



TANGLED HEARTS

GIG HARBOR SERIES

M.S. PARKER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

TANGLED HEARTS

Gig Harbor Series

M. S. PARKER

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Tangle Hearts

TANGLED HEARTS

GIG HARBOR SERIES

Prologue

Aria

THERE I WAS, in the center of a human hurricane, just trying to make my way to the bartender and order another round of drinks. My friends and I were celebrating in this jam-packed bar that smelled like the aftermath of a frat party.

As I passed by some douche who was at least five drinks past his limit, I swatted away his wandering hand that was going for my ass. He whined like a kicked puppy while his buddy just laughed. With an eye roll that could've won an Olympic medal, I bulldozed forward, squeezing between two mammoth bald dudes who looked like they chowed down on nails for breakfast.

Finally reaching the counter, I twisted my long hair up and let out an exasperated sigh as the cool air from the AC above the bar greeted the back of my neck like a long-lost friend. Seriously, this place was hotter than Satan's armpit on laundry day.

"ID," the bartender mumbled in my direction, as he slid a drink to the guy on my right.

My eyes did another Olympic-level backflip. "You know I bought a round like, what, thirty minutes ago, right?" I fished out my ID from my pocket and waved it in front of him like I was performing a magic trick.

He shrugged, grinning like a kid who'd just stolen candy from a baby. "Sorry, sweetheart, it's nothing personal. I'm not risking our liquor license on trying to remember who I carded, and when."

"Sweetheart? Really?" I shot back.

He rolled his eyes and plopped the three drinks on a tray for me. "Fine, ma'am."

I scowled, but not at the 'ma'am' part. He hadn't asked for my order. He'd remembered that from last time, but still had to see my ID. Male bartenders, always trying to flex those authority muscles like they're the bouncers of the

booze world.

“Aria Reed!” Madison hollered from across the bar. “Get your ass back here with our drinks!”

I flashed a grin as I made my way to my friends, drinks in hand, so we could continue celebrating my promotion to senior designer at Webwise Solutions. At barely twenty-one, I was the youngest senior designer in the company’s history.

You’d think, since it was my big night, I wouldn’t be the one buying the drinks. But Lily was a barista and Madison did computer coding for some tiny company, so none of us were exactly rolling in dough. We took turns buying rounds, no matter the occasion.

“So, who’s up next?” I asked, sipping my Malibu Sunset.

“It’s your turn.” Lily Thompson was a year older than me, but with her blonde curls and petite build, I knew she’d still be getting carded long after I stopped.

Grabbing the three darts from the table, I barely took a second to aim and then, in three quick movements, let them fly. Thunk, thunk, thunk. One on either side of the bull’s eye and the last dead center.

“How the hell do you do that?” Madison downed her shot of whiskey, making a face that said she’d have been better off drinking turpentine. “I mean it. How do you just turn and throw and hit it like that?”

I shrugged. “Good hand-eye coordination?”

Madison flipped me off and went to retrieve the darts.

“Soooo, Madison and I were talking...” Lily began.

I groaned. Whenever she started a sentence with ‘Madison and I,’ I knew I was in for trouble.

“We came up with a list of songs we think would be perfect for you—”

“Nope.” I cut her off like a karate chop. “I told you two, I’m not singing karaoke.”

“Tell you what,” Madison chimed in, lining up her shot. “I think you just got lucky throwing those darts before. So, if I beat you in this round, you must sing three songs when karaoke night starts.”

“One,” I countered. I couldn’t carry a tune even if it had handles. They just wanted to see me make a fool of myself in front of the entire crowd.

“Worried?” Madison grinned.

I narrowed my eyes and glared at her. “Fine. Three. But what do I get when I beat you?”

“Next round on me, if you beat me,” Madison said, winking.

With the precision of a surgeon, Madison threw her darts. One hit dead center, one in the circle right outside it, and the last in the next circle. Not bad, but I knew I could do better.

I went to retrieve the darts, already plotting my victory, when the TV screen on the wall caught my attention. Or, more specifically, the picture and name on the screen.

Rachel Blackwell.

My foster sister.

Who was apparently missing.

What the hell...

