feeling she'd get pissed off by the *sweet* thing, but she was.

Rolling onto my belly, I snagged a pillow and closed my eyes.

"It's over," I told myself. "Over and done with."

Another thought hit me not even a second later.

What in the hell was I going to do if she decided I needed to find another lawyer?

The coffee in front of me had gone lukewarm. My head was fogged with fatigue, but I knew how to operate when I was running on empty. Shit, I could be past empty and still function. Who said you couldn't learn survival skills when you were an addict?

"*Recovering* addict," I muttered. Pressing the heel of my hand to my right eye socket, I tried to will the headache away, but that wasn't going to happen. I might have gotten thirty minutes of sleep once I'd left Leslie's room.

While I'd been with her, I'd slept pretty damn good – when I hadn't been busy gorging on the taste and feel of her. She'd calmed me in a way nothing had. Ever.

Now, though, I was just waiting for her to walk in here, and tell me I'd have to find somebody else to handle the divorce. I wasn't looking forward to that, but with every hour that passed, I'd grown more and more convinced she'd decide we should part ways.

It was my fault. Well, not entirely. I'd given her the chance to say no. But I'd been dreading finding a lawyer to begin with, then I found one who wasn't bad at all, one who would fight for me. What happened if the next one was all the bad shit I'd expected to find the first time around?

It was my own dumb fault.

I should have told Carter that Leslie couldn't come with us. Hell, I shouldn't have even asked her to come meet my daughter to begin with.

I was so busy brooding that I didn't hear her come in, and when she slid onto the stool across from me, I almost came out of my seat.

“What the – shit.” Laughing tiredly, I picked up my coffee and bolted it back. Cold or not, the need for caffeine was now urgent. Getting up, I went to the coffee pot and poured more. “You want a cup?”

“Please.” Her voice was cautiously polite.

Squeezing my eyes closed, I paused for a moment before reaching up to grab her a cup. After pouring her some coffee, I turned back and went to the island, stopping at the end of it, a few inches away from her. Close enough that I could touch. And if she was going to tell me to get another lawyer, I was damn well going to try to touch again.

“Listen, Leslie...about last night...”

“It’s okay, Paxton. We’re both adults.” She reached over and took the coffee from me, lifting it to her lips. She took a quick sip, then lowered it. She shrugged and smiled. “I doubt it’s the first time either of us have had a one-night stand. Everything’s fine.”

One-night stand.

The words settled wrong, although I didn’t understand why. I should've been relieved. She wasn't angry or hurt. She wasn't acting like we were going to get married after just a single night, no matter how mind-blowing.

“So...” I blew out a breath. Trying to stall while I gathered the courage to ask the question, I took a sip of coffee and then put the cup down. “Are you still planning on handling my divorce?”

“Yes. I can separate the two. This...the past twenty-four hours were a fluke. A personal thing. The divorce is a professional – and separate – matter. If you’re comfortable with it, I am.”

A fluke. Unable to stop myself, I slid my eyes down to study her mouth, remembering the feel of it, the taste. I should've just let it go, but I could still feel the connection between the two of us.

“I’m not sure I could say I’m...*comfortable*, but I don’t want another lawyer.” I gave her a flirtatious smile to judge how she would take it.

“Okay.” She slid off the stool exactly when I reached out to brush her hair back.

Her lashes fluttered, and her cheeks flushed.

Damn. She felt it too.

“I’m really *not* comfortable.” I cast a meaningful glance down.

“You...” Her mouth twisted as if she didn't like what she'd intended to say. “You know what? Neither am I.”

A moment later, she was in my arms, and I boosted her back up onto the

stool. She was tall and curvy, so different from anyone else I'd dated.

"I want you naked. Now," I said against her mouth.

She laughed and the sound was like whiskey and silk. A sweet torture, the kind I could get drunk on.

I reached for the waistband of her pants, then stopped.

"Shit."

"What?" Her eyes widened, body stiffening.

"Carter...she...I doubt she'll wake, but I..." Looking around, I swung Leslie up into my arms. Judging by the expression on her face, that wasn't something she that happened a lot. A few minutes later, we were inside the bedroom where I'd been sleeping. I put her down by the door. "Stay."

"You're bossy." There was no malice in her words.

A seductive smile curled her lips, and I was tempted to kiss it off. I would, too, after I got a damn condom.

In less than a minute, I was gloved up and kissing her again. Fighting with her pants, I jerked them down to her hips and then pulled back. Dammit! I turned us both and then spun her so that she was facing the table just inside the door.

"Bend over."

"My...I need to take my pants off."

I nudged her down, pressing my hand to her upper back. It didn't seem possible that I could want her so badly after I'd had her so many times last night, but I was so hard that it hurt.

"Just bend over, Les. I want inside – *now*."

She whimpered and obeyed. The sight of her sweet, lush ass lifting for me had my cock jerking almost painfully. I ran my finger across her to find her wet enough that I could take her without hurting her. That was all I needed to know.

I pushed inside her slowly, shuddering as she closed, hot and snug, around every inch of me. I wanted to feel all of her, without the condom, feel the honey-wet silk of her cunt. I wanted to lick her dry, then make her wet all over again. I wanted to take her so slowly that she begged me to let her come.

I withdrew, and then thrust back inside, hard, tearing a cry from her lips.

"Shhh..." I reached up and covered her mouth with one hand, using the other to steady her hips.

Her teeth sank into my palm as I sank into her.

I growled, and without thinking, I brought my hand down on the curve of

her ass. "Bite me again, baby."

She did, and heat rushed through me. Impossibly, I got even harder. She wiggled her ass and I swatted her again, sweat forming on my temple and starting to drip down as I pumped into her harder and faster. But it wasn't enough.

Mindless, I freed her mouth to grip her hips with both hands and thrust deep, pounding into her as something deep and primal coursed through us. The sound of our flesh coming together filled the room as she pushed back against me, just as eager as I was. The thought that she needed me as much as I needed her was heady.

She came only a breath before I did, and the sound of her low, raw moan was the best damn music I'd heard in a long time.

Chapter Sixteen

LESLIE

When I'd woken up, I told myself that I'd talk to Paxton, and tell him that it would be best if he found another lawyer. I could make several recommendations.

But then I'd seen him sitting in the kitchen, and knew I wouldn't.

I was starting to understand his wife to some extent, even though I'd never met her. She was an addict. There was something she craved, thought she couldn't live without. Drugs and booze were her weakness.

Paxton was becoming mine.

I'd slept with another woman's husband. Yes, they were shortly going to be divorced, but that wasn't the point. I'd never slept with a married man before.

And I'd slept with a client.

More than once.

Paxton's hand smoothed over my hip before he curled his arm around my waist, dragging me upright even while he was still inside me. Lips pressing to my ear, he said, "I'm still not comfortable. Are you?"

He surprised a laugh out of me. "I'm not sure. But...Carter?"

"I'll go check. Be naked when I come back."

"Bossy," I teased.

In response, he bit my earlobe and sent a bolt of arousal through me.

He was gone a moment later, and I sighed, reaching up to tug my cami off. It was already looking worse for wear. My panties had been a victim of the night before. My capris were tangled mid-thigh, and I pushed them down, stepping out before looking around the bedroom. Before I had the chance to

form any kind of impression, the door swung open and he came back in.

“She’s still sleeping. Probably have another hour as late as we were out.”

He strode past me, and I watched as he went straight to the bedside table. I couldn’t help but remember that was the same place condoms were kept in the guest bedroom where I’d slept.

“Is this...?” Licking my lips, I hesitated a brief moment before deciding the hell with it. “Is this one of the guest bedrooms?”

He came back to me, box in hand. “Sort of. I’ve been sleeping in here for a month now.”

That made me feel a little better.

A few seconds later, I was on my way to feeling a lot better. He boosted me up so that I was sitting on the table and he went to his knees in front of me.

I really hoped that meant what I thought it did.

“I’m going to taste you now, Leslie,” he muttered against my thigh.

The sound of his voice, raw and hungry, had my toes curling, and I sagged backward, my shoulders coming to rest against the wall.

The first brush of his tongue had me biting my lip to keep from making any noise. The second had me covering my mouth with my hand.

When he bit my clit, scraping it with his teeth, I couldn’t stop the harsh cry, could only muffle it. He growled in approval before stabbing his tongue into me, over and over again.

But right when I thought one more touch would send me over, he shifted and began to press soft kisses to the crease of my thigh.

“You bastard.”

He laughed quietly. “Anticipation makes it better. Haven’t you ever learned that?”

“Bastard,” I repeated.

He stroked a finger down my folds, opening me, and then he licked me again, kissed me. Pressed his mouth against me and proved again that his tongue was talented at more than just singing.

He worked me right back up to the edge, doing it over and over until I was begging him to make me come. Only when I was almost in tears, my body throbbing with a need like nothing I’d felt before, did he stand.

He gripped my hips and pulled me to the edge of the table, thrusting in deep with one stroke. We were eye to eye, and the intimacy of it cut right through to my core. His blue eyes seared me, lighting up places I hadn’t even

realized were cold and dark.

“Leslie...” My name was a raspy growl and then he was kissing me and I never wanted him to stop.

Not ever.

Was it possible to want somebody *too* much?

I doubted it had even been thirty minutes since we’d disappeared into the bedroom, and we’d had sex twice. And I still wanted more of him.

As we slid out of the bedroom, I gave into the urge and moved up behind him, sliding my arms around his waist. He tensed for a moment, then stopped. Pressing my face against his back, I breathed in the scent of him and let myself wish, let myself wonder.

His hands covered mine and we stood like that for a few moments.

I don’t remember which one of us pulled away first, but when we walked into the kitchen, we did it without speaking and sat back down in the seats where we’d been earlier.

Our coffee had gone cold. I picked up mine and drank it anyway.

After a moment, Paxton did the same and we just sat there, staring at each other.

Eventually, he got up and moved over to the refrigerator and opened it. “I’m going to make some breakfast. Would you like some?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

He nodded, not looking at me.

I almost laughed. I’d come out here earlier and told him that everything was fine, we were both adults and could handle the fact that we’d gone and had sex.

Then we’d gone and done it again, and now we were walking on eggshells.

Or were we?

It...something felt different.

I couldn’t even explain what it was, but something was just...different

Determined to think about something else – anything else – I got up and carried my coffee cup over to the sink, washing it out, and putting it in the dish rack where the glass he’d been using for whiskey the night before still sat.

“How long have you been clean?”

From the corner of my eye, I could see the way his hands stilled. Turning my head, I looked at him. He cocked his eyebrow.

“Little details,” I said. “Sooner or later, we’ll have to talk about that in detail.”

A humorless smile curled his lips. “Great pillow talk, Leslie.”

“It’s not like we’re lovers.” It was just as much to remind myself as anything.

A muscle in his jaw pulsed, but he shrugged casually. “True. Just a couple of acquaintances. We had a couple of good hard fucks, right?”

“They were very good.” My heart stuttered and blood rushed to heat my cheeks, but I didn’t look away from him. “That doesn’t mean I don’t have questions I need to ask as your lawyer. I figured I might as well get some of them out of the way.”

“Sure. Why not?”

He was quiet for a moment, and I watched as he got an omelet started. “It took two tries before I kicked everything, but I was clean before Carter was born. I...well, I grew up seeing my parents abuse drugs, each other...me.”

He shrugged, the motion lacking his normal, smooth grace. That told me more than his words how much he hated talking about it.

“I told myself that if I ever had kids, that wouldn’t be me. Of course, I also told myself I wouldn’t get hooked on shit like they did, and what did I do? But at least I was able to quit.”

He was smiling to himself now, and the love in that smile told me exactly who he was thinking of.

“You had a good reason to quit.”

He looked up at me. “Yeah. The best. But I had to do it for me, first. I promised myself I’d do better than my parents, and I am. Of course, some wild animals eat their young, and they would make better parents than my folks did.” He flipped the omelet, silent for a few moments before continuing. “Once I was able to stop, though, for good, the world was more real. Things were clearer, music was better, and I found myself wondering why I’d ever gone down that rabbit hole to begin with.”

“Did you ever figure that out?”

“It was easier.” He shrugged. “No one thing set me off. I’d have some weed here, some coke there. Then I was using more and more, and before I knew it, I was addicted. Then Brinke and I got together and we were both using and...”

He blew out a breath and turned away, grabbed a couple of plates from a glass-fronted cabinet.

Once we were sitting down, he looked at me. "Next question?"

Laughing, I said, "I think that will do it for now. I need to eat and then get out of here. It's way past time to go."

He looked like he wanted to say something, but he just nodded. Part of me wished he'd argued, but we both knew the truth of it. Our time together had pretty much come to an end.

And that was for the best.

Chapter Seventeen

LESLIE

We ate in silence, and although the omelet was delicious, I was only able to eat half of what he gave me. I wasn't nauseous, but I didn't have my usual appetite. When I couldn't eat anymore, I stood, intending to take my plate into the kitchen when we both heard the door open.

Shit.

Paxton set his jaw and stood up, his eyes skimming me from top to bottom.

Bad enough that I'd slept with him, but it was pretty obvious – or at least it was to me – that I'd spent the night. He bent down, scooped up the jacket I'd draped over my file bag and helped me slip into it. “Let me handle this.”

My gut twisted into hot, slippery knots as I reached for my coffee so I could have something in my hands.

The woman who appeared in the doorway bore little resemblance to the glamorous creature featured next to Paxton in online promo shots. Although she was still lovely, she was too thin, her eyes sunken, face gaunt. I could still see the resemblance to Carter though.

Pale blue eyes skewered me. “Who the fuck are you?”

Before I could answer, Paxton rested a hand on my shoulder. “Brinke, this is Leslie. She's a lawyer handling some issues we've been having...” He stopped abruptly and laughed, not even trying to disguise the brittle sound of it. “What in the hell do you care? You haven't bothered to show up for anything on our new album.”

I had to appreciate the skillful way he'd implied I was a studio lawyer without actually saying it. While I doubted she'd made the distinction when

she finally did find out, she couldn't say he'd actually lied about who I was.

He moved past me and opened the refrigerator, grabbing a bottle of water. "Guess I ought to start looking for another backup singer. Raina and Leona can't do it all."

Color flooded her face, hot little splotches that rode her cheekbones and accentuated the hollows there. She was thin, almost to the point of skeletal with shadows under her eyes. She was still very pretty, but it was obvious she was no longer using drugs, they were using her. Using her up.

"I haven't been feeling well, you know that." She gave him an imploring look and ignored me. That was good.

"Seems to be a lot of that. You aren't feeling well, Darla isn't either. Kind of weird, how she had to have her appendix removed twice." He shot her a cutting look.

I pretended to be enraptured with my coffee, not wanting to draw attention to myself. But from under my lashes, I watched Brinke's face, saw the way her lids flickered, saw understanding in her eyes, and then something else.

"Oh, honey..." She smiled and walked up to him.

My temper sparked as she started to curl her arms around him, but he stopped her, grabbing her wrists before she touched him.

Brinke gave him a mock pout and then glanced over at me, winking. "He doesn't like public displays of affection." Sighing lustily, she moved back to the island and sat down, picking up his mostly untouched coffee and drinking it. Then she cut into his omelet. "It wasn't Darla last year. It was Daria. I must have mistyped when I sent you the text. I was so upset at the time..."

She slid him a look, trying to gauge his response. He turned away, a disgusted noise escaping him.

I saw the way her mouth tightened, and then, for a brief moment, our eyes connected. The vitriol I saw there probably would have made a lot of people leery. I thought about Carter, how hurt she'd been by her mom taking off. I thought about Paxton, and how much he hated what he had to do. But I couldn't react to her the way I wanted to, couldn't react like the woman who hated everything Brinke had done to her family. Slowly, I lifted my coffee cup to my lips. Over the rim, I smiled at her.

"Just what exactly do we need a lawyer for anyway? Everything's going fine with the album, isn't it?" Brinke demanded, her voice going from cajoling to commanding.

“I need a lawyer because there are issues I want looked at,” Paxton said evenly.

The speculation in her eyes grew, and I could tell right away she was already suspicious. Not good. The evasive shit wasn’t going to fly.

“Licensing.” I cut Brinke off when she started to ask another question. Me lying to her was different than him doing it. “There were licensing issues early on in Mr. Gorham’s career, and I’m taking another look.”

“We do this every year.” She rolled her eyes.

“Sooner or later, we’ll get it to go the way we want to.” Paxton smiled at me faintly over her head. I could see the relief in his eyes that I’d spoken out.

“You oughta just let it go. You waste more money on the damn lawyers than it’s worth. So, there are a few songs that you got fucked over on. Big deal. You make more than enough to make up for those. Besides, lawyers will screw you in the end anyway. They are all a bunch of crooks and liars.”

I could feel my smile tightening.

She dismissed me and turned to Paxton. “Listen, honey, with everything that happened yesterday, I wasn’t able to take Carter out, and I want to make it up to her.”

“Do you think you can?” Paxton leaned back against the counter.

I eyed my bag and wondered if I’d be able to grab it, and make it out the door without being drawn into this.

“Don’t be like that.” Brinke waved a hand. “Kids are resilient.”

“That doesn’t mean you treat them like shit,” he growled.

“I had an emergency!” she snapped. Then, she stopped, sucking in a deep breath of air. “Okay. Okay. I’m not here to fight. I want to take Carter out today. We’ll go to the park, grab some lunch, maybe even find a different show out on Broadway.”

“Mommy?”

Shit.

Paxton muttered something that didn’t sound like English under his breath as a sleepy, pj-clad Carter appeared in the doorway.

Her eyes landed on Brinke and she rushed over to her.

Brinke, to her credit, leaped up and caught the child, swinging her up into the air. The smile on her face looked real and she pressed a loud kiss to Carter’s cheek. Even I could tell the affection was genuine.

“My baby girl. I’m so sorry about yesterday. A friend got super sick. Please say you’re not mad at Mommy.”

“I’m not mad.” Carter rested her head on Brinke’s shoulder. “I was sad for a little while, but Daddy and I had fun anyway. I watched the play online because I didn’t think we were going to get to see it.”

“Smart girl.”

I wonder if Brinke had any idea what Carter’s statements said about her belief in her mother as a parent in general. It sure as hell didn’t say *good* things.

Carter started to say something else, but she glanced my way, and whatever she’d been going to say ended in a squeal. “Leslie!”

A moment later, she was running toward me, and I self-consciously hugged her around the shoulders as she pressed her face to my belly. “Hi, there, Carter.”

“Mommy! This is Leslie! She went to the fireworks with me and Daddy!”

When Brinke looked at me this time, there was an all-new level of hatred in her eyes. I simply stared back, working to keep my face blank. I wasn’t going to give her anything.

“So, you went to the fireworks with them and are back here bright and early? Wow. You’re one dedicated lawyer,” she said, her voice full of venom.

“By the time we got back, the storm had settled in,” Paxton said flatly. “There were flash flood warnings and the wind was hell. Leslie used the other guest bedroom. Feel free to get all paranoid about that, Brinke. It’s your favorite thing to do.”

She continued to stare at me for a long moment.

Finally, she cut the connection and looked at Carter. “Come on, sugar. We need to get you dressed so we can hit the town.”

They started out, but before Brinke got out of the room, Paxton caught her arm and leaned in. “Carter, you head on up, Mommy will be there in a minute.”

Once she was gone, I pretended not to hear as Paxton softly said, “Alex is going with you.”

Brinke’s eyes narrowed. “I can spend the day with my kid without a chaperone, Pax.”

“Yeah? Since when? The last time you were alone with her, you got so stoned, you ended up passed out on the bathroom floor.” He took a step toward her. “Alex goes, or Carter *doesn’t*. Take your choice.”

“Fine.” Brinke rolled her eyes. “It’s better if she comes anyway. She

handles Carter better when the kid gets whiny.”

Wow. Talk about mom of the year.

“Listen to me, Brinke. I'm not playing around. You *will* stay sober today. You won't do drugs. If you get high or even have a single drink, I'll know, and I'll have your ass locked up. You will *not* do that shit around her. Not again.”

She rolled her eyes and jerked her arm away. “I know how to take care of our baby, Pax.”

I didn't leave right away. It seemed a little too obvious to just sneak out right after we'd managed to come up with such a convincing story. I was torn between guilt and aggravation as I drank another cup of coffee, watching as Paxton busied himself with washing up the dishes.

He seemed comfortable doing it, almost happy to have something to do with his hands, although his gaze kept straying toward the hall and I knew he was thinking about Carter...and Brinke.

When he heard them coming downstairs, he moved away from the sink to the fridge, grabbing something from inside it before heading out of the room.

I heard them talking but stayed where I was.

Brinke's voice carried, and I had to grit my teeth as she snapped, “I can handle it, Paxton.”

I had no idea what she was going on about, nor did I really care, but I wondered if she had to handle everything like such an uber-bitch. The part of me that felt sorry for her was getting smaller all the time.

There was a lower, softer voice, and then Paxton laughed. “Yeah, kid. I know you're a big girl. Getting too big, if you ask me. Have fun, okay? Call me if you need me.”

They appeared in the doorway of the kitchen a moment later, and Carter trotted over to a cabinet, a backpack dangling from one hand. She waved at me before opening the cabinet and reaching inside.

“Gotta get my snacks,” she said seriously while Brinke rolled her eyes from the hall. At least there wasn't anything malicious about it.

Alex smiled at me and spoke softly to Paxton while Carter tucked a few things into her backpack. Her, I liked.

“You two have fun dealing with that...licensing issue.” Brinke gave me a simpering smile, and the snide tone in her voice rubbed me wrong.

Paxton moved back to the counter and sat down across from me, drawing Brinke's attention to him. "I'd invite you to hang around, but we both know how you hate discussing business. You just enjoy spending the money."

"It's just that you're so much better at all that boring stuff, sweetheart."

A muscle in his jaw flexed, and I recognized the signs of an old argument easy enough. She spun around, Carter's hand in hers while Alex flanked Carter's other side, already chatting. A few seconds later, they were all gone.

Paxton and I were now alone.

Seconds ticked by and he kept his head cocked, listening.

"Think she's going to come back to try and catch us in a lie?"

He shrugged. "Wouldn't put it past her." Another minute or so went by before he seemed to relax, and then he gave me a slow smile. "Licensing issues. That was fast thinking."

I shrugged. "Not so much. I read up about you – part of the job – and I remembered reading that you had some issues with the first music label you signed with. It was the first thing that came to mind. I'm just glad she didn't push for details."

"She wouldn't have. Like I already mentioned, business isn't her thing." His mouth twisted again and he looked irritated all over again.

Reaching out, I touched his hand. It wasn't a good idea, but I hated seeing him upset way more than I should have. "What is it?"

He twined our fingers together, rubbing his thumb across my skin. "Nothing." He continued to stroke my palm, and after a moment, his gaze slid up to mine.

The heat in his eyes scorched me, and I started to tug my hand away. "I should go."

Chapter Eighteen

LESLIE

“*W*hy?” He lifted my hand to his lips, kissed the inside of my wrist. “There’s no reason for our day to end. Not now. We’ve got at least half a day to ourselves.”

My heart leaped up at the press of his lips, flipped around a few times inside my chest, and my body started to go molten as the heat from his kiss spread. My common sense, however, was kicking me in the ass. “Didn’t we already agree this was stupid?”

“Yes,” he said amicably. “We agreed that last night. It didn’t stop us then. You going to let it get in the way now?”

I should. I knew that. But in the end, I just shook my head and reached for him. I’d never wanted anyone as badly as I wanted him. He grabbed my hips and picked me up, sitting me on the table even as I tore at his shirt.

His hands went to the hem of my shirt, yanking it over my head, and taking my mouth only seconds later. His lips were hard against mine, his tongue greedy as it swept into my mouth. We only broke apart to deal with the rest of our clothes, and then he was inside me again. There was no foreplay, no gentle caresses. This was need, fierce and primal. I clung to his body, wrapping my legs around his waist and matching him thrust for thrust as best I could without falling off the table.

The fire inside me was blazing, licking across my skin until I was burning. I felt the orgasm building inside me, relentless. His teeth scraped across my bottom lip and I bit his in return. I dug my fingers into his hair even as one of his hands moved between us. It squeezed my breast, fingers twisting and tugging at my nipple until the pain-laced pleasure sent me

rocketing over the edge.

I tightened around him as I started to come, and suddenly, he froze.

“Son of a bitch!”

He pulled out of me with an urgency that left me floundering, my now-empty pussy spasming as he came too...on my belly. Semen jetted all over my lower abdomen and trickled down as I stared at him. It took my brain a long moment to catch up and realize what we'd done.

“Fuck,” he said, panting. “Damn it, Les. I'm sorry. I can't believe I...”

I reached up, touched his cheek, drawing his attention to me.

“There are two of us here. I'm just as capable of thinking as you are, and I didn't remember either. I'm clean. I get checked regularly. You...?”

His face was still tight. “As far as I know. I get checked every few months. I...” He blew out a breath and reached up, cupping my face. “That's supposed to be a thing of the past when you're married, but...”

I didn't need him to say it. Instead, I did. “Brinke.”

“Brinke,” he agreed.

Despite the circumstances, I allowed myself to enjoy watching his ass flex as he walked over to the sink and grabbed a paper towel, then wet it under the faucet. He washed himself, and then came over with a new one. I shivered under his touch as he gently cleaned me. Neither of us spoke, but I knew he had something he wanted to say.

After he'd disposed of the towel, he came back to me and rested his hands on my thighs.

“The room we were in earlier, that's been mine pretty much since my family moved here. My marriage is over.”

His mouth twisted as he said it, and for a few seconds, he stared past my shoulder. I had a feeling this was the first time he'd ever said those words out loud.

“It's over,” he said again, shaking his head. “I've known that for a while even if I'm just now letting myself admit it. Brinke and I haven't shared a bed in a long time. I would have been able to tell you for certain that everything's fine, but...” He swore and looked away. “We had a fight right before I came to see you. And...hell...it was habit as much as anything. I used a condom, but nothing is foolproof.”

I didn't want to see him getting down on himself. Covering his hands with mine, I leaned in and pressed a kiss to his chin. “Mistakes happen.”

“Yeah.” His gaze slid away and he said, “I'm sorry. I don't know what I

was thinking. I'll get checked again, just to be on the safe side.”

“Thank you,” I said sincerely.

He sighed as his eyes slid back to mine. “See, this is why I insinuated you might melt. I really think you might be a witch. You do bad things to my brain.”

“You do bad things to mine too,” I replied. I rested my head against his chest, wiggled closer. His arms went around me and it was all I could do not to moan. Part of it was the way the golden hair on his chest rubbed against my nipples, but a lot of it had to do with the strength and safety I felt in his embrace.

The contact was doing things for Paxton too. His cock twitched against the folds of my pussy and we both shivered.

“I don’t have any right to ask,” Paxton murmured as he slid a hand up my back, fisted it in my hair. “I’m doing it anyway. Please stay.”

I sighed and looked up at him. “We both know that’s a bad idea. I really shouldn’t.”

“Agreed. It’s a bad idea, and you really shouldn’t.” He brushed his lips across mine. “Do it anyway.”

An hour later, we were soaking in a tub that was almost the size of a small swimming pool, and I’d never felt so decadent in my life.

“I want a bathtub like this. I want a bathroom like this. I could live in here.” Water lapped against my breasts as I cuddled back against his chest, the heat soothing away aches and pains from spending a day wandering the city, and half the night under Paxton. I was in good shape, but all of that combined had been too much for me to get away completely unscathed.

Not that I was complaining at all.

He kissed my temple, and I felt his smile.

“You might eventually want a kitchen, maybe a bedroom.”

I shook my head. “No.” Closing my eyes, I sank a little deeper into a daydream that was going to end far too soon. “I’ll order takeout and I can fit a bed in here.”

He laughed, the sound low and rough and sexy enough to make my toes curl. Arms coming around me, he tugged me more fully against him. His erection pressed against the small of my back.

“And when you have to get work done?”

“I’ll dictate. I’ve got a headset, and I’ll figure out a way to deal with court.” Wiggling loose, I turned around and braced a knee on either side of his hips. “You’re a smart ass, you know. And you’re raining on my parade.”

Blue eyes met mine. The only warning I had was his body tensing, and then we were moving. He grasped my hips, yanked me down into his lap. I gasped as he filled me completely. We rocked together, the motion rubbing my clit against the base of his cock until I cried out his name.

“Damn, that sound...” He pressed his face into the curve of my neck, his lips and teeth working at the skin even as he thrust up into me. “Say my name again.”

He did something with his hips that made his cock hit my g-spot and I had no problem calling out his name again as I came. This time, he waited until I was coming down before he eased out of me and grabbed a nearby washcloth. He finished himself off quickly, and I couldn't help but feel a bit disappointed that I didn't get to feel him come inside me. I was on the pill and he said he was pretty sure he was clean, but he clearly didn't want to take any chances.

After a few minutes of silence, he spoke, “Raining on your parade, am I? I guess I should make it up to you.”

He lifted me onto the edge of the tub and, still watching me, he lowered his mouth to the curls between my thighs.

My breath caught and my body throbbed in anticipation. My skin was so sensitive that this was going to be almost too intense, but I wasn't about to stop him.

One slow lick and he had me open.

Another one had me arching.

The next one circled my clit and made me moan.

When he began to pump his fingers inside me, I closed my eyes and gave in, enjoying the ride.

After a shower to clean up from our bath, I made lunch.

He argued and I insisted. I liked to cook, and I didn't get to do it for others often.

He finally relented and sat down at the table, nursing a ginger ale while I poked around to see what I could find. To my delight, the answer seemed to be...everything.

Somebody here liked to cook as well, it seemed.

I went for simple, because why waste time on something fancy when we only had today? There was some leftover chicken he told me I was free to use, so I went with a rustic sort of chicken salad, adding some walnuts and grapes, then pulled out some of the brioche rolls I found on the counter.

The best part was the potato chips – made in the microwave – and the look on Paxton’s face when I said what I was doing. He seemed to be awaiting disaster. That was fair. I hadn’t expected the recipe I found online to work the first time I’d seen it either, but it did.

When we sat down, he plucked up one of the crispy pieces and studied it for a moment before taking a bite.

The surprise made me laugh. “Never doubt my cooking skills, Paxton. Never.”

“I think it’s safe to say I won’t.” He grabbed a handful of the chips and dug in while I cut the sandwiches in two and served them.

We ate in easy silence, although every now and then, I caught him looking at me. It wasn’t hard to catch him, either. I kept looking at him too. He wore nothing but jeans.

I was wearing nothing but his shirt.

I was also wondering if it would be easy to sneak it out when I left. It smelled of him, and I wanted to wear it until the smell was gone. Then keep on wearing it, trying to remember the scent long after it faded.

You’re getting sappy, lady, I told myself. This isn’t some romance novel.

Although I didn’t say anything, and neither did he, urgency seemed to fill us both.

I’d have to leave soon.

We were in the living room, in front of the TV, although it wasn’t on. Nothing was more interesting than what I was looking at.

He sat on the couch while I sprawled between his thighs. His head was thrown back, and his eyes were closed while I slid my hands and lips across his firm torso. I could spend hours just exploring him.

When I finally reached his cock, I closed my hand around it and stroked up, learning the feel of him, the weight. He was thick, and the silken smooth skin stretched over the length of him. Hungry for him, I licked my lips and looked up.

He was staring at me through slitted eyes. I smiled at him, and leaned forward, pressing my lips to the crown of his cock.

“Do it like you mean it,” he said, tangling a hand in my hair and tugging me closer.

“Do what...this?” I took his cock in my mouth and begin to suck, moving up, then down in a slow, lazy rhythm that belied the hunger driving both of us. If I only had today, I wanted to make the most of every moment, and that meant getting to taste him.

“Yeah. That.”

I shifted, adjusting my pace until I found a rhythm that had his breath catching and a groan rolling out of him. One big hand cupped my jaw while the other tangled in my hair.

“Leslie,” he rasped. Breath coming out in rough pants, he arched up, the muscles in his thighs straining.

I pulled up, letting his cock leave my mouth with a faint *pop*.

He was up a moment later, and I was bent over the couch. There was a ripping sound, and then he thrust into me hard and fast. Two strokes and then he pulled me up against him, his hand arrowing down to manipulate my clitoris as he slowed his rhythm until he was barely moving within me.

He held me pinned to his chest, hips swiveling even as his fingers mimicked the motion on my clit.

Whimpering, I clenched down around him.

He turned his face into my hair. “Do that again.”

I did, clenching my inner muscles tight around him.

His cock pulsed inside me, and I gasped at the exquisiteness of it. I felt each ripple straight to the tips of my toes. My head sagged against his shoulder as he shifted his cock, rubbing against that spot inside me.

He bit my ear and demanded, “Again.”

We continued like that until we were both so ready to come that one more minute, one more *second* was too much to ask. Paxton grabbed my hips and lifted me up, pulled me down. Again, again, again –

I arched my spine and cried out as my orgasm ripped through me.

It was over.

I didn't know how the day had gone by so quickly, but it the same time I knew it was time to go.

Brinke would be home with Carter in an hour or so, and I needed to be gone before then. Once I was dressed, we moved toward the front door, almost by unspoken agreement.

Paxton had gathered trash while I got dressed, dumping it down a shoot hidden behind a door I hadn't even noticed. Handy. I really wouldn't mind it at all, being able to afford a place like this.

I knew what he'd dumped too. All the wrappers from the condoms, the now empty box. Disposing of the evidence, as it were.

"I'll walk you down."

"No." I hovered in the doorway, blocking him. "It's better that you don't." He started to argue, and I reached up, touching his lips. "It's over, Paxton. She'll be back soon, and if she says something to any of the valets..." I let my voice trail off, shaking my head.

Paxton snorted. "She treats them like crap. To her, they're invisible."

"For some people, everybody's invisible until you want something from them. Let's not take the chance." I gave him one last kiss before opening the door. As I walked away, I told myself not to look back.

This time, I actually listened to my own advice.

Chapter Nineteen

PAXTON

The penthouse was too quiet.

That was the first thing I noticed after I closed the door behind Leslie.

I had the insane urge to open the door and call her back – fuck Brinke. It wasn't like she hadn't been running around on me for years. I wasn't an idiot.

But Leslie was right.

Besides, everything was about to change.

The divorce was going to be hell on Carter. Even though Brinke was hardly ever there for her anyway, it was going to change things in a big way and before long, I'd be...

“Shit.” I shoved the heels of my hands against my eyes. “I'm going to be a single dad.”

More than that, I'd be a single dad with sole custody if things went right.

I didn't want to keep Carter from Brinke, and if she ever got herself together, we could change things. Leslie was right. Shared custody would eventually be fine, but not while she was messed up like this.

Worry started to gnaw at me, and I tugged my phone out, sent a quick text to Brinke. She didn't respond so I tagged Alex.

The nanny responded immediately.

Everything is fine, although we're probably going to be late. She decided she was starving and we ended up at one of the busiest places in Manhattan...and she was recognized.

Well, that was just great.

But not entirely shocking.

Brinke ended up responding a few minutes later, and the text was more than a little bitchy.

For fuck's sake, stop checking up on me. Everything is cool. She ate a nice healthy breakfast and lunch – no sweets, just like we agreed. You worry too much.

Sighing, I shoved the phone away and then pushed away from the door, moving into the tomb-like silence of the penthouse. Why hadn't I ever noticed how quiet it was here? Probably because I was hardly ever here alone. But once the divorce was final, there would be times when I'd be here by myself. I'd probably arrange for Alex to go with Carter whenever she was with Brinke. Brinke got along with her well enough, and I knew I could trust Alex.

A hell of a lot more than I could trust my wife.

Ex-wife. Soon to be *ex-wife*.

Guilt rubbed me raw inside because part of my brain was still occupied with thoughts of Leslie, and now with Brinke and the upcoming divorce weighing down on me, I had to think about what I'd done. It pissed me off all over again, and I stormed into the living room, randomly grabbing up a few toys that hadn't gotten picked up from yesterday. The cleaning people were in twice a week, but they couldn't be here around the clock, and still have plenty of work.

Carter and Brinke made sure of that. At least my daughter was only six. She was still learning.

I burned through nervous energy setting things to right, trying hard not to think about why I was anxious.

"Everything's fine," I told myself.

This wasn't like the last time Carter had been with her mom all day. That had been in California, and Alex hadn't been with them then. In the end, that was why we'd left California and moved to New York. The rest of the guys had already called the city their home base, but we'd always been fine traveling back and forth when it came time to record. After that mess with Brinke, I realize we needed a clean slate.

What happened still tore me up inside when I thought about it. They'd

gone to an aquarium, then shopping. Everything had been fine up until Brinke got 'thirsty.' I could still hear her explanation.