Ethan

Jumping out of a fucking airplane wasn't my go-to choice for a birthday bonanza, but when your best bud, Jake Mason, is all about skydiving for his big day, you don't exactly say no. There we were, practically hugging the open plane door, waiting for our instructor to give us the green light.

"This is fucking awesome!" Jake hollered, his face showcasing the most ridiculous grin I'd ever seen.

Seeing him so pumped had me grinning, too. I doubled-checked my straps like a paranoid maniac. Don't get me wrong, I'm all in for a wild time, but skydiving wasn't on my bucket list. Jake wanted this, though, and I'd be damned if I didn't get a kick out of it too.

"Ready, Ethan?" The instructor sized us up, and we nodded like bobbleheads.

And then it was go time.

Jake took the plunge, let out a battle cry, and leaped into oblivion. I got the all-clear, took a deep breath, and followed suit.

For a split second, I was hyper-aware of everything: the chilly air nipping at my face, the adrenaline buzz, the butterflies in my stomach, and the spectacular view.

And then—nada. Total brain freeze.

Next thing I knew, my feet were back on solid ground, and my chute was collapsing behind me. A few feet away, Jake was losing his shit and yelling something about being "king of the world" or some Titanic nonsense.

I just shook my head and laughed my ass off.

I ambled over to Jake and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Had a blast, did you?"

He grinned like a madman, his dark hair a windswept mess, and green eyes sparkling. "That was amazing! Almost better than sex."

I snorted. “Fun, yeah. But not that fun.”

“I said ‘almost.’”

“Sounds like something I should tell your wife.”

Jake shoved me, laughing. “Keep your trap shut around my wife, asshole.”

I held up my hands, all innocent-like. “Hey, I’m not the one dissing your sex life.”

“I’m not—fuck you, Cole.”

“Well, that’d be one way to improve your sex life,” I shot back. “But I don’t swing that way. Your wife, on the other hand…”

Jake thumped my shoulder, hard, but not too hard. “Hands off Abigail, dickhead. She’s way outta your league.”

I shrugged. “Can’t argue with that.”

Untangling ourselves from the straps and buckles took some serious focus, and as we made our way to the changing room, I clocked the brunette at the counter giving me the old once-over.

I slipped out of the jumpsuit and back into my regular clothes, feeling a lot more like myself. Jake did the same, as we shared a few more laughs about our death-defying experience.

With that out of the way, we headed for the exit. Jake nudged me and grinned, egging me on.

“Go get her number,” he said, nodding toward the brunette from earlier.

“What?” I feigned cluelessness.

“The girl at the counter. She’s had her eye on you since we got here. Get her number. Ask her out.”

“Not interested,” I said, not even bothering with a backward glance.

“And you’re busting my balls about my sex life?”

I raised an eyebrow. “You’re married with two kids. You should be thanking

your lucky stars for the occasional quickie. Me? I hit a bar or club, buy a hottie a drink, and we're off to the races."

"Abigail and I have sex more than occasionally," Jake insisted. "And it's still great."

"Can we not keep discussing your sex life?" I asked with a grin as I climbed into my car. "Let's focus on what an amazing friend I am for planning this stellar birthday for you."

"You are, and you did," Jake agreed. "Can't wait to see how you'll top it next year."

"I'll come up with something," I promised. "You're the one who's gonna have a tough time. I already set the bar sky-high, quite literally, and you'll spend the entire year trying to come up with something to outdo me."

The parking lot at Roquette was a shitshow, and it took me a hot minute to find a spot. Thankfully, Jake's wife, Abigail—who I actually liked despite my constant teasing—had snagged some seats for us inside. Their kids were off at the grandparents for the night, which was a relief because I'm not exactly a kid person.

Since I was driving, I grabbed a Scotch for a toast and a beer to nurse for the rest of the night.

"Did you enjoy your little adventure?" Abby asked after we clinked glasses.

"I did," Jake said, grinning like a kid in a candy store.

"Thank you, Ethan, for taking him," Abby said to me. "I love him, but there's no way in hell I was jumping out of a plane."

"It was a blast," I admitted.

"Not as fun as it could've been," Jake chimed in, smirking. "At least for him."

Abby shot him a puzzled look while I glared daggers at him.

"Ethan had a prime opportunity to hook up with a lovely lady at the check in, but he didn't even say hi," Jake spilled the beans.