I don't know what the fucking problem was – she was in the car maybe twenty minutes and the windows were down. Not like she was going to die of a heat stroke. Everybody is all up in my ass because I'm famous and that fucking judge had a hard-on for me. That's the whole problem, baby.

But a guy had come into the little open air restaurant where she'd been belting back her third martini and said somebody left a kid alone in a car – anybody know who she belonged to? He'd already called the cops.

Then, to make matters worse, Brinke had tottered on off and gotten into the fucking car – drunk.

Sometimes I got sick thinking about what might have happened if somebody hadn't put two and two together and followed her, managing to get the keys while she'd still been trying to get them into the ignition.

She'd done a six-week, court-ordered stint in rehab, and had come out more level. I'd hoped she'd stay that way. Now I was kicking myself for thinking things might work out.

I grabbed my phone after dumping an armful of toys in the giant crate Alex had found for just that purpose.

Pacing over to the window, I pulled out my phone and almost sent another message.

But what was the point?

Alex was there. Carter was safe with Alex there.

I stood in front of the windows and stared outside.

I wasn't seeing the city's brightly light skyline, though.

In my mind's eye, I was seeing Leslie.

Her and Carter. For a while, it had been easy to just kind of...wish.

Stupid, maybe, but easy.

I'd had a million things go through my head once I'd found out I was going to be a dad, but none of them had been like the reality. The reality of picking Carter up when I realized Brinke was getting sick in the bathroom because she'd drank half the night.

The reality of not just baby proofing the house, but daily – and nightly – checks to make sure my wife hadn't left pills laying out.

I was an idiot.

I should have ended this a long time ago. The reason I hadn't was because Brinke had *gotten* me. Before. She'd been the first one to ever understand who I was. But now, we were so far apart, we might as well be strangers and worse, she was a stranger who wasn't good for my kid.

I'd started to think that maybe the only way my daughter would ever have somebody *good* around her would be through people I *paid* – like Alex – or through the friends I was lucky enough to have, like Decker and LaToya.

Then Leslie had sort of just dropped into Carter's life and made my baby girl laugh. She'd talked to her like she mattered.

With Brinke, sometimes Carter was like a doll, something fun to play with when she had time – and was sober enough. But beyond that? Brinke was what mattered to Brinke. I knew she loved our daughter, but never enough to put Carter's well being above her own.

Maybe if Leslie had been a little less amazing, I wouldn't still be thinking about her. Maybe I wouldn't have coaxed her into staying the day. Laughed with her, talked with her.

I'd had fun with her, and not just when I was balls-deep inside her either.

And I'd cheated on my wife with her.

I could rationalize the hell out of it. Brinke hadn't been faithful since the first year of our marriage. I'd seen it with my own eyes. I'd walked in while she was fucking a guy from some other band.

He'd seen me.

She hadn't.

I'd walked back out and told myself to find a woman, but I hadn't. All these years, I hadn't. And now when it was almost over, I'd cheated.

I didn't know why it bothered me so much. It'd clearly never bothered Brinke to break the promises she made.

I'll have her back by eight, sugar. Promise.

Promises.

Setting my jaw, I looked over at the clock and saw that it was just after seven.

I wasn't going to think about it.

Heading to the practice studio I'd set up, I grabbed my guitar and moved back into the living room. I was no master with the instrument. I could strum my way through a song, and that was it, but having a tune helped when I was trying to put new lyrics to paper.

Killing time, I played with the melody that had been going through my

head for weeks – longer. The song had been chasing me.

Broken promises.

I knew plenty about those.

Although the song was *there*, dying to be written, it hadn't wanted to come; but tonight, whether loosened by stress or something else, I managed to get a few more lines down and fix the opening.

I had Leslie in mind as I played.

Wrong as it might've been, I could no longer pretend that Brinke was any kind of inspiration. She hadn't been for a while, and I'd been writing without a muse.

There was nothing romantic about the lyrics coming out of me – it was all sex and heat and that was fine.

It felt like the sun coming out after months of storm.

I looked up only when the phone rang, and I realized it had gotten dark. Dark. And it was still quiet in the penthouse, which meant it was well past time for Brinke to have been home with Carter.

Swearing, I started to fumble for the phone I almost always had in my back pocket when I realized it was already ringing. On the coffee table.

I grabbed it, seeing a picture of Alex and Carter flash on the screen. My gut, already slippery and twisted with tension, eased a little.

“Yeah?”

“Paxton.” It was indeed Alex and her normally calm, confident voice was *not* calm or confident.

Don't panic, I told myself. *Don't panic*.

“What's up, Alex? You guys running late?” *Obvious answer is obvious, genius*.

“We were finally getting ready to go, and I got up to use the restroom. Carter didn't want to go with me so I left her with Brinke. I just got back to the table and they're gone.”

I blinked, my brain not processing. “Alex?”

“They're *gone*, Paxton,” she nearly screamed. “The manager is here telling me that Brinke said I was taking care of the tab because it was her birthday – the bill is over three thousand dollars – ” Her voice hitched and then steadied. “I'll handle it, but they're *gone*.”

“The fuck you'll handle it,” I said, furious and getting more so. “Give him the business card I gave you for expenses and...” My brain stopped functioning after that because that was the only thing I had a definite solution

for.

Don't panic, I told myself. *Don't panic*.

“She’s probably fucking with us,” I told Alex, forcing myself to calm. “We both know she was pissed off because I insisted you go with her. Go on outside and see if you can find them anywhere nearby. I’ll try calling her.”

Don't panic, I thought again. And I managed to listen to my own advice.

For a while.

I sent text after text to Brinke. No response to any of them.

Alex came rushing in less than thirty minutes after she’d called, her eyes half-wild.

I’d shaken my head and after a little while, I told her to go ahead and go on down to her place. No reason for us both to sit there and stare at my phone like it was a snake.

Don't panic. Don't panic.

But by the time midnight rolled around and I still hadn’t heard from Brinke, fuck it, I was ready to panic.

Chapter Twenty

LESLIE

The hours drifted by in a haze.

I knew I'd gotten in my car, driven back home, and put my car back into my space. I knew I came inside and changed into my pajamas.

After that?

I thought I sorta drifted around the apartment, smiling stupidly as I gazed toward Manhattan and the general direction where Paxton would be. Carter would be home by now.

Hopefully, she'd had fun, and now she and Paxton were settling in for the night. Having dinner maybe, or she was taking a bath, and he was cleaning up in the kitchen. The mega-rich, mega-beautiful Paxton Gorham didn't mind getting his hands dirty in the kitchen. It was kind of hot.

At some point, those silly daydreams turned into real dreams, and I fell asleep on my bed, curled up on my side.

Paxton was there and this time, we didn't have borrowed time or a few stolen hours.

We just had each other.

When the phone rang, it jolted me out of a hot, sexy dream, and I sat there a few seconds, confused. The phone rang again, and I grabbed it, staring at it blearily before the number clicked and I realized who it was.

"Hello?"

"Leslie. It's Paxton."

"Yes?"

A few taut moments of silence passed before he said anything, and my heart began to beat in hard, slow beats, each one of them becoming more and

more deafening until I could barely hear anything past it.

When he finally spoke, I was aware of nothing but his voice.

“It’s Brinke,” he said finally.

I swallowed, my hand going damp where it clutched the phone. Shit.

“Leslie...she...she hasn’t come home yet. She and Carter...they’ve disappeared.”

I *heard* the words – they made sense, logically.

But, in that moment, all I could do was picture Carter and the way she and her father looked at her.

Carter...

“Leslie!” Paxton’s voice barked out of the phone in harsh demand.

“I heard you,” I said quietly, struggling to keep my voice level. My mind spun.

“They’ve disappeared, dammit! What in the hell am I supposed to do?”

A Legal Affair continues in Book 2. [Click here](#) to get the complete Box Set.

BONUS 2: UNLAWFUL ATTRACTION

Club Prive – Dena’s Story

M. S. PARKER

M.S. PARKER
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A photograph of a man with a beard and short hair, wearing a dark suit jacket over a white shirt that is unbuttoned at the collar. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is dark and moody.

UNLAWFUL
ATTRACTION

VOL. I

Chapter One

DENA

The woman in the mirror looked back at me with pale gray eyes that matched the suit. It was a good suit, one I wore when I needed to look at least close to my twenty-six years, or when I wanted to look my best. Since today was my last day at Webster & Steinberg, it was my only choice.

I couldn't believe it was finally here. I'd gone through the follow-ups with my biggest clients and handled the ones who needed to be gently handed off to the woman who'd fill my shoes. They'd all been sorry to see me go, but not as sorry as my boss. I'd be the fourth lawyer she lost in a little over a year. The other three had been friends of mine, and their absence here made leaving a bit easier.

I thoroughly expected to get through the day without anyone really noticing and I'd managed it up until a few minutes ago when my co-workers had sprung a surprise going-away party for me. Surprise because I wasn't really that close with any of them. Without Leslie, Carrie and Krissy here, I'd mostly kept to myself. I wasn't shy or a snob, but I liked to focus on my work, and they'd been the only ones who'd ever really managed to keep me from being a total workaholic.

The bathroom door swung open and I leaned forward to finish checking my make-up. I hadn't cried because I didn't do that, but I had gotten a bit teary and I wanted to make sure nothing had run.

Emma smiled at me as she came in. "Don't think for one moment we're going to let you hide in here."

I gave her a small smile. "I thought for once you guys wouldn't make a big deal of things."

“You’re such a sweet kid, believing in fairy tales.” She winked at me before disappearing into one of the stalls.

I laughed and affably called her a bitch before stepping back from the counter. With my white blonde hair chopped into a short pixie-cut and my petite frame, I looked years younger than I was, which meant I spent plenty of time being referred to as a 'kid.' Instead of letting it bother me, I usually took advantage of people underestimating me.

“By the way, Dena, one of the partners came down to tell you good-bye. Better get out there,” she added.

Sighing, I pushed away from the sink. “Why would they want to do that?” I’d already said good-bye to my boss, Mimi. She wasn’t a named partner, but rumor had it she would be by the end of the year.

Emma answered my question, “Probably because you know exactly when to go for the balls and exactly how hard to squeeze. You’ll be missed. For your ability to squeeze balls if nothing else.”

I rolled my eyes as I turned toward the door.

Another hour and I’d be done. I both dreaded and anticipated the moment. I’d miss the stability, the familiarity of Webster & Steinberg, but at the same time, I’d been preparing for the step I was about to take for what felt like my entire life.

As soon as I stepped out of the bathroom, scents of food assailed me from the break room. My belly started to rumble almost immediately. They’d kept me running all day, so when I hadn’t been finishing up with my clients, I’d been handling busy work or running errands, even making calls that generally the interns would’ve handled. I hadn’t thought anything of it since I’d known I couldn’t take on anything new.

Now I saw they’d kept me busy so I wouldn’t figure out what they were up to. It also meant I hadn’t had a chance to eat lunch. Most people thought that since I was barely five feet and maybe a hundred pounds that I didn’t eat much. That wasn’t the case, and I was seriously hungry.

As I stepped into the break room, the decorations hit me all over again. The entire room was done up in streamers, and on the far wall there was a sign with bars that read *Put ‘em away, Dena!* Behind the bars, it showed the scruffy, tired face of a man glaring sullenly at the camera.

Two weeks ago, I’d accepted a position as an assistant district attorney. I wouldn’t be arguing the big cases or anything. Not for a while yet, but at least I had the ever important foot in the door. Once I’d proven myself, I’d get to

start on the big stuff.

“Are you excited?”

At the question, I looked over at Lori Martin, the attorney the firm had hired to take my clients. Since Leslie had left a couple months back, I carried too heavy a load to just shunt my cases off onto others in the firm. The divorce business was booming.

Smiling at Lori, I nodded. “I am.”

For as long as I could remember, this was all I ever wanted to do. Some little girls grew up dreaming about being a nurse, a doctor, a teacher. Not me.

A friend of mine from high school had majored in archaeology. That had been her dream ever since she'd been a kid. Working in the garden with her mom one year, she'd found a bone and in her child's mind, it had been a bone from some rare, undiscovered dinosaur. In reality, it'd been a dog's hind leg, but that hadn't mattered in the long run. It sparked her interest and she'd gone for it.

I'd always wanted to be a lawyer. A prosecutor, to be specific. Working at Webster & Steinberg had only been a stepping stone.

Unfortunately, I didn't have some fun little story about why I'd decided I wanted to put bad guys away. My desire had come from tragedy.

Late one night, more than twenty years ago, sirens had woken me. I'd crawled into bed with my parents and gone back to sleep. As a child, that wailing sound had been common enough in my neighborhood.

The next morning, both of my parents had been unusually quiet. My father had gone to work like usual, but Mom stayed home with me. When I asked her why my sitter hadn't come yet, she told me my sitter had gone away. I persisted, but all she'd say was that Miss Jenny was gone and I'd understand when I was older.

The problem was, I'd always been a precocious child, too nosy for my own good, and I discovered the truth myself a couple of days later when I'd seen a newspaper with a picture of Jenny.

Mom had come in when I'd been sounding out the headline.

She'd tried to take the paper away, but I'd already figured out enough of the words to ask the question.

What's dead, Mama?

My mother had softened the blow as much as she could, but how could anything about murder be soft to a four year-old? I'd understood sick and old, but I'd known Miss Jenny hadn't been either one of those.

Mom told me that the man who'd killed Miss Jenny had been a different kind of sick and that he hadn't meant it. My childish mind had accepted that, but I'd come back to her explanation years later when the older sister of a boy in my class had been murdered. At twelve, I'd been old enough to read the stories in the newspapers and online. And I'd been old enough to research when I recognized the name of the man's previous victim.

Jennifer Kyle.

That's when I'd found out that Jenny's killer had been an ex who'd beaten her before. That he'd been arrested with her blood still on him, but a defense attorney had found a loophole that had let the murderer go free. Free to kill my classmate's sister.

That was when I'd decided what I wanted to do with my life. I wanted to be the one who made the bad guys go to jail.

Soon, I'd be doing it. Very soon.

Looking over at Lori, I nodded again. "Yes. I'm very excited."

My excitement must've been showing on my face when I walked into Club Privé that night. My friends were already waiting for me at our regular table, Carrie's and Krissy's men at their sides. Carrie and her extremely rich and hot fiancé, Gavin Manning, ran the club together and they were almost sickeningly in love. Not that Krissy and her equally gorgeous and wealthy man, DeVon, were any better. They both lived on the West Coast, but DeVon was rich enough that he and Krissy came to visit as often as possible.

I hugged Leslie first as she stood to push out my chair. Krissy was next, and then I was in Carrie's arms for a quick, but heartfelt embrace.

I didn't have a chance for anything more than that, though.

Carrie's eyes narrowed as she released me. "You're up to something. It's written all over your face, Dena. Tell us. What is it? Tell us."

Krissy leaned forward a little bit, her expression speculative.

Shit. I'd forgotten how intuitive the two of them could be. Even Leslie was looking at me with suspicion, and she usually let me alone.

"You're right, Carrie," Krissy agreed, nodding sagely. "You're up to something, Dena. I know that smirk. What's going on?"

I reached for the glass of water in front of me and took a sip, trying to buy time. I didn't want to just blurt it out. These three women were my best friends, the closest things I'd ever had to sisters. They would understand why

this was so important to me.

In those brief seconds, Krissy took over, falling easily into her usual role within the group. Her dark eyes glinted as she propped her elbow on the table. Chin in hand, she asked, “Did you meet a guy? Say you met a guy. Tall and blond, or dark and mysterious?”

“Both?” Leslie wiggled her eyebrows suggestively. At least with her there, I wasn't the only single one.

With a snort, I glanced over as a woman stopped by to check on our drinks. I put my order in before answering, “No. I didn't meet a guy.” Mentally, I added, *I wish*.

I'd hooked up with a couple men off and on over the past year, but none of them had been worth more than one night. A part of me wanted what Krissy and Carrie had, but it wasn't as easy for me as it was for them.

I wasn't exactly blaming myself for my single state, but I had certain...quirks that made it hard for anything long-term. Club Privé, ideally, should've made it easier, but in reality, it hadn't.

There were plenty of good-looking guys – and hell, I wasn't so shallow that the man had to be a ten. Other things mattered besides washboard abs and a face that looked like he'd been carved by the very hands of Michelangelo. I *did* want somebody I was physically attracted to, but somebody who made me laugh and somebody who *got* me did a hell of a lot more than a pretty face.

And that was where everything got fucked up.

Club Privé was a sex club, and one that catered to the bdsm lifestyle. Except most of the guys who came here already had it in their head what they wanted from a sub, and I didn't fit that role. Oh, I might've looked the part, but there weren't a lot of men who had what it took to dominate a switch. And that's what I was.

Some of the time, I loved being in control in the bedroom, but there a lot of times I needed something else. It freed something inside me, gave me a place where I could just let go and know that I'd be taken care of. But it'd been way too long since I'd had that.

The men who saw that I could also dominate took it as a challenge, something to work out of me, especially the men who got off on humiliation as a way to top their partner. I didn't judge the ones who were into that, but it wasn't my kink. Sub or Dom, I enjoyed the control part of things. A little rough play wasn't bad, but the whole punishment / humiliation part of things

wasn't what I wanted.

So, more often than not, I ended up on top. And while that did speak to my control-freak side, it didn't do that much for the part of me who wanted to be taken care of.

Feeling the watchful eyes of my friends, I glanced up and smiled a little ruefully. "No. No guy. I wish that was my surprise." I gave a lusty sigh. "Man, do I ever wish."

"But there is a surprise?" Leslie asked.

"Well..." I drew the word out, not bothering to fight my grin. "Yes. Usually, you two are the ones with all the good news and stuff, but it's my turn."

Across the glossy surface of the big, round table, Krissy and DeVon shared a secretive little smile. Or at least, Krissy had a secretive smile on her face when she looked over at him. He smiled back at her, but he just looked laid back and relaxed as he traced his fingers over the skin of her arm.

Reaching for my wineglass, I asked, "All right, you two. What's going on?"

"No, no, no. You have news. I want to hear your news." Krissy shook her head emphatically, her eyes sparkling.

I glanced at DeVon. Maybe he wasn't grinning the way she was, but his dark brown eyes had a glint to them, and there was definitely something different in the looks he was giving her. I was used to him looking at her like he couldn't wait to find somewhere private he could do some seriously naughty things to her, but these looks were different. Gentle, awed.

I glanced over at Carrie and she shrugged. "Beats me. She's been all giggly ever since she got here, and she won't say anything. Now spill your news before I have to beat it out of you."

Gavin nuzzled Carrie's neck. "Can we watch?" He winked at me, a playful gesture that had absolutely no heat to it.

Carrie elbowed him sharply and he kissed her cheek. I would've suggested they get a room, but they probably would've done exactly that and disappeared for the rest of the night.

I rolled my eyes. "Okay, I'll spill." I may have sounded like they were twisting my arm, but I knew my friends didn't believe it for a minute. I allowed myself another dramatic pause. "As of today, I'm unemployed."

All five of them exchanged glances that ranged from worried to confused.

Unsurprisingly, it was Krissy who spoke first. "Okay. I don't get it. You

look happy. Having a job is a good thing, right?”

“It is.” I smiled and continued, “Technically, I guess you could say I'm only temporarily unemployed. First thing Monday, I'm starting my new job as an assistant district attorney.”

They stared at me for a moment as they processed the news, and then the women erupted. Krissy practically climbed over DeVon to get out of the booth while Carrie wrapped me up in a tight hug. Leslie was next, her squeal loud enough to make the nearest table stare at us. I didn't care though. As Krissy joined in the group hug, I closed my eyes and sighed.

I might not have had a fantastic guy, but I was getting ready to start my dream job and I had great friends. Life was good.

“I think her bladder has shrunk down to the size of a peanut,” Carrie said as she scrolled through her iPad, showing me pictures of some of the places she and Gavin were planning on going for their honeymoon.

Krissy had been looking at pictures with the rest of us, but now she was in the bathroom for the third time.

I studied the serene, blue-green waters on the screen before glancing up at Carrie. “I'm dying of envy, you know.”

“Take a vacation and go. You don't need a guy to go on vacation,” Carrie said.

“But they do make some things more fun,” Leslie put in with a wicked grin. “You could pick one up over there in a heartbeat. Get your brains fucked out. You probably need it.” She nudged me with her elbow, green eyes shining.

Rolling my eyes, I shook my head. “It'll be a little bit before I get a decent vacation. Starting a new job, remember?”

“Doesn't mean you can't pick up a hottie to have some fun with right here,” Leslie said. She tossed her red curls over her shoulder and surveyed the prospects again.

Across from us, DeVon caught my attention by getting to his feet. Even if that hadn't been a clue, I would've known by the way his face softened that Krissy was coming back from the bathroom.

As she took her seat next to him, I glanced at her. “That's like your third trip to powder your nose, honey.”

“A girl must always look her best,” she said primly. She gestured to the

tablet. "Carrie still teasing us with her honeymoon plans?"

"It's not teasing," Carrie huffed. "It's *sharing*."

"Teasing, sharing. It's all the same thing," Krissy made a dismissive gesture with her hand.

"If you want to go on a fantastic trip with your man, nobody's stopping you." Carrie waved loftily in DeVon's direction.

"No, travel is something we won't be doing for a while." Krissy looked up at the man sitting next to her and stroked her hand across his arm. He gave her a slight nod. "As a matter of fact, in a few months we won't even be able to travel out here much."

DeVon slid his arm around her shoulders and leaned over to kiss the top of her head.

I frowned as I looked at Leslie and Carrie who looked as lost as I was. "Is everything okay?" I asked.

It seemed like a stupid question. Krissy looked fine. She was smiling, her face glowing. And it wasn't like she was drunk or anything. I glanced at her glass. All Krissy had sipped on all night was water...

"Son of a bitch. You're pregnant." The words popped out without me realizing that I was planning on saying them.

"Seriously?" Leslie asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Take a look." I pointed at Krissy's glass. "No alcohol. Three bathroom trips in just a couple hours. Travel restrictions. And the two of them have been practically purring over something all night."

Carrie, Gavin and Leslie looked at Krissy and DeVon. The matching smiles on their faces confirmed everything I was saying. Leslie squealed again as we all moved to hug our friends.

Babies and marriages and new jobs. It seemed like my little group of friends and I were all moving toward new chapters in our lives, and I was more than ready to see what the future held.

Chapter Two

DENA

*K*rissy and DeVon had left nearly half an hour ago. They were leaving in the morning so they could stop over in Chicago to tell Krissy's family the good news. Leslie had been on the prowl for a while, but seemed to be setting her sights on one dark-haired man who seemed to be thoroughly enjoying her attention. Carrie and Gavin were dancing somewhere, although he did occasionally have to stop to deal with business. She didn't seem to mind though. She seemed more at home here than she ever had at Webster & Steinberg.

Swaying on the dance floor, I contemplated my own prospects for the night. I hadn't spent time and money on the sexy little black number I was currently wearing just to hang out and watch my friends. With my petite build, I had to be careful I didn't pick things that made me look twelve, and I'd chosen this dress specifically because it didn't. Matched with a pair of four inch heels, I knew I looked good. Now I just had to find someone worth the effort that had gone into looking like this.

I'd already declined several offers when a sleek, chiseled guy approached me, his hands coming out to grasp my hips sure and confident. The way he moved would've given me high hopes if I hadn't already done this song and dance a hundred times before. At least it felt that way.

Lazily, I spun around on the floor, putting my back to his chest, enjoying the feel of his body moving against mine. It was a trick of mine, a way to gauge if I wanted to do anything more than share a dance with him. If he got all grabby then and there, then it would end here. There was a fine line between sensual and out-and-out groping.

He dipped his head and skimmed his lips along my bare shoulder.

I felt disconnected.

That didn't bode well.

His palm stroked up my side and I caught his wrist. Too bad.

"A little shy?" he murmured in my ear, just loud enough to be heard over the music.

"I prefer to think of myself as selective."

He chuckled, and I felt a warm puff of air against my ear. It didn't feel erotic. The gut instinct I relied on as both an attorney and a New Yorker told me this wasn't the right guy.

Still, I kept my movements easy as I swiveled around to look at him. I needed to see how he'd take me not melting in his arms.

He gave me a slow, sage nod as if his approval was somehow necessary. "I like that. Picky. You just need the right man to take you. Make you obedient. Break you until you're the perfect little submissive slave."

Was he serious? Any lust I'd been feeling vanished. Lip curling, I came to a stop in the middle of the dance floor.

"Break me?" I said. At that exact moment, the music fell into one of those odd lulls – the DJ switching to a different song, or an electrical issue – and those two words hung in the air.

I didn't normally care to be the center of attention unless I was addressing the court, but at that moment, I was too pissed off to care. As he took a step toward me, still smiling that smug smile, I let my disdain show through. The music started again, but the attention was still on me.

"*Break* me?" I said again. I hated men like this, the ones who gave the entire lifestyle a bad name. "Is that what you think this is about? Either you're new, or you never had a decent teacher, so let me give you some advice. Being a Dom has nothing to do with *breaking* anybody. Submission is all about willingly giving up control to someone you trust. Not someone who *broke* you."

His face bled to an ugly shade of red and he took another step toward me.

Suddenly, a large body stepped between me and the idiot. A glance up told me that it was one of the regulars, a Dom who was easily six and a half feet tall and built like a brick wall.

"I think you need to leave the lady alone," he said, towering over the much smaller man.

The wannabe Dom gave me a scathing look around the man between us

before storming off. For a few seconds, the tension held, but then it was gone and everyone went back to what they'd been doing.

I thanked the man who helped me and smiled as I watched him walk away. A tall, muscular man was waiting and the two shared a sweet embrace that made something in my chest ache. It seemed like everyone but me could find what they needed.

Twenty minutes and a glass and a half of wine later, Gavin found me brooding at the bar. "I showed that asshole to the door."

"Ugh," I groaned. "You didn't need to kick him out for me." Picking up my glass of wine, I swirled it around before meeting his gaze.

"It wasn't just for you. It was for everyone here. And for me."

Gavin leaned back against the bar, resting on his elbows. Not for the first time, I thought of how lucky Carrie was to have found him.

He continued, "Apparently, he was here on a guest VIP pass, trying the package out. After you shut him down, he came stomping up to me and got in my face, wanting to know why the subs weren't better trained." Amusement danced in his deep blue eyes. "Dena, why aren't you better trained?"

I chuckled, and then asked, "Was Carrie around when he asked that?"

"Yeah, she was." He grinned at me.

I burst out laughing, my melancholy mood gone. He leaned over and kissed my cheek. "I thought that would make you smile."

Someone called his name and he headed off, but I wasn't left alone long. When somebody settled down next to me, I glanced over, a dismissal already forming on my lips. I'd already decided I wasn't up to messing around tonight.

But then I met a pair of soft blue eyes and something stayed my tongue.

"Hello."

The man's gaze fell away for a brief moment, and then he looked at me and smiled.

"I enjoyed your show on the dance floor."

"That wasn't meant to be a show." I gave him a wry smile before taking another sip of wine.

"I figured as much." He quickly brushed his fingers across the back of my hand before pulling away, his eyes dropping for another moment. "Are you looking for company tonight?"

I took my time deliberating the question. This guy wasn't exactly what I'd been planning on, but no one had been lately. Besides, he looked like he might be fun.

Private rooms at Club Privé were nothing short of amazing to begin with. As a VIP member and one of Carrie's best friends, I had access to the best of the best.

In this case, it involved a room where I could stretch myself out on a king-size bed, while the sub who'd approached me knelt between my thighs and went to work on me like there was nothing else he would rather do than lick me straight into orgasm.

And he was damn *good* at it too.

After he'd brought me to a second climax, he paused, his cheek on my thigh as his breath came in rough, ragged gasps. I propped myself up on my elbows and looked down my body to meet Jack's blue eyes.

“Would you like another?” He licked his lips, clearly having enjoyed himself as much as I had.

I did, actually, because the first two had been wonderful, but what I really wanted was his cock. Absently, I tried to remember the last time I'd been the one on my knees, a man's hands fisted tightly in my hair while he thrust his cock past my lips, deep into my mouth until I couldn't take him deeper – and then he had me take just a little more.

I could've gone down on Jack, felt the weight of him on my tongue, but it wouldn't have been the same. There was a term, 'topping from the bottom' that could've worked, where I was technically still dominating the sub, but performing various things that one would normally consider to be the function of a sub.

It wasn't the actions I wanted though. I wanted the loss of control. But since I couldn't have that, I'd have him.

Sitting up, I fisted a hand in Jack's dark hair. He made a small sound in the back of his throat.

“I think what I want right now is for you to get on the bench over there.”

“What do you plan to do to me?” Jack asked, voice ragged.

The excitement in his voice was palpable, and something monstrously close to envy burned inside me. Pushing my initial plan aside, I didn't answer him. “I changed my mind. Kneel down in front of the bench. Facing it.”

His long, lean body flushed as he moved to do as I said. His cock was hard and he hadn't even touched it. I knew he was waiting for me to tell him it was okay, but we weren't there yet. Since I'd brought him up here, I'd agreed, even if it had been silently, to take care of his needs. That's what a good Dom did, made sure their sub was taken care of.

As he knelt down in front of the bench, I moved to the wall with its display of various tools and toys. Upon using one, it would be added to my account and I could either take it home, or they'd keep it for me for the next time. I took my time and found a crop that was both functional and elegant.

What could I say? I was a girl who liked having pretty toys.

Testing it against my hand, I glanced over to find him staring at me in the mirror.

The naked heat and raw desire in his eyes fired that part of me that did enjoy the domination side of things, and I turned, walking lazily over to him. Pressing the end of the crop to his neck, I nudged him forward.

“Bend over.”

After he complied, I took a moment to admire the designs tattooed across his skin. I traced them with the tip of the crop and watched goosebumps break out across his skin. When he was practically shivering in anticipation, I lifted the crop then brought it down across his muscled ass. He tensed, a harsh noise escaping him.

I knew that sound. It wasn't one of pain, but rather the sound that someone made when pain had been relieved. My gut clenched and I pushed aside my own desire for that same relief.

I brought the crop down again, this time on his right flank.

Another tight sound escaped him followed by a shudder.

I settled into a pattern that alternated from side to side, working up and down from his buttocks to a few inches above his knees, staying away from the joints where it could cause damage.

He was moaning and writhing, demanding sounds falling harshly from his lips. He was panting, begging, swearing...but never once did he say the safe word we'd agreed on.

Finally, I brought the crop to my side and moved forward, straddling the bench. “Sit up,” I ordered.

He did, swaying a bit, his eyes glazed with the headspace that came with someone thoroughly into what we were doing. I waited until he was steady, watching to make sure I didn't need to help him maintain his balance. When I

was sure he was okay, I reached for him.

Fisting a hand in his hair, I brought his head to my breast. “Suck on me. Hard.”

He immediately took my left nipple into his mouth, using his tongue to work the tip into a taut point. He seemed to know instinctively how much pressure to use, and when he scraped his teeth over me, it brought a ragged cry to my lips.

He paused, eyes flicking up to my face.

I brought the crop down on his ass, hard enough to sting, but not to hurt. “I didn’t tell you to stop.”

He went back to the task at hand with as much enthusiasm as before, this time alternating between my breasts. After a few minutes, his talented mouth had me aching and ready.

“Sit down.” I gestured to the space in front of me.

He moved with easy fluidity and I took another moment to admire him before I grabbed the condom I’d gotten ready earlier. Tearing it open, I leaned forward and slowly rolled it over his thick shaft. My knuckles brushed against his stomach, the tense muscles twitching under my touch.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” I asked softly.

“Yes.” His voice was a low, husky rasp and the gleam of satisfaction in his eyes made me smile.

“Good.” I trailed my fingers down his thigh. “That’s good, Jack. Now you get to show me how much you appreciated it.”

I moved to straddle his lap, but didn’t sink down on him. Not yet. He was strung far too tight. No matter how much control he had, I doubted he’d be able to overcome his body’s natural needs if I slid down on him right now. I pushed my hands through his hair, making slow, even strokes across his scalp until I felt the tension in his body start to ease.

“Now, Jack, are you ready to show me how much you appreciated it?”

“Hell, yes,” Jack said and the words were ragged, underscored with an unspoken demand. He didn’t say it, but I knew he was almost dying for release.

I was, too.

Smiling at him, I finally lowered myself enough for contact, brushing the tip of him against me. His latex-sheathed dick felt good, and I shivered in appreciation. He was hot. His cock was average size, but he was thicker than normal, and I knew he would feel amazing stretching me.

Taking his hands, I guided them to my hips. I was the one calling the shots, so I was at least going to get at least one thing I wanted.

Oblivion.

“I want you to fuck me now, Jack. Hard.”

I put my hands on his shoulders as I dropped a bit lower. We both moaned. My hands flexed on his shoulders, nails digging into his flesh.

“I want to feel it in the morning. Got it?”

His eyes widened slightly, pupils spiking. Something flashed across his face and then a slow smile curled his lips. “Yes, ma'am.”

“Any rules?”

“Yes. You don't stop, and you don't get to come until I do.”

He nodded and his grip on my hips tightened. He raised his hips even as he pulled me down, driving himself deep and hard. My head fell back and Jack began to prove that he was a man of many talents.

As he dressed, Jack asked if he could see me again. I gave him a noncommittal shrug. I wasn't totally opposed to the idea. I had to admit, he was the best partner I'd had in a good long while. He was definitely the best sub I'd ever topped. And he was an all-around good guy from what I saw.

On my way to the front of the club, my body ached in all the best ways and I knew that I'd be able to sleep better than I had in a while. He'd done exactly as I'd asked, fucked me good and hard, and all the stress that had been caged inside me had drifted away with each climax.

He hadn't just held back until I came. He'd held back until I came *twice*.

Jack wasn't a novice, or somebody looking to hold his hand, either. He was doing the same thing I was, looking for a partner. Someone who got everything he needed. If he'd been a switch, the two of us would've been perfect for each other.

But he was a sub through and through, and in the end, I needed more.

Still, I wasn't against the idea of us hooking up again in the future, and that had been what I told him. He'd taken my lack of commitment with good-natured humor and kissed me gently. Proving again what a great guy he was.

And then, right before he'd left, he said, “It can't be easy.”

I'd looked at him in confusion and he just shrugged.

“It can be a bitch sometimes, finding a decent partner. I'm sure you've heard it. I'm not a submissive guy outside of here, but when it comes to

sex...well, all I want is to please the woman I'm with, and I enjoy submitting. Finding a partner who gets that can be complicated. I've been with more than a couple of female Doms who deal with the same sort of crap, just the opposite side of the coin. The guy is supposed to be on top and the woman is supposed to submit. All that shit. I figured you probably got it too, except from both ends."

"How'd you know?" I'd asked, curious. Nobody ever figured out that I was a switch, unless I told them. And I didn't make a practice of that. In the bdsm world, being a switch was almost like how some people looked at being bisexual. That you could only be one or the other. Both was somehow confused. Not everyone thought like that, not even the majority, I thought, but I still always kept it to myself.

"It wasn't hard, Dena." His eyes had roamed over me appreciatively and then he'd given me a smile before turning back to the door. "A good partner picks up on what the other one wants or needs. Same way you did with me." He'd opened the door then, and looked over his shoulder. "If you're ever in the mood, look me up."

Chapter Three

ARIK

Music blasted around me as I stepped into the club, but it wasn't so loud that I couldn't hear myself think. I took that as a good sign. This was only my second visit to Club Privé since moving to New York. So far I hadn't decided on whether or not I wanted to join, but so far, things were looking good.

I was greeted by one of the hostesses, and she led me up to the VIP floor. She hadn't asked for my name, but she'd greeted me with it. I assumed that meant she remembered me from my initial visits here. That was service for you. But that was also why they had a VIP section, and why they charged buckets for it.

I'd been places where their VIP section was a joke, but here, it seemed to be worth it. I was moving through the scattering of bodies on the top floor when a good-looking couple approached. After a moment, I put a name to the man's face.

"Gavin, right?" I held out my hand. "The owner?"

"Yes. And you're Arik. Arik Porter, if I remember correctly."

I nodded, not elaborating any further. It was a habit. I only gave the needed information, never anything more.

"What do you think of my club?"

I gave him a noncommittal smile and nodded to the woman with him, a gorgeous blonde who he clearly adored.

She held out her hand. "I'm Carrie. I hope you're enjoying yourself."

"Right now, I'm just looking to get a drink and sit down for a little while." I hadn't decided on anything beyond that, although I hoped to scout the group

out and see if I couldn't find somebody to...keep me company.

Carrie smiled brightly. "Well, let's get that taken care of. Would you care to join us?"

It seemed like as good a plan as any to get the lay of the land, so I nodded. A few minutes later, I found myself sitting at a table with them, a drink in hand while Gavin, Carrie and I chatted easily.

"What brings you to New York?" Carrie asked, tossing her golden curls over her shoulder. "You mentioned that you were new to the city?"

I nodded. She wasn't a native either, judging by the slight Southern drawl. "I was offered a new job, and it was worth the move."

I didn't offer anything more, and Gavin moved the conversation in a different direction. He asked if I'd belonged to any clubs back home, mentioning that he had briefly thought of expanding into other cities. When I said I was from Chicago, Carrie immediately mentioned that her best friend was originally from the windy city, and the conversation meandered from there.

After nearly twenty minutes, Carrie excused herself to go talk to someone she knew, and a short while after that, somebody came to haul Gavin away on business relating to the club. He told me to enjoy myself and let him know if I needed anything. I assured him I would.

I had to admit that even though I enjoyed talking to them both, I wasn't sorry to see them go. I hadn't come to make conversation, and now that I'd had my drink, I was ready to find a distraction. That wasn't the sort of thing I wanted to do with an audience.

As I made my way to the stairs, a cute redhead bumped into me. She looked up at me from under her lashes, offering a giggling apology that suited her youthful appearance.

I smiled, but before I could brush around her, she moved closer and rested a hand against my chest. A bold move for someone I immediately marked as a submissive. Then again, she might've been the kind of sub who liked to flirt and push until she finally found someone to punish her.

"Are you...looking for anybody particular?" she asked, her gaze flicking to my mouth.

"I might be."

She bit her lower lip and slid the hand on my chest down. I caught it before it reached my belt, but I didn't move her away. I was curious to see what she'd do next. I wasn't opposed to delivering a little bit of punishment at

the moment.

“I can be anybody. Somebody.” She licked her lips again and moved in closer. “Nobody. Take your pick.”

I let my eyes run down her body. She was about average height, slender, and wearing a few strips of silk and lace that barely covered her essentials. She was beautiful, and I had a feeling she'd do every single thing I told her.

Wrap those cherry-red lips around my cock and suck. Let me fuck her mouth.

Spank her ass until it was hot and pink, my hand stinging.

Use a flogger. A crop. Any one of the dozens of toys I was sure the club provided their VIP patrons.

Fuck her in every position possible. In her pussy. In her ass. As hard and as fast as I wanted.

Make her scream my name, and beg me to let her come.

I knew she would let me do all of that and more. All I had to do was say the word, and she'd be mine for however long it took for us both to be sated.

My gaze came back to her face. “So, anybody. Somebody. Nobody. Do you have an actual name I should call you?”

Chapter Four

DENA

I'd expected to be nervous. After all, this was the job I'd been working toward my whole life, so it made sense that my stomach felt like it had butterflies as I walked into the Manhattan DA's office. The offices were huge and not a little intimidating, but I had my game face on and didn't let the nerves show.

Dressed in what I considered my best power suit, I crossed the black and white tiled floor with slow deliberation, my briefcase swinging from my hand and my head held high. I'd spent hours yesterday picking out exactly what I wanted to wear this morning.

The pinstripe two-piece suit fit me to perfection. The pencil skirt stopped at my knee and the fitted jacket stopped just a little below my waist. I wore a white camisole under it that displayed a hint of lace at the vee of the double breasted bodice. It was feminine and flattering, but understated and more powerful for it.

My shoes, on the other hand, were anything but understated.

They were murder red Manolo Blahniks – my favorite shoes.

They matched the bag I carried and I know both the bag and the shoes made a statement, but it wasn't as much about the statement as it was about me personally. I liked how the entire outfit made me feel, and today, I needed that. I needed to feel like I was a woman to be taken seriously and not a child to be overlooked.

As planned, I arrived five minutes early and took a few moments to look around. Despite the power suit and kick-ass shoes, I felt out of place, and started to worry that I looked out of place too.

I mentally chided myself. I wouldn't be here if I didn't belong, if I couldn't do the job I was assigned to do. I belonged here just as much as anybody else and I knew that. At least most of me did.

“Well,” a low voice said, drawing the word out. “Hello there.”

Even before I turned around, I knew what I was going to find. Years of experience had already taught me this lesson. I deliberately waited a beat before turning to meet a set of turquoise eyes set in the face of a man who could only be described as pretty. And judging by the look on his face, he knew it too. Every inch of him said he spent more time in front of the mirror than I did.

His gaze slithered over me, and I set my face into an expression of cool disdain. He was smiling, although the smile wasn't directed at me. How could it be? He was too busy checking out my rack and my legs.

I cleared my throat and waited for his gaze to swing upward. When it did, I gave an icy smile. A practiced mask settled on his face, one I recognized. I was supposed to be charmed or flattered by his clearly appreciative perusal.

I didn't blink, holding his gaze until he looked away first. Still, he didn't look the least bit embarrassed or ashamed. As he stepped forward, he held out a hand.

“I'm Pierce Lawton, the new ADA. Would you by chance be...ah, Dena, I believe? The other one?”

The other one. Nice. “Yes. Dena Monroe.” I took his hand and gave him a short, quick shake, long enough for him to know he hadn't intimidated me, but too short for him to read into it.

“I don't know about you, but I'm looking forward to diving in. Getting my hands dirty.” He gave me a quick wink that I was sure he thought was charming. “It's okay to be nervous, you know. Between the defense attorneys and the scum they represent, it's hard to know who's sleazier.”

I had an answer to that question, but kept it to myself. A moment later, I was glad I had.

A woman strode in, pausing only briefly when she saw us. Sharp blue eyes moved from Pierce to me, and then she nodded. “Good,” she said, her voice crisp. “You're both here. Follow me.”

She didn't introduce herself, but I had to assume she was Bethany McDermott, the ADA I was told I'd be working with. She looked to be in her mid-forties, but with plenty of make-up and her honey-blonde curls professionally done, she might've been older. When she walked into an

office, I saw her name on the door, confirming her identity.

She strode around the desk and only then turned to face us. Bracing her hands on the desk, she studied us for a moment. She wore her own version of a power suit. It was the same sapphire color as her eyes, and close-fitting, flattering her lush curves without being obvious.

She looked like the kind of woman who drank souls and had the hearts of her victims for breakfast.

“Okay, so this is how it's going to work. Due to our current situation, we aren't going to do our usual six-week training period. I don't have time to coddle or baby either of you. Figure out how to swim, or you're out. Be prepared to learn and learn fast. We hired you because we assumed you could do the job without us having to hold your hand along the way.” She paused, her eyes sliding over to me. “Will that be a problem?”

My spine stiffened as her gaze locked with mine. It felt like I was getting singled out, and I didn't care for it. But I didn't let my reaction show. “Of course not.”

She flicked a look at Pierce and arched one perfectly plucked eyebrow.

“That's how I work.” He gave her the same slow, smug smile he'd given me earlier.

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes, but just barely. What a schmuck. But every office, firm, classroom, had a guy like him, if not two or three. I learned how to deal with them years ago, and generally it was best to ignore.

“Good.” She pushed a button on her phone and when a voice came on, she said, “Darcy, I wanted those files now.” She looked up at us again. “I've got a lot of cases on my desk, and basically, the two of you are going to do all of the scut work I don't trust to the paralegals. You won't say a word to a judge until I've determined you won't fuck up my cases.” She gave me a condescending smile. “Is language an issue for either of you?”

I had a few choice words I wouldn't have minded sharing with her.

“Of course not.” I smiled blandly.

“Excellent.” She gave a short nod as the door swung open and a rather harried young woman stuck her head in. “Bring in the case files.”

While Bethany addressed the person I assumed was Darcy, I mentally sighed over the fact that I was back to being the bottom rung on the totem pole. Part of me had anticipated it, but it was still grating. I might not have argued criminal cases before, but I'd been presenting to judges on my own for a couple of years.

As Darcy stepped out again, Bethany turned back to Pierce and me. “As you’ve probably figured out, I’m your direct supervisor, which means I’ll be deciding if and when you’re ready to take on cases of your own. You do a good job and I’ll get you into the court room. Screw me over and you’ll be lucky to argue shit in traffic court.”

Darcy shuffled in with an overflowing file box, looking like she could barely hold on. I was petite, but this skinny wisp of a woman looked like she was about to fall over. Instinctively, I moved to help, taking it from her as I glanced toward Pierce, waiting for him to step in.

He didn’t, solidifying my opinion of him as a total asshole.

“Thanks for taking the initiative, Dena.” Bethany gave me a cool smile. “There’s a list in there that details everything I need. I also had Darcy send it to your email so there aren’t any excuses. Pierce, you’re with me.”

The box gouged my hips with its sharp corners as Bethany strode out of the office, Pierce at her heels. Staring at their backs, I briefly imagined giving into the childish urge to stick my tongue out at them. I didn’t, of course, but it would’ve been satisfying.

“You have an office.” Darcy gave me a small, nervous smile when I looked at her.

“Excuse me?”

“You already have a space to work. I’m not sure I’d call it an office, but it’s yours.”

I nodded and grimly tightened my grip on the box. “Lead the way.”

Some nine plus hours later, I collapsed face-down on the couch in my apartment, more thankful than ever that I didn’t have a roommate. I had a sweet little place in Chelsea, and it was my pride and joy. Just then, though, I couldn’t take the time to appreciate the restored brick walls or the view, or anything else for that matter.

All I wanted was peace and quiet, and maybe in a little while, a glass of wine.

Fuck that. I might just have the whole damn bottle.

My first day as an ADA hadn’t exactly been what I could call glamorous. It hadn’t been exciting. I couldn’t really even say it had been fulfilling. I could have handled the lack of glamour and excitement. Those stars had been wiped from my eyes a long time ago. But it would have been nice if the day

hadn't completely sucked.

Once Darcy had shown me into my office – it was hardly more than a closet – I had spent the first hour dealing with a computer that had come straight out of the Stone Age.

Then I'd spent several hours going blind on legal briefs. There were filings and reports, things that were generally handled by paralegals. Except Bethany didn't seem to have any paralegals around. I knew things were tight since they'd let Pierce and I slide on the usual training, but it still seemed excessive.

Then again, my boss seemed like that kind of person. Excessive. And not in a generous kind of way. When I'd been coming back from lunch, Bethany had found me and demanded to know how far I'd gotten.

“You're not done yet?” she'd snapped. Then with a shake of her head, she'd shoved a clipboard into my hands. “People up for parole. I argued the cases in court. Write the letters. You can pull up the details on your computer.”

I'd seen the conference table through the glass behind her, and both she and Pierce had looked to be working on something else, something that apparently required them to have meals brought in. Rather than ask why he was working with her rather than me, I simply nodded and retreated to my cell. My office.

And that was where I'd stayed until I'd realized it was after five. When I left, I saw Pierce coming out of an office a few doors down from Bethany's. I'd managed to catch a glimpse into the room before he shut the door completely.

“My new office.” He'd given me a smug smile. “You like yours?”

“It suits me just fine,” I'd lied.

I wasn't a superficial person, but I did believe in equality and fairness. Two people starting out the same should be treated the same. There was no reason for Pierce's office to be an actual office, with room for a real desk and some movement. But there it was.

Now, I was lying on my couch and trying not to brood too much. It didn't mean anything. Maybe he actually had more experience than I did. I was pretty sure he was nearly a decade older. Maybe he'd transferred from another DA's office, and he had more seniority. It didn't matter.

That was what I told myself. I didn't particularly believe it, though. The phone rang, but I ignored it. I didn't want to talk to anyone, didn't want to

deal with anyone asking me how things had gone, didn't want to have to listen to anyone else talk about their problems. I just wanted to be left alone.

I ignored pretty much everything right up until my bladder forced me off the couch and into the bathroom. I could see the screen of my phone showing that I had messages, but I didn't answer any of them. I didn't even look at them.

What I did do was get myself something to drink.

After pouring myself a glass of wine, I retreated into my bathroom and settled down for a nice long soak.

“Tomorrow will be better,” I said. Relaxing back into my lavender and vanilla bubbles, I sighed. “Tomorrow will be better.”

What a line of bullshit.

The next day wasn't any better, nor were the days that followed. I felt like I was an associate all over again, and it annoyed the crap out of me.

It only got worse on Wednesday morning when I took some files to Bethany's office. I paused in the doorway, listening while Pierce explained a tact he would have tried if he was first chair on some case they were working on.

I stood there stiffly, my hands gripping the files I held, waiting for them to notice me. When they finished, Pierce glanced over at me and gave me a surprised look as if he'd just now realized I was there. Bethany, however, eyed me dismissively before going back to the notes she was working on.

“Did you need something?” Pierce asked.

“I just need to give Bethany the research notes she needed.” Keeping my voice level, I walked across the floor and put everything down. As I was turning away, I heard papers rustling.

“Oh, great. I needed this for that filing I was doing for you, Bethany.”

I stiffened even more, one hand curling into a fist. Unlike a lot of lawyers, I didn't thrive on conflict. In fact, I didn't even really like it. I liked making logical arguments, presenting clear and concise evidence.

But a girl could only take so much for so long, and I was heading down that path.

I was being jerked around and I knew it. I'd need to address it, but I wouldn't do it without thinking things through. This wasn't some asshole at a club. This was my job, the place that I'd always dreamed of being. I wasn't

going to lose that in a moment of rash temper. No matter how justified.

But just as I reached the door, Bethany spoke, “Actually, Dena, it's a good thing you stopped by. It saves me from having to hunt you down later.”

I turned toward her, letting her know I was listening.

“I've been given the okay to put the two of you up for the next case that comes across my desk. You'll be taking second chair, of course. I'll be arguing the case, but you'll be there to see how things work.”

I blinked, almost certain I'd heard wrong. Pierce grinned as he shoved his hands into his pockets. Bethany ignored him, her pen scratching across the surface of her notepad.

“In the meantime, I'm presenting you two with a case. It's already been closed, but I want to hear strategies on how you would've handled it had you been trying it.” Now she looked up, sliding her gaze from Pierce to me. “Consider this trial by fire. Don't fuck up.”

Something hot and pleased settled inside me.

Pierce glanced at me, but I didn't waste my time looking at him now.

Trials by fire suited me just fine.

Chapter Five

ARIK

“*I* have news for you.” I looked up at the sound of my new boss coming from the doorway of my office.

While I wasn’t a senior partner anymore, I had a big office, and once I did make it, I expected to move from this office to a corner one.

Charles Sheldon stood in the doorway, smoothing down his burgundy tie in a gesture I'd already come to recognize. “Do you mind?” he asked, gesturing to the door.

“Of course not.” Giving him an easy grin, I added, “After all, you are the boss.”

“For now.” His eyebrow quirked, reminding me of the response I’d given him when I agreed to take the job his firm had offered me.

I’d been a senior partner at my old firm back in Chicago, well on my way to convincing them to make me a named partner. I hadn't been overly enthusiastic about the demotion to junior partner here, but the promise of practicing for one of the most prestigious defense firms in the country had been one hell of a lure.

I’d agreed to take the job, and then told them I planned to be a senior partner in a year. Sheldon had been the man to make the final call. He’d laughed, but he hired me.

“What can I help you with, Sheldon?”

“Got a case for you.” He hitched up his pants and sat down in the chair across from me. “It seems like it’s right up your alley. Regular clients of ours – well, I should amend that. Client. Anyway. We’re on retainer. We just got a phone call. The man who retained us is now dead. You’ll be defending his

wife.”

Holding up my hand, I cut him off before he could say anything else, “Don't give me any more information. Just tell me where she is and how I can contact her.”

“She's at home.” He gave me the address and rose. “And you might want to hurry. You might get there before the cops do.”

For a split second, I gaped at him. Was he kidding me? He'd sat there, all casual, while our client was facing the possibility of having to talk to the cops without us. I didn't know what the circumstances were, but any woman whose husband just died shouldn't have to worry about saying something incriminating, even if it was something petty.

I jumped to my feet and grabbed my briefcase. As I hurried past Sheldon, he gave me a small smile, as if he'd done all of that on purpose. It was too bad, I thought as I stepped outside. I'd actually liked the guy. Now, not so much.

Then I pushed the thoughts aside. I had a job to do, a client to defend.

The address, thankfully, was close.

Sheldon, Simon and Sharpe chose to operate out of a converted house not too far from Central Park and the over-priced, and overdone, glamour of the Trump International Hotel. They weren't the biggest defense firm in the city, but they had one of the best reputations.

My client, one Leayna Mance, lived in a house just a couple blocks away. If I hadn't wanted to seem unprofessional, I would've walked rather than grabbing a cab, but something told me that this wasn't about some parking ticket or even a home invasion.

Now, standing at the door, I pounded on it after my polite knock didn't garner any response. The place was quiet, and that worried me. There weren't any police cars, no uniforms hanging around.

And still, no one answered the door.

If my gut hadn't been telling me something was off, I would've wondered if maybe this was some strange joke they played on the new guy.

I knocked again, pounding hard enough for it to make my hand hurt. “Ms. Mance? It's Arik Porter, from Sheldon, Simon and Sharpe.” I paused and then added, “Charles Sheldon sent me. I understand you've got a problem.”

I had a bad feeling that the problem was going to be a dead body. I'd stopped Sheldon from telling me too much because I didn't want to form an opinion before I met with my client, but I couldn't stop hearing his comment

about Mrs. Mance's husband being dead.

From behind the door, I heard a slight noise. The door unlocked and through a crack, I saw a woman's face. She peered at me and through that narrow slit, I could see that she held a phone clutched to her chest. "I called the cops."

"Good. That's good. Why don't you let me in, Ms. Mance? They'll be here soon—"

Sirens sliced through the air and she jerked.

"Mrs. Mance, may I come in? I'm your attorney, ma'am. I think it's a good idea I come in before the police get here."

She hesitated, then nodded as she opened the door. I went inside, and even before I crossed the threshold, I smelled it.

Death.

The metallic, sickly sweet smell of blood. Something else underneath it. Something that made it clear that, here, blood meant death.

I breathed slowly and tried not to focus on the smell. I had a clearly freaked out client. "It would appear you have a problem, ma'am," I said calmly.

She started to cry as she nodded. "My husband's dead."

The next few hours were a rush of cops, questions and tears.

Leayna hadn't made the wisest decision in calling a lawyer first, not as far as the cops were concerned. And the fact that I'd gotten there before them just added to their annoyance.

I already knew the district attorney would find plenty of ways to spin that in a bad way if this went to trial, and it wasn't a far stretch to see things getting to a jury, even though I believed she was innocent.

Maybe her tears had gotten to me, or maybe it was easier to con me than I thought, but as Leayna sat there holding my hands and repeating the same statement over and over again, I believed her.

I didn't do it. I know it looks bad, but I didn't.

I hadn't asked her if she did it. Each defense attorney has their own way of handling client guilt, but personally, I didn't want to know. Even the guilty were entitled to a defense, but it was easier to move forward with the knowledge in my gut that the woman sitting next to me hadn't killed her husband. Plus, it kept me from knowingly supporting perjury if I had to put

her under oath.

It had been cleverly arranged to make it look like she was guilty, but in my gut, when she said *I didn't do this...* my instinct was to believe her. And I'd spent most of my life trusting my gut.

“What am I going to do, Arik?” she whispered, her voice raw and broken.

Her grass green eyes were red rimmed and swollen, not the sort of thing one would've expected from a trophy wife decades younger than her late husband. She sniffed, then blew her nose on the handkerchief I'd given her when we left for the police station.

She'd been officially arrested, though I would do my best to get that thrown out since they'd made the arrest without any clear evidence. They hadn't found her standing over the body, and there'd been no time to process any real forensics. Someone had gotten a little overzealous.

Leayna sent a furtive glance toward the door to the interrogation room. “Am I...do I have to stay in prison or do they let me out on bail or what?”

“There will be a hearing to determine whether or not you get out on bail. Then we'll look over every piece of evidence...” I trailed off. She wasn't fully taking this in.

She'd heard the words *whether or not*. “I might not get out on bail?” Her voice cracked and I wished I'd worded that differently. “But I didn't do anything!”

“Leayna,” I said firmly, trying to ground her. She was slipping away, lost in a maze of fear and confusion. Squeezing her hands, I said her name again.

She patted down her short hair. It was a warm hazelnut color that I was pretty sure wasn't natural. She looked at me, her lashes sweeping down before slowly lifting back up.

“I won't get out on bail,” she said, her lips stiff.

“We don't know that—”

There was a knock at the door, but before I had a chance to say anything, it swung open. Immediately, I stood up, a hand on Leayna's shoulder, placing my body partially between her and the door. She might've been close to my age, but I felt strangely protective of her.

“Excuse us, we're...” Shit. “Hello, Bethany.”

Assistant district attorney Bethany McDermott stood in the doorway, her lips pursed as she looked from Leayna to me. “Oh, I'm sorry, Arik. I thought you were ready for me. Hello, Mrs. Mance.” She glanced to her watch and then back at me with a lifted eyebrow. “Should I give you a few more

minutes?”

“I’m not sure a few minutes will be enough.”

“It’s going to have to.” She started to tap her foot. “We’ll be seeing the judge shortly for a bail hearing. I thought you might want to confer for a few minutes before that happens.”

“Bail hearing?”

Leayna flinched at the abrupt sound of my voice. I mentally kicked myself. Out of all the ADAs in the city, I had to get the only one I’d already met.

And loathed.

I gestured to the door. “Let’s step outside.”

“I do have other cases, Arik.” She gave Leayna a look of mock sympathy. “Not everybody has a high priced defense attorney who can hang around all day. I need to prepare for an appearance before the judge shortly, and then several other things need my attention.”

I wanted to roll my eyes at the obvious theatrics. “Fine. Now, outside for a few minutes.”

She followed, so I counted that as a win. I closed the door behind me and took an extra few steps.

“What is this about the bail hearing? She was only processed thirty minutes ago. We’ve barely had time to talk.”

“Bail hearing is at two.” Bethany gave me a wide-eyed smile before reaching up to smooth down my tie. “Really, Arik. You should be more up on what is going on with your client.”

“I’m trying to figure out why nobody bothered to tell me about my client’s bail hearing.” I brushed her hand aside and resisted the impulse to rub my hand on my pant leg.

“Well, I’m sure they tried to contact you.” She gave me a sweet smile that I knew only went skin deep. “Now that we’ve settled that, shall we go back inside? I’m sure your client is just beside herself with...grief.”

My mouth flattened into a line. “She is. She’s also scared and confused.”

“With the prospect of life behind bars, she *should* be scared.” Bethany shrugged, absolutely no sympathy in her expression or voice.

“She didn’t kill him,” I snapped.

“Save it for court.” Bethany rolled her eyes and took a step to go around me.

I barred her way. “You don’t talk to my client without me being present.”

I scowled down at her. "I'm not in the room so you're not going in there."

"Then get in there." She scowled back, any pretense of politeness gone. "Or I'll make it clear you're getting in the way of me doing my job, and that won't do anybody any good. She's in enough trouble as it is, Porter. Your best bet is to get her to plead out. Either we talk now or you can make an appointment with my office, and we'll talk when I've got time in a few days."

"I don't much care for having you trying to steamroll me," I said softly. "I'm not one of your puppets, Bethany."

She gave me a little smirk. "Whatever do you mean by that, Arik?"

I didn't bother to respond. Turning around, I opened the door and shoved inside. Bethany followed me, but I ignored her, keeping my focus on Leayna. She was sitting in the chair, arms wrapped around herself and rocking as if she ached deep inside.

Her eyes, big and scared, met mine.

I went back to the seat I'd been using and took her hand. "Good news. We'll be having the bail hearing soon."

"That's good news?"

"Once you post bail—"

"We're going to ask that bail be denied," Bethany interrupted as she gave Leayna a smile that brimmed with mock sympathy. "Standard procedure in murder cases."

Leayna flinched and I almost wanted to put my arm around her.

"You don't have any proof," I said.

"I'm simply pointing out—"

I stood up and cut around the table, moving out into the hall again. Bethany was too much a bulldog with her cases to chance having this fucked up by her staying in the room alone with my client, so she followed, as I'd expected her to.

Once she did, I closed the door again, resisting the urge to slam it. Once it was shut, I pivoted on Bethany, eyes narrowed and voice cold. "Don't pull that shit again. I'm not some idealistic public defender fresh out of law school. I've been arguing cases almost as long as you, and I'm better."

Her eyes glittered bright and hot. I'd seen this side of her before, and it hadn't been pleasant then either. She opened her mouth.

I cut her off before she could speak. "I've had less than thirty minutes to discuss things with my client and she's been in shock the entire time, which

means she isn't yet capable of assisting in her own defense. So, unless you want me to bring this up to a judge, you're going to back the hell off and do things the right way.”

She sauntered closer, reaching up to stroke her fingers down my jawline. I jerked my head back out of her reach.

“You know, when we first met, I'd really hoped we could be...friendly,” Bethany murmured.

I shook my head. “No offense, I'd rather be friendly with a snake.”

She laughed, but it wasn't a nice sound. “Better prepare your client, and yourself. It doesn't look good for either of you.”

I was starting to regret coming to New York after all.

Chapter Six

DENA

“Interesting.” Bethany looked at me after I finished and gave a slow, thoughtful nod. Her eyes were hard to read.

My new boss might've looked like the meaner, harder version of Lawyer Barbie, but she had one hell of a game face. After a moment, she shifted her attention to the file I'd given her and tapped it with a French manicured nail.

“You present a good argument.”

That sounded suspiciously like a compliment. I didn't say it out loud, though. I simply inclined my head and said, “Thank you.”

She made a noncommittal sound under her breath and flipped through a few pages. “It wouldn't have convinced a jury, of course. But it's still a good argument.” Now she did look back at me and gave me a patronizing smile. “I think you'll get there, Dena. It just takes a bit of time to make the switch from divorce and family law to criminal law.”

Without waiting for a response from me, she looked at Pierce and began to fire a barrage of questions at him.

I tried not to let any reaction show, returning to the chair a few feet away from the one where Pierce normally sat, sinking down into it. I wished I could've just walked out since it was clear that she wasn't going to treat me like she treated Pierce, but I wouldn't stoop to being petty. I was an adult.

No matter how much it sucked.

“Impressive.” Bethany drew the word out long and slow and I continued to study the window so I didn't have to see the pompous prick preening.

Her phone buzzed on her desk and she picked it up, effectively letting us know that the rest of the discussion was over. That was fine with me.

Rising, I gathered up the information I'd brought in for my presentation, and began stuffing everything into my briefcase.

I was almost out the door when she called after Pierce and told him to wait a few more minutes. Obviously, he did so, relaxing back in the chair as I ducked outside, quick as I could. I was ready to get out of there.

It was finally Friday.

As I was making my way out along with the rest of the people who were done for the day, I heard snatches of conversations and greetings. Plans being made. People laughing.

Loneliness settled along with a knot of edginess that grew with every step I took.

It's finally Friday...

I hit the doors and decided I needed to go out.

Club Privé wasn't high on my list of places to go tonight.

I was feeling a little too rough to have the watchful eye of my best friend's husband on me. Not to mention the best friend herself. As much as I adored Carrie and Gavin, they'd taken it upon themselves to look out for me every time I came in, and I didn't need that. I could look out for myself.

What I needed was...

I sighed. What I needed was something I was beginning to think I could never have.

So I went to Leather and Laces. It wasn't quite as upscale as Club Privé, but they played excellent music and looked out for their guests as well as Gavin did. I knew the guys who handled the doors too, and when they saw me approaching, they automatically waved me in, much to the disgust of the people waiting in line. I ignored them. Once upon a time, I'd been the one waiting in line. It was my turn to move ahead now.

The dark silver mini dress I wore stopped a few inches below my butt and I'd paired it with boots that came up a few inches over my knees, leaving only a couple inches of thigh bare in between.

I'd chosen a pair of platform boots for tonight since I didn't know if I'd be staying here or going somewhere else, and I wasn't overly thrilled at the idea of walking a lot in heels. The platform boots were a lot more comfortable and solid, and they still gave me three more inches. That might not have sounded like a lot, but to someone who barely hit five feet, any extra

height was nice.

Inside the club, low lights pulsed in time to the music, and I breathed in the familiar scents that came with any sort of place like this. Sweat, perfume, soap. Sex. Here, there was also just a hint of leather since at least half the crowd was wearing it.

I let the rush of energy wash over me as I moved deeper inside and looked around. I hadn't been to L&L in a few months, and while there were some familiar faces, more were unfamiliar. I wondered how many of the patrons had left for Club Privé when it'd reopened its doors.

Somebody bumped into me, and a hand followed to steady my hip. When the hand didn't immediately fall away, I shifted my gaze over and stared levelly at a short – at least relatively speaking – rail-thin man who wore a leather vest and equally tight pants to match. I continued to stare until his hand fell away and then I continued my trek toward the dance floor.

One of the men caught my eye and a slow smile spread across his face even as his gaze dropped so that he was looking at me through his lashes.

I smiled back. Leather and Laces had private rooms in the back as well. They weren't as nice as the ones Gavin and Carrie had, but they were far better than some sleazy hotel.

I held out my hand and he came to me, his head bowed. He was average height, which meant I didn't have to strain to whisper in his ear.

“I'm Dena.”

“Edward.”

“Do you want to come with me?”

A shudder ran through him, and while that answered my question, I waited for him to nod before I turned and started for the back. He trailed after me, his fingers still twisted tightly in mine.

Sweat still dewed my flesh as I pushed my skirt back down and adjusted my underwear. I hadn't been able to climax, though not due to lack of trying on Edward's part.

I'd gotten him worked up first, trying to lose myself in his trust, in controlling his pleasure, but it hadn't worked. Well, it hadn't worked for me. He'd been practically shaking with need when I'd made him stretch out on the bed. I'd ridden his face, my desperation growing as his tongue and lips weren't able to get me off. When I'd finally rolled on the condom and lowered

myself onto him, I'd resigned myself to leaving without being satisfied. I'd focused all of my attention then on making sure Edward found his release.

He moaned from beneath me, his eyes half-rolled back in his head. When I rose, he started to lift his hand. I caught it, squeezed, hoping he'd take the hint and not say anything. He smiled as he rolled onto his side. I brushed some of his dark hair back from his face, using the touch to make sure he was okay. Some subs needed extra aftercare, but we hadn't done anything particularly intense so I was thinking he'd be fine. When he nodded at me, I squeezed his hand again.

"I'll take care of the room. Thank you." I leaned down and kissed his cheek, leaving before he could ask me what was wrong.

I couldn't tell him that I was miserable because nothing made me happy lately. It wasn't his fault. I was pretty certain I'd given him what he needed, but it hadn't done anything for me, and it wasn't fair to him to make him think that any of this was his fault. Plenty of subs got pleasure from the actual submission and knowing it was arousing to their partner. Edward was one of those.

But I didn't want anybody submitting to me right now.

I was tired of being in the driver's seat. I just wanted an hour where I didn't have to think, didn't have to be in control. An hour where I could completely rely on someone else to take care of me.

When I stepped out of the hall, I was tempted to head for the door, go home and find my vibrator. If I closed my eyes and imagined really hard, I could make myself believe for a few minutes at least that somebody could give me what I needed.

Instead, I went to the dance floor.

I had to burn out this energy, and it looked like dancing was my only option. I threw myself into the music with sheer, reckless abandon, grateful to at least be able to shed the straight-laced image I wore most of the time.

A couple of hard-bodied, younger wannabes were there and they quickly surrounded me, keeping just enough space free that I didn't feel claustrophobic or threatened. I'd never be interested in joining any of them in a room, but for dancing? They looked like they could be a welcome distraction. When one of them came up behind me and lightly rested his hands on my hips, I let him.

If this was the only outlet I had, I was going to make the most of it.

Chapter Seven

ARIK

“*I*s there anything else I can do for you, Mr. Porter?”

The soft, almost breathy voice coming from the doorway had me looking up from the reports and other files I had littering my desk. A few days ago, the glossy black surface had been clean, not even a paperclip out of place. Then Charles Sheldon had dropped by my office with his little bombshell, and my nice, neat organization had gone straight down the path of hell.

I didn't like that very much. I liked things to be exactly where I wanted them. I knew I had some control issues, but I also knew that was one of the things that made me good at my job. That and the fact that I was a bit of a workaholic.

The paralegal standing in the door smiled at me, her pretty face not showing any of the exhaustion I knew she must be feeling.

This case was a big one for the firm. Leayna was rich, well-known and her marriage had been almost as sensational as the death. All eyes were on us. I hoped I didn't fuck things up. I'd been told any extra hours I needed from my paralegal were fine, and when I mentioned it to her, she'd told me she didn't have any family or children, no boyfriend.

She'd hesitated on that last one, her voice trailing off.

At the time, I'd wondered if she had been trying to tell me something. Now I was sure of it.

She slid into the room, sauntering closer with a slow, deliberate walk. Ella Pott was a beautiful woman in her early twenties, and a sensual one at that. It was in the way she moved, the way she used her body. The way she

watched people. I was usually a good judge of women, and I had a feeling she'd be a pleasure in bed. The way she was watching me now made me think she wouldn't be put off if I invited her back to my place. She'd probably beat me out of the door.

Chestnut brown hair. Big blue-green eyes. Nice curves. She had a full, pretty mouth that looked slightly puckered all the time, almost as if she was waiting for a kiss...or to kiss something. I tried to imagine her on her knees, wrapping those pouty lips around my cock.

I felt sluggish interest, but nothing strong enough to warrant acting on it.

That was good though. I didn't want to fool around with someone I worked with, let alone someone who was technically working under me.

"No. I think I've got everything under control," I told her, shaking my head. "I'll be wrapping up soon, Ella. Have a good weekend."

I hated that her shoulders sort of drooped when I said it. She was cute, but even if she hadn't been my paralegal, I most likely wouldn't have gone after her anyway.

She wasn't exactly my...type.

Since I'd come to New York, when I wanted to go out, I usually went to Club Privé, but I wasn't in the mood for its sleek elegance tonight. I hit another place a friend from back home recommended. Leather and Laces was still a decent club, but the crowd was a little rougher than I usually went with. I was more into the control than some of the...other aspects of the lifestyle. Tonight, however, I was in the mood for something a little darker than normal.

A little less than a year before I'd moved, I'd had a somewhat regular thing going with a woman, and it had worked for us, but then she'd wanted something more like a relationship, and that wasn't something I wanted. I liked her well enough and the split had been amicable. I'd even been happy for her when I heard she'd found a serious boyfriend, but I never once regretted not ignoring my instincts and giving in. Relationships and I didn't work.

Since moving, I'd had a few encounters, but they had been brief and not particularly satisfying, nothing more than taking care of a physical need. The part of me that needed that extra...edge hadn't been sated.

Briefly, I thought about Ella, and knew she'd be willing, enthusiastic even. She might even be willing to learn about what I needed, but I wasn't in

the mood to teach someone. Some men might've leapt at the chance to teach some wide-eyed newbie, but I wasn't one of them. I knew what I wanted, but I wasn't sure I'd ever find it.

Music pounded in the air, and I leaned against the bar, raising my voice to be heard so I could order a scotch. A brunette with a short cap of hair crossed my line of sight and paused, looking at me speculatively. A smile curled her lips, soft and hesitant, but the shyness was more for show than anything else. I could tell she was one of those people who came to a place like this looking for a thrill. She'd play a bit, then go back to whatever vanilla boyfriend or fiancé she had waiting for her.

I ordered another scotch before moving into the crowd. There was a stage to my left and people were setting up for some sort of show. I didn't need to know what was going on to know I'd be bored. None of the displays that happened in the BDSM clubs had ever appealed to me. There were plenty who enjoyed the spectator aspects of the lifestyle, but I wasn't one of them.

I preferred to be involved. Once, I'd told a sub that spectator sports were fine for something like football, but anything else, I wanted to be hands on. It was like how I wasn't really into the whole humiliation and pain aspect of it. I had no issues with anything that happened between consenting adults, but it just wasn't me. I mean, a little spanking and punishment were fine, but I didn't go for any of the harder stuff.

Strobe lights pulsed in time to the music as I cut around the edge of the dance floor. I glanced over almost reflexively, and that was when I saw her. For one moment, she was clearly illuminated in the light, and that moment was enough.

She was slender, delicate. Yet the way she moved on the floor exuded confidence and strength. Three men crowded around her, and one of them reached up, his hand moving to her throat in a clearly dominant gesture.

A smug smile curled her lips. I watched as she reached up and caught the man's shirt, hauled him toward her as though they might kiss. Their faces hovered no more than a few inches away, and when he moved to close the distance, she pushed him back and spun around. Now with her back to the man's chest, she caught his hands, guiding them to her hips.

A second man moved in. Her slim form was practically hidden by the two men for a moment, and then she slid out from between the two of them. When they tried to close her in again, she pressed her hands to their chests. There was something both playful and commanding about how she did it.

She was controlling every damn thing about the dance, and those two men – barely old enough to drink, I suspected – didn't even realize how completely she was doing it. They clearly thought themselves dominants, but they were clearly no match for this tiny little thing.

Intrigued, and more than a little curious, I finished my scotch and passed the glass off to a nearby server without taking my eyes off the woman. Her eyes flicked toward me, and then moved back to her partners. Then, slowly, she looked back at me again. Her chin angled up, head cocked slightly to the side, as if she was reading me.

The smile on her lips tugged up at the corners just a bit as I moved closer, arching an eyebrow. She responded in kind, and moved away from the men she'd been dancing with. When they made to follow, she shook her head, and then looked back at me.

She caught her lower lip between her teeth and then let it roll out. I imagined her doing the exact same thing before I kissed her. She had an absolutely perfect mouth.

I made up my mind then and there that I was going to taste that mouth tonight.

I reached out as soon as she was close enough and settled a hand on her waist, slowly drawing her toward me. She came easily, and when I set my other hand on her hip, she did the same thing to me she'd done earlier. She brought her hand up and curled her fist into the front of my shirt. She didn't pull me in or push me away, though.

She just kept her hand there as though she was still debating what to do with me.

Or maybe she was waiting for me.

The thought sent blood rushing south.

She'd been controlling those men, but the dominant in me had felt something else, and now I was thinking my instincts had been right.

Leaning down, I pressed my lips to her ear. "I'd tell you you're the hottest thing here, but I'm pretty sure you already know that."

When I straightened, I found myself looking into the most gorgeous pale gray eyes I'd ever seen. I brushed my thumb across the curve of that delicious mouth. She slid her tongue out, almost as if she was tasting the path my thumb had taken.

My gut clenched. Fuck me. I'd never had such an immediate, visceral reaction to anyone before.

Normally, I wouldn't kiss a woman within two minutes of seeing her.
But when she opened her mouth under mine, I knew it hadn't been a bad
call.

Chapter Eight

DENA

*H*is mouth...
Oh, damn.

His mouth.

I'd wanted him as soon as I'd seen him, watching me with those eyes that I now knew were a rich emerald green. He was handsome in a rugged way, not the usual pretty-boy or classically handsome men I usually saw.

But that wasn't the only thing different about him.

The hand on my hip slid up over my ribcage, tangling in my short hair, tightening and tugging, a slow rhythmic sensation that drove me to distraction even as his tongue pushed demandingly past my lips.

He tasted me before pulling back to rake his teeth across my lower lip. It was all I could do not to moan right there. Starving for a deeper kiss, I flicked out my tongue and he nipped at it. I shuddered and he wrapped an arm around my waist, tugging me in close against his hard, muscular body.

One kiss turned into two, and I went from clutching at his shirt with one hand to hanging onto both of his shoulders. All the while, he moved us off the dance floor and into a darkened corner. My back was to the wall, as he wedged himself between my thighs. I could feel his cock, already hard against me.

He let go of my hair, and I might have been disappointed, because he stopped kissing me too, but he didn't pull away. His mouth moved down to my neck and I gasped as he raked the sensitive skin with his teeth.

He muttered something against my ear, but over the roaring of my own blood, the racing of my heart, I had no idea what it was. I wasn't even sure I

cared.

The heel of his hand brushed against my breast. It was a light touch, not hesitant, but more like he was...feeling out the territory. I arched into his touch. He could feel out whatever in the hell he wanted.

My nipples tightened. Between my natural build and the style of the dress, I hadn't bothered to wear a bra. As his hand moved to cup my breast completely, I could feel the intense heat of him through the thin fabric.

I sucked in air, my eyelids fluttering, as his teeth teased the shell of my ear. The oxygen exploded out of me in the next second when he pinched my nipple between thumb and forefinger, twisting just a little before plucking gently. He repeated the move as he moved his mouth so he could speak.

“I want to push your dress up right now and sink my cock inside you.”

I managed to swallow my moan, barely. “Is that a fact?”

“Yes.” He lifted his head enough that we could see each other’s eyes.

Shit. I really didn't want to get my hopes up, but I was pretty sure I'd just found someone who could finally take care of me.

“We could be at a hotel in less than twenty minutes. In a room in under thirty.”

I wasn't sure I could wait that long, but I'd do it if it meant I could finally have some relief.

Holding his gaze, I nodded.

He was right.

One of the beautiful things about New York City was that a hotel was within a stone's throw of just about everywhere. Especially in Manhattan.

He'd taken us to one of the boutique hotels, a glitzy little place that spoke of the glittering glamour of the 1920s. The black and white art deco was gorgeous, and I probably would have taken a lot more time to appreciate it if I hadn't been burning from the inside out.

I barely paid attention to anything as he checked us in, and even in the elevator, the only thing I really was aware of were the sliding doors before he turned and pulled me to him. One arm wrapped around my waist, settling his hand at the top of my ass.

His other hand came up and closed around my throat, his thumb nudging my chin up. “Open.”

I obeyed immediately, and a split second later, he was kissing me, filling

me with a drugging, intoxicating sort of want. Not want. Need. Hunger.

Dazed, I thought *this*, this was what I'd been missing.

There was a muted beep as the doors slid open, and he pulled away. I barely had enough composure to walk alongside him as we found the room. I'd been kissed, fucked, manhandled, but I'd never had anyone affect me the way he had.

I managed to maintain that thin composure as he unlocked the door, and we moved inside. As he relocked the door, I looked around the room, checking it out. Nice, but not so opulent that it was disconcerting.

When he turned to me, I inhaled slowly. The blood rushing in a heated frenzy through my veins was making it hard to think, but thinking was still required. Things had to be said before this could go where I wanted it to go.

I took another breath and kicked off my shoes before moving over to the small bar service and taking a bottle of water.

“My name's Arik.”

As I cracked the bottle open, I slid him a small smile. “Dena.”

He took a step forward, and stroked a finger down my bare arm. I noticed earlier that his hands were callused, and now the roughened pads of his fingertip felt delicious against my skin.

I shivered, feeling that heated need swelling inside me again. *Deal with the practicalities first, girl*. I had to admit, he was the first man who'd ever made me almost forget.

Taking a drink of water, I turned away and walked over to the bed, taking a seat on the edge before looking back at him. There was always a bit of nervousness with a new partner, adding an edge to the excitement that some people enjoyed. I actually didn't. I liked to be sure of things. I was a pretty good judge of character, but anyone who didn't have at least a bit of anxiety was either lying or an idiot.

“Are you going to go first?” I asked before I took another sip of water.

He gave me a crooked smile that made me like him even more. It was real, that smile. “My mother raised a gentleman. By all means, go ahead.”

“I snapped a picture of you,” I said without preamble, staring at him levelly. “It's on my phone. It's also on my cloud storage. If something happens to me, I have friends who know how to access my account.”

I waited to see if he understood what I was getting at. After all, a girl couldn't be too safe, no matter what she was into.

A grin curled his lips and he nodded. “That's smart.” His eyes narrowed

slightly. “Although, just when were you able to get a picture of me?”

I touched my tongue to my lips. “I have my ways.” With a shrug, I added, “Also, my phone has password protection. Don’t try to get in it.”

He continued to smile, but a look of appreciation entered his eyes. “You really do have this all thought out.” He paused for a moment, then spoke again. “Don’t worry, I’m just looking for a sub for the night. I’m not some raving psycho, but I appreciate your candor. Once the night is over, can I assume you will delete the picture?”

More than once, I’d had men get pissed over my little speech. I only did it when I left a club with a stranger – and that didn’t happen often – but if a guy didn’t understand my need for caution, then he wasn’t getting anything anyway.

“You can,” I answered. I was careful not to say more than that. I would delete the picture as I said, but not right away. I’d just wait until I was secure in the knowledge that he wouldn’t turn out to be a...well, a raving psycho. A friend of mine had gotten in trouble once because she’d gone to a hotel with a man she thought was nice. He stalked her for two months before the police were able to find something to arrest him for. That’s why I was cautious.

“Noted.” His eyes slid to the bed and back to me again. “Safety concerns? Limits?”

“You will wear a condom. For everything. If you try to do anything without one, this all stops.”

“That’s a rule of mine as well.” Arik took another step toward me, absently raking a hand through carelessly tousled hair. The lighting in here was better than it had been in the club and I could see that his hair was a rich, dark red.

Damn.

I wanted to tangle my hands in those dark, silken strands as he kissed me again.

I wanted his hands in *my* hair.

“I don’t do humiliation.” My voice was ragged, raspy now. I had to force myself to focus on the common sense things that had to come first. Ground rules. Had to set up the ground rules. “I enjoy submitting from time to time, but I’m not looking to be somebody’s slave or toy. Not even for a night. I don’t call *anybody* master.”

His voice was low, sliding over my skin like silk.

“I think we’re on the same page, Dena. Of course, I’m the one who’s

looking for your submission, not the other way around.” His eyes narrowed thoughtfully and his tone changed. “From time to time?”

“From time to time.” I didn’t elaborate further, and I raised an eyebrow almost in challenge.

“Anything else?”

“No toys,” I said, my brain struggling to recall the things I normally said. “I don't play with things I don't know.”

That hot, sexy smile curled his lips once more, and he nodded as he came to me. For a moment, he simply stood, towering over me by more than a foot. Then, he slid his hands into my hair. That action alone fired a dozen fantasies, and as they came simmering to life, I had to fight to keep from trembling.

“What’s your safe word?” He brushed his thumb over my mouth.

“Uncle.” The word breathed out of me as my skin sang from his touch.

Arik’s brow winged up. “Uncle?”

I gave him a sharp smile. “When I was first getting into the lifestyle, there was this guy. I was still fairly ignorant, and not all that good at picking my partners. He was one of the first. I hadn’t yet figured out what I needed, and he was convinced he knew. Told me he’d have me crying uncle in no time flat.” My smile flattened. “He was crying after I nearly ripped his balls off because he didn't stop.”

Arik's eyes widened slightly, but he didn't move away from me.

“I picked *uncle* as my safe word after that to remind me.” I bit off the rest of what I was going to say. That it was this word, no matter how caught up I got, that reminded me to always take measures to make sure I was safe.

Arik's fingertips brushed across my cheekbone, before trailing down my cheek. His voice was rough as he murmured, “I think it takes a certain kind of man to top a woman like you, Dena.” His touch lingered for a moment, and then he straightened. “Fortunately, I think I’m up to the task.”

I really hoped so.

He shrugged his jacket from his shoulders, then watched me as he moved on to his shirt, exposing a broad, muscled chest. When he was done, he pulled out his wallet and tucked it into his jacket, then gathered up the garments and carried them to the closet, hanging them inside. The open door obscured him for a brief moment and when he reappeared, he had removed his shoes. Inside my boots, my toes curled. He shouldn't be allowed to be so fucking hot, standing there in only his well-tailored slacks.

He came back toward me, and I saw a flash of silver in his hand. Condoms. At least I didn't have to dig them out of my purse. He put them on the bed next to me and then turned away again. I didn't speak as he looked around the room. I had some idea of what he was doing, and when he disappeared into the bathroom for a moment, I wasn't surprised when he returned carrying a couple of long strips of cloth in his hand.

The belts from the hotel robes.

"Any problem with being bound?" He stood in front of me again, his voice dropping to that low, sexy sound that sent another blast of lust through me.

My pussy throbbed at the thought. Sometimes, bondage was about testing limits, stretching endurance, but for me, it was about everything I wanted out of tonight.

I shook my head as I peered up from under my lashes, knowing there was no way to hide the anticipation curling inside me. I was rarely one to be submissive enough to keep my eyes down, but something about Arik spoke to that primal part of me that few men had ever managed to reach.

"No problems with being bound."

"Good. Now, I'm going to have you suck my cock." Arik delivered this statement in a level voice, as though we were discussing the weather.

It made me shudder how matter-of-fact he said it. I nodded, waiting for my next instruction.

"Open one of the condoms."

I did so, pleased to see I was able to keep my hands steady even though everything inside me was starting to quake. I knelt in front of him, taking a moment to look up at those gorgeous emerald-colored eyes again before dropping my gaze again. I couldn't stop the shiver though as he freed his belt and slowly dragged down his zipper. I was definitely getting a lesson in anticipation as he removed his pants and underwear, tossing them aside before straightening to reveal a thick, heavy shaft that made my mouth water just looking at it.

"Put it on." Still that calm, almost cool voice.

I wanted him to control me, but it would be nice to hear him struggling to control himself...because of me.

As I rolled the cool latex over him, he continued to speak.

"I don't think I'll have you take off that dress. Or those boots. I might even keep your panties on." His eyes gleamed. "What are you wearing under

there? A thong? Boy shorts? A bikini?”

I swallowed hard. “Boy shorts.”

“Would you like it that way, Dena?” He brushed his fingers across my hairline. “Would you like it if I fucked you while you were wearing your clothes? If I just pulled your panties aside and took you that way?”

A rush of heat and wetness escaped me, dampening the soft cotton of my panties as I made sure the condom was on snugly, lingering a bit longer than I needed to. He just felt so good pulsing under my hand, long and hot. I pressed my thumb against the vein on the underside. His harsh intake of breath was the only reaction he gave, but at least it was something.

He wasn't completely indifferent after all.

I closed my hand around the broad base of him and lifted my eyes to his. “Yes. I'd like that.”

His eyes darkened. “Did I tell you that you could touch me yet?”

Shaking my head without looking away, I tightened my grip on his cock.

“Why are you doing it?” He sounded honestly curious.

I gave him the truth. “Maybe because I want to see what you do.” Squeezing, I began to drag my hand up, then down, wishing I could feel skin instead.

“Dena.” His voice was chastising, but that didn't stop me from leaning forward. Suddenly, he took a step back. “Stand up.” The words were a growl.

My legs were shaky as I stood.

“Turn around.”

I did it, anticipating his reaction.

Except Arik didn't do what I thought he would. Instead, he did something better. He used one of the belts to loop through my elbows, effectively restraining me. I could still move my hands to some extent, and if I tried, I could get free. I appreciated the thought behind it. I'd often done the same thing with the subs I met. It was a safety net of sorts. Security but also an escape if needed.

He turned me back around and took my shoulders, maneuvering me back until I was sitting on the bed again. He studied my face and I watched as several different expressions crossed his eyes.

“You want to be punished,” he said quietly.

I caught my breath. He did understand. For me, it was all about giving over that control, and that was a part of it.

He brushed a lock of hair back. “You'll get what you need later, but for

now, you're going to suck my cock. And the better you do, the more inclined I will be to take good care of you."

The words sent a shiver of longing through me, and again I tightened my thighs against the ache pulsing in my cunt.

His hands threaded through my short hair.

Breath hitching in anticipation, I let him tug me forward, guiding me toward his cock. Although I knew it was necessary, a part of me resented the latex barrier between us, the taste of it against my lips as I slowly took him into my mouth. A wild part of me wished that, at some point, I'd be able to find out how he tasted for real.

I slid almost halfway and then pulled back up. He tried to nudge the head deeper, but for now, this was my show. I let it fall from between my lips before taking him in again, deeper this time.

After a few more teasing movements, a harsh growl escaped him and he widened his stance, hands tightening on my hair as he began to pump against the rhythm I'd established.

I had taken a little more than half of him now, lips stretched wide around his wide shaft, the tip butting up against the back of my throat. His hand slid around to the back of my head, gripping me firmly as the other went to his cock, marking my limit.

"How much can you take?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

He pulled back enough for me to answer. I knew what my answer would mean, knew what he wanted. I wanted it too.

"I can take whatever you can give me."

I caught a flicker of something and then his fingers tightened in my hair.

"More," he growled, his hips surging and driving his cock in a fast pace that stole my breath.

I pushed against his hand, trying to slow things, control the pace. The need to touch him rode me hard, but when I tried to lift a hand, I couldn't. Groaning in frustration, I scraped my teeth across the sensitive underside.

He grunted, his hips jerking. "Suck me, Dena."

Instead, I tried to use my tongue to tease him.

He gripped my hair and pulled sharply. "Suck."

I did.

Hard.

He yanked me back, his eyes narrowing with a heated gaze.

"You told me to do a good job." I licked my lips and lowered my eyes to

his cock. “Am I doing a good job?”

“Open that smart mouth, Dena, and I'll show you how to do a good job.”

He guided it back to my mouth and slowly slid inside. This time, the grip on my hair was so tight, I couldn't move at all. Then a hand moved down to grip my jaw in a way that took the last of my control. Need clamored inside as he began to slowly and thoroughly fuck my mouth. The first thrust took him to the back of my throat and he held there for a long second.

“Swallow me.”

Fuck.

I nearly gagged before my throat relaxed enough to obey, but I didn't struggle. I knew I could take it. The hand in my hair tightened and I heard him mutter something in a harsh growl as he slipped down my throat. That calm composure was gone.

I intended to use the tricks I'd learned from some very experienced subs to make him completely lose it.

I swallowed, hummed, used everything I knew until I felt a shudder go through him.

At that moment, he seemed to grab some control back. Part of me hated to give it back, at least until he pulled away, caught me under the elbows, and pulled me to my feet. He bent his head and I thought he was going to kiss me. Instead, he pressed his lips underneath my ear, a soft gentle kiss that belied the urgency from just a few moments ago.

“I have a feeling you like to push your limits, don't you, Dena?” he asked.

“I push the limits other people set for me,” I answered, surprised at how casual I sounded.

“Let's see if we can expand those limits a little.”

Less than five minutes later, he'd come up with a very inventive way to use the belts. I was bent facedown over the padded, plush ottoman, still completely clothed, but also completely helpless. The utter deliciousness of it left me feeling like I might explode at any minute. But explode in a good way.

For so many months, I'd felt like a caged animal, unable to escape the restlessness inside me. But now that I was now effectively restrained, I felt freer than I had in a very long time. It might not have made sense to a lot of people, but some of us were just wired that way.

And Arik understood that.

He knelt behind me, one hand fisted in the material of my panties and I shivered as he tugged, dragging the boy shorts upward. The garment rasped over my clitoris, rubbed against the slick folds of my pussy, and the cleft between the cheeks of my ass.

I moaned as he slid his free hand over my ass, the touch light and teasing. “I think it's time to punish you. How do you want it?”

I shivered, shaking my head. My entire body was quivering with need. It felt like everything I'd had building inside me for months was coming together all at once.

“Tell me, Dena. Tell me what you need.”

I whimpered, lust clenching almost violently inside me as he spread his hand wide over my butt.

“Spank me,” I said. I was half afraid he wouldn't do it. Half-afraid he would.

“Is that what you need?”

“Yes.” It was halfway between a demand and a plea.

“If I spank you, will you be a good girl?” He kept his hand on my ass for a few more seconds.

I didn't even know how to respond to that question. Even though I had a deep need to have a man take control from time to time, I could never be a “good” submissive, a *good girl*. I sometimes fought the men who topped me, made them work for the submission they wanted. I never gave in completely, not the way most submissives did.

“You might be able to talk me into it,” I finally said, need making my voice shake. “But I'm never very good at being good.”

He chuckled, a dark sound that I liked...a lot.

“But I'm sure you're excellent at being bad, aren't you?”

Without waiting for an answer, he brought the flat of his hand down on the curve of my ass. It was a light blow, too light and I made a sound of sheer frustration. He repeated the gesture on the other side, equally as light. I moved as best as I could, trying to lift myself higher.

“Be still,” he ordered. He shoved a hand into my hair. He pulled sharply, and hot little licks of fire radiated from my scalp. I whimpered in appreciation. I didn't get off on serious pain. But I did like that.

“Be still,” he growled. “Or this stops, and you'll go back to sucking my cock until I come. I might even stand right over there where you can see me, get myself off until I come, and you'll just have to watch me.”

The image of him masturbating while I watched was enough to make my heart skip a beat, but his next words did it for a different reason.

“Then, I’ll order myself up a drink, and relax a bit while you stay here, and think about whether or not you’re going to obey.”

A harsh jolt went through my pussy at the thought, even as a snarl twisted my lips. I almost told him to try it.

But then he spanked me again. Harder.

Oh shit.

I didn’t move. As much as I wanted to lift myself, arch my spine, do *something*, I fought the need and put everything I had into not moving. Into obeying.

Submitting.

Arik fell into a rhythm, each swat on my ass coming with a little more force. I began to cry out, need twisting through me as moisture gathered between my thighs.

He pulled on my panties again, the material tightening almost painfully against my clit.

There was a pause, and then he leaned over me, putting his lips against my ear.

“See...you can be good, Dena, can’t you?”

The noise that came from my throat was low and wordless. But it was apparently close enough. The head of his cock prodded against me, rubbing me through the barrier of my panties. Then I felt his fingers, roughly pulling the panties to the side, exposing me. Arik’s palm came down harder on my ass, more force than I was used to, right as he drove inside me, burying himself balls deep in that single thrust

It sent me screaming into the best orgasm I’d ever had.

But it wasn't over.

Even as I was still coming, he kept moving, driving straight toward another peak, riding me hard and rough, each thrust so forceful, we would've slid across the floor if he hadn’t anchored me with one strong arm around my hips, the other fisted in my hair and arching my spine up.

“You’re right,” he spoke in my ear, his voice harsh. “You’re not very good at being good, Dena. But damn if you aren’t excellent at being bad.”

I shuddered under the impact of his thrusts, squirming and trying to find...something. I didn't know if I was looking for a release, or a reprieve, from the inexorable, dominating possession.

“Come,” he ordered. “Come for me, Dena. And maybe this time, I’ll reward you for being *bad*. Would you like that?”

I groaned in response, every nerve in my body on fire.

“That’s no answer.”

“Ye—” I could barely speak. “Yes, dammit. Make me come, you son of a bitch.”

He let go of my hair and worked a hand between me and the ottoman, unerringly seeking out my clitoris. Slow, deliberate strokes, and I was flying into another bone-melting orgasm.

I thought that first orgasm had been the best of my life. I was wrong.

Chapter Nine

ARIK

Dena wasn't what I would've called beautiful. She was delicate and elfin, almost cute, but I had a feeling she'd have words with any person who used that word to describe her. Or maybe cut their balls off.

She was also the most amazing woman I'd ever dominated. Drawing each small submission from her had been like winning a battle, and it had made everything that much more erotic.

She sighed into the pillow as I slid a hand down her back.

Her ass was still pink from the spanking I'd given her, drawing me. Sliding my way down her back, I pressed my lips to her skin as I went, feeling the warmth of it against my lips.

"Feeling okay?" I murmured. I was always careful with my subs, making sure they had what they needed, but this was the first time I wanted the answer not because I wanted to know if I could leave or to make sure I'd done a good job. I honestly wanted to make sure she was okay.

"Better than." She turned her head and cracked open one eye to look at me. The pale gray gleamed almost silver in the dim light.

Having her in bed next to me did something odd to me. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but instead of climbing out of the bed the way I typically did after making sure my partner was fine, I was content to lie there and stroke my hand up and down her back. We were done. It was edging up on midnight. I should go. That was how this was supposed to work. Get what I need. Give what they need. Leave.

But I could see myself staying in bed beside her for another couple of hours. For the rest of the night. Waking up in the morning and rolling her

onto her back. Sliding into that tight, wet, heat. A slow and lazy wake-up call. I'd like to hear those rough, raw moans again. Feel her hips lift to mine as we took our time.

But that wasn't how this worked. How *I* worked.

Rolling onto my back, I ran a hand through my hair, then scraped my nails down the shadow on my jaw. I was telling myself I needed to get my ass up and moving when the bed shifted. Slanting a look over at Dena, I saw her already easing out of bed, the elegant line of her back arching in a sleek curve as she stretched her arms over her head.

I watched as she got up, picked up her dress and panties, then headed into the bathroom. I wasn't entirely sure when I'd taken her clothes off of her. Probably some time after I untied her, but before I'd gone down on her. Forcing her to stay still when every muscle had been quivering with pleasure had been extremely satisfying.

When she came back into the bedroom, she was dressed. She bent over to pick up her boots, and that was when it hit me.

She was leaving first.

I couldn't decide how I felt about that.

"Am I going to see you again?" I surprised myself by asking the question.

She slid a look at me over her shoulder as she tugged her boots on, then shrugged before answering, "I don't know. I don't usually go to Leather and Laces. Do you know Club Privé?"

"Yeah." I couldn't help but smile. I wasn't surprised. She seemed to fit there, all sleek and elegant. She'd stood out in Leather and Laces, a highly polished diamond in a box full of cubic zirconia. "That your normal spot?"

"More often than not."

"Maybe we'll see each other there, then." The idea of meeting with her again made my heart skip a beat.

She came to me then, bent over me, pressed her lips to mine in a brief, chaste kiss. "I can't say I'd mind."

Then she slid away, leaving without a sound.

Blowing out a breath, I flung my arm over my eyes. Somehow, I knew it would take awhile to get her out of my head.

Chapter Ten

DENA

Today was one of those perfect days.

I got in late – or early, depending on how I wanted to look at it – and took a long, hot shower, then collapsed into my bed and slept until noon.

When I woke up, I decided the best way to spend the day could only involve Chinese food delivery and wine, followed up by finishing a book while curled up in the window seat. When I finally closed the last page, I headed into the bathroom and sank into a long, hot soak where I allowed myself to enjoy a replay of the past night.

Arik.

His name was Arik, and whether or not I ever saw him again, I knew one thing for certain. It was entirely possible to find a guy who could give me what I needed.

Last night had been *amazing*.

Arik had made all the Doms I'd been with before pale in comparison, rank amateurs at knowing how to handle me. I knew I might feel discouraged and disappointed later on when others didn't measure up, but I'd never regret what had happened last night. Finally feeling that release...

My breath shuddered into my lungs, then out as the memories pulsed, then flashed through in hot, rhythmic pants, echoing in time with my heart.

It was everything I'd ever hoped for.

He was everything I'd ever hoped for.

What if I never found that again?

Groaning, I slid down into the water and soaked my hair. Honeysuckle-scented water caressed my skin, and I sighed. I felt better, more relaxed, than

I had in months. Maybe even longer.

And who knew when I'd get to feel like this again.

I opened my eyes. I needed to stop thinking about whether or not I'd ever have another night like last night and focus on what I did know.

Bethany had said she'd give us her decision first thing. I had the chance of a lifetime in front of me. I would've liked to pretend that I could spend the rest of the weekend relaxing, but I knew better.

I was going to think through every line and detail of my presentation.

I'd done better than Pierce had.

I wasn't thinking that out of arrogance. I knew when I was being arrogant. My parents had called me on it enough growing up for me to recognize that line. I also knew when I was being realistic. The choice should be logical. I'd presented the better argument, regardless of Bethany's differing reactions.

I also knew I was the better lawyer. I was the one who'd do better for the DA's office. I'd actually done some research on Pierce since meeting him. He wasn't a bad lawyer, really, but he wasn't exceptional either. He took short cuts, made deals when he didn't need to, failed to push when he should have, compromised when it was simply convenient. Basically, he took the easiest route possible rather than fighting for the best outcome.

There was no question how this should go.

Operative word: should.

Fighting to keep my face expressionless, I stood in front of Bethany's desk and listened to her describe the process that had led to her decision. I nodded at the right times, made the appropriate noises and managed not to say something I'd regret.

According to her, Pierce and I had both made fantastic arguments, but Pierce seemed to have a little more experience when it came to trial law.

Experience.

Like hell he did.

His entire argument had been built on smoke and subterfuge, but since he'd argued something other than divorce and child custody cases, he was the one who'd be better in front of a judge and jury.

She hadn't said it flat-out like that, but I knew what she meant.

When she finished, she gave me a guileless stare. After a long moment,

she rose and came around the desk, leaning against it as she held my eyes. “You’re a good lawyer, Dena. I think after a while, you could be exceptional. You just need a little more...seasoning.”

What was I, a turkey?

She continued, “Right now, I need all hands on deck. If you can help with the research and legwork, it'd do me a world of good, and it can get you that much needed experience. Are you onboard?”

“Of course.” I gave her a polite smile, and then nodded at Pierce before cutting around them.

He'd been given second chair.

I was relegated to gopher and glorified donut fetcher.

They might not say as much, but that's what I was doing. That behind-the-scenes-shit was just that – shit. I knew what they wanted. I'd be doing a bunch of grunt work, and I'd be lucky if I made it into the gallery for any of the actual trial.

On this one.

I tried to console myself by saying that it was only one case. I couldn't take it personally. I was just starting out, and I knew what that meant. Just because I'd paid my dues at Webster and Steinberg didn't mean I didn't have to pay them here.

Except I had a strange feeling about this.

No, it was more than that. It was a *bad* feeling. I'd been knocked down a hundred times since I'd gotten into law school, sometimes justifiably, sometimes not. I knew the difference.

Just as I went to push through the door, Pierce called my name. I braced my shoulders, prepared for whatever crap comment he had. But when I turned to look at him, he was holding out a fat manila folder.

“This is some of the information we need pulled. Can you get to work on it? As soon as possible, please.” He gave me a wide smile. “Thanks.”

“Of course.” I gave him a stiff smile and took the file.

I could get through it, I told myself. I'd done it before. I could do it again. Just keep my eyes on the prize.

As soon as possible...thanks.

Pierce's words had been echoing in my head all week, driving me bat-shit crazy. I let myself out of my so-called office and turned toward the steps,

intent on finding Bethany and Pierce. They'd be holed up together, I had no doubt of that, doing all of the trial work.

I had the utmost respect for the difficulty and importance of research, as well as for those whose job it was to do it.

I just didn't want it to be my job.

I'd already made up my mind. Once I turned over the information I'd dug up, I was going to do something I hadn't ever done.

I was going to play hooky. Well, not exactly, since it was technically the end of the work day. I just wasn't going to spend today like I had the rest of the week, working late on some of the pointless shit Pierce had thought up. I had everything they needed here, but I'd already learned that it didn't matter if I thought my work was done. They'd find something else for me to do so I wasn't included in their little two-person team.

I'd had it. I'd do my work and do it well, but I was through letting Pierce be an ass.

Resolved, I strode down the hall toward Bethany's office.

There were a few paralegals and associates still here, and I saw at least one other ADA's light on, but Bethany's door was shut and her blinds drawn.

Strange.

I knew Bethany and Pierce should be there. They'd told me they needed this information.

Knocking briskly on the door, I waited.

And waited.

And waited.

And acknowledged that I was waiting on people who had likely left already without bothering to tell me.

Assholes, I thought sourly.

Blowing out a breath, I tried to decide what to do. Bethany locked her office when she left. I could try it, but if they were inside and I opened the door, she'd probably be pissed. And if she was gone and the door was unlocked, she'd probably be just as pissed if I went into her office when she wasn't there. But I had to do something with the files.

I'd leave them on Pierce's desk, I decided. His office was near mine and we were on the same level, so it wouldn't be the same as going into a supervisor's office. Plus, I knew he left his office unlocked since I'd gone into it yesterday to get something for him.

I headed back down to where our offices were located, trying not to let

my frustration get the best of me. As I neared the door to his office, however, I stopped suddenly.

Was that...

My skin prickled.

Heat rushed up to suffuse my face.

Oh, hell.

It was.

And before I could figure out what I should do, everything shifted.

Because the rough voice I'd just heard was most definitely Pierce's.

And he'd just grunted out, "Bethany...fuck. Yeah. Just like that."

Son of a bitch.

A rush of emotion welled inside me, stronger than anything I had felt in a very long time. I still held the information that Pierce had needed in my hands, my palms growing slick with sweat while my jaw locked to keep me from doing something stupid.

Anger, disgust, a seething sort of self-righteous fury that burned away the headache residing at the base of my skull – all of them thrummed within me in a cacophony that was almost loud enough to drown out the moans coming from Pierce's office.

I didn't know what to think in that moment. All I could do was stand there. Stand there and listen as Bethany urged Pierce to fuck her harder and faster.

She was his superior. Bethany was supposed to be his boss.

While there were a whole host of ethical issues brought up by what they were doing, it wasn't even those things that were causing the anger to bubble up inside me.

Bethany had shoved me aside and given second chair to Pierce because they were involved. That's all there was to it. I was smart enough to know that I should've been given second chair. I had a lot to learn, true, but I was a better fucking lawyer.

And now I knew the truth.

But they didn't need to know that yet. I waited a few more moments and pulled my emotions under control, closed my eyes and breathed deeply. I was going to take some time and think this through, calm down.

Anything I did right now would be driven by emotion, and that wasn't the way to handle things. This wasn't some asshole in a club. This was my job. One I'd been working my whole life toward. I needed to be smart.

As much fun as it might be to call them both on it, I knew I'd be better served by moving forward with calm deliberation and making sure I was reacting for the right reasons, rather than the petty ones.

I turned and headed back to my office. I'd wait until I heard Pierce's door close before I went to give him the files. Then I was getting the hell out of here.

By the time I finally got home, it was late and I was tired. More than that, though, I was still pissed.

Part of me was so tired, I wanted to just lay down and sleep, but at the same time, I knew there was no way I'd be sleeping any time soon. I ducked into the bathroom for a quick shower, then pulled on a pair of tight leather pants and a silk tank top.

Club Privé was a little farther from my place than I would've preferred to go considering how tired I was, but I desperately needed to blow off some steam, and part of me was hoping that I might find Arik there.

A little while with him and I'd be able to forget about the lousy day. Maybe it'd even clear my head enough that I could think through the problem with Pierce and Bethany.

And if not, well, hell, I'd still have had one more night with Arik.

When I strode through the doors, I met the eyes of the woman manning the door and nodded. Arlene was in her mid-thirties, a lesbian in a committed relationship, and one of my favorite people at the club. She was built like the side of a barn, and had a face that looked like somebody had smashed it with a hammer. She was also one of the sweetest people I'd ever met, and she could scare some of the toughest looking sons of bitches I'd ever met. She could also talk people down in a blink.

That was why she handled the door. She could have been a bailiff.

I doubted Carrie would be here tonight since she was busy with wedding preparations, but that was good. I didn't want to talk to a friend.

I wanted to fuck.

Hopefully Arik.

Bodies swayed and moved to the music. Skimming the crowd, I studied the dance floor for a long time before moving off to the staircase that led up to the VIP floor. I couldn't see him.

It should've bothered me that I knew I'd be able to spot him in a crowd, but it didn't. I just wanted him.

One familiar form did catch my eye, and I paused briefly when Jack

caught my eye, but that wouldn't do it tonight. I gave him a smile and turned away. Settling at the bar, I ordered a drink.

Gavin found me before I was halfway through my glass.

"You look like you've had a hell of a day."

"It's been one hell of a week." I crooked a smile at him and shook my head. I considered elaborating and then decided not to. It wasn't going to help, wasn't going to make anything any better.

"Carrie is off looking at..." Gavin frowned, looking more perplexed than normal. "Table favors and hand fans."

I grinned at him, amused. Seeing Gavin confused and thrown off his stride was something I might've paid money for at one time. He was definitely one of those men who always seemed to know what to do in any situation. "What, Gavin, don't you know your way around a doily and a jar of mints? A personalized bottle opener?"

"It's not the favors." Gavin let it go at that.

There was a shiver of fear and awe in his eyes that left me amused.

Men and weddings.

I knew beyond a doubt that he loved Carrie more than anything, but he was still freaking out a bit. Maybe it was just the planning, but it was still amusing.

Rising, I moved to the railing that faced out over the dance floor on the lower level. As Gavin moved to join me, I gave him a smile. "It won't be long until you're well and truly chained for life."

"Yeah." He nodded slowly, a glint showing in his eyes. "I can't wait."

It was just the event itself. Good.

Envy curled inside me, but I didn't let it show as I leaned over and bumped his shoulder with mine. "You're such a sap."

He snorted, then said something else, but I didn't hear him.

A tall, lean figure moving out on the dance floor had caught my eyes. He'd emerged from the shadows and I hadn't seen him. My heart skipped a beat. I steadied my breathing and mentally prepared a little exit strategy.

Those few precious seconds saved me from doing something stupid.

Arik wasn't alone.

He had a woman with him.

One I knew.

She was a regular here at the club. She was pretty and funny and nice.

She was also a submissive. More of a traditional 'yes, Sir' one.

Not like me.

As Arik led her off to the area where some of the private rooms were, my throat went tight.

I closed my hand tighter around the stem of my wine glass, and told myself that it didn't matter. We hadn't made any promises to each other.

Then why the hell did my chest hurt so badly?

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M. S. Parker is a USA Today Bestselling author and the author of the Erotic Romance series, Club Privè and Chasing Perfection.

Living in Las Vegas, she enjoys sitting by the pool with her laptop writing on her next spicy romance.

Growing up all she wanted to be was a dancer, actor or author. So far only the latter has come true but M. S. Parker hasn't retired her dancing shoes just yet. She is still waiting for the call for her to appear on Dancing With The Stars.

When M. S. isn't writing, she can usually be found reading– oops, scratch that! She is always writing.

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