I flipped him off in response.

“Maybe Ethan prefers someone in a more similar line of work,” Abby suggested. “Someone who’s a CFO of a Seattle-based fashion company, perhaps?”

“Are you talking about Jennifer?” Jake asked.

Abby sipped her drink, nodding. “Jennifer’s gorgeous, smart, and gets the pressures of running a business. She’s also at the point in her life where she’s ready to date seriously and find a man to settle down with.”

I paused, my beer hovering near my lips. “And you think that’s me?”

“You’re thirty-eight, Ethan,” Abby pointed out.

“I’m well aware of my age,” I said, trying to keep my cool. “And I’m not interested in a serious relationship, let alone marriage and a family.”

As Abby listed all the ways Jennifer could change my mind, a news story playing behind her caught my eye.

A missing girl from Gig Harbor.

My fucking hometown.

A missing girl named Rachel Blackwell.

The same last name as the only woman I’d ever loved.

The one who got away.

Chapter One

Aria

I HATED HAVING to make this call, but with Rachel gone, I had no choice. Fingers trembling, I dialed the number, praying for a miracle.

David Johnson, owner of Webwise Solutions and my all-knowing boss, answered on the second ring. “Aria? I didn’t expect to hear from you on the weekend. Everything okay?”

“Actually, no,” I said, wincing. “My sister’s missing, and I need to go back home to help find her.”

“Sister? I thought you were an only child.”

I imagined David raising an eyebrow, probably thinking I was trying to pull a fast one. I couldn’t blame him; I knew of at least three employees who’d lied to get out of work. Like Tiffany, who said her car broke down, but then posted pictures on Instagram of her cherry red Mustang in Fort Angeles. Nice one, Tiff.

“Foster sister,” I clarified. “I lived with her and her mom for seven years after my parents... She’s an only child, so her mom doesn’t have anyone else. I need to be there for Sarah and help find Rachel.”

“So, you’re asking for time off because your foster sister, who you’ve never mentioned in the three years you’ve worked here, has been kidnapped and you need to help look for her? Two days after you’re promoted to senior web designer?” David’s tone was a mix of skepticism and disbelief.

Shit. When he put it like that, it surprised me he hadn’t hung up on me.

“I know it sounds crazy,” I admitted, “but it’s the truth. And I don’t know that Rachel’s been kidnapped, only that she’s missing. Still, I can’t imagine what her mother’s going through right now.”

David sighed, as if I was asking him to give up his firstborn instead of needing time off for a family crisis. I resisted the urge to remind him that if he could let his secretary take ninety-minute “lunches” to get her nails done, he could let me have this. Besides, I wasn’t planning on just sitting around.

“I’ll still work remotely,” I said. “I can get projects done at night or while I’m waiting with Sarah for news.”

“All right,” he said, relenting. “I’ll give you a week and try to keep your workload light. After that, we’re going to need to re-evaluate.”

“Sounds good to me,” I said. “Thank you.”

“I hope your sister’s okay.”

I thanked him again and hung up, feeling relief wash over me for a moment before the anxiety of going back to my hometown and concern for Rachel swallowed it up.

I’d meant what I said about not knowing if Rachel had been kidnapped. It was entirely possible she’d just left, and Sarah had panicked when Rachel didn’t answer her calls.

And that was just one scenario more likely than kidnapping.

As I checked my suitcase to make sure I’d packed everything, my eye caught a picture tucked into the corner of the mirror. In it, a thirteen-year-old me with my dark brown hair cut short, stood next to a pretty, sun-kissed blonde, her hair nearly white in the summer sun, looking like a California surfer. Two years younger than me, she’d had a weight to her that’d made those years disappear. Her immaturity had never been naivety or innocence.

“I’ll find you,” I promised the little girl in the picture.

It was the least I could do, since this was partly my fault to begin with.

THE TRIP back to Gig Harbor was a swift one, less than an hour, but it felt like I’d traveled back in time three years. The town where I grew up seemed frozen in the past.

The same used but reliable car I’d bought just days before leaving town was packed to the brim with my shit. A mix of sadness, guilt, and concern swirled in my gut, and thoughts of Rachel were at the forefront of my mind. While

I'd worried about what I'd do when I reached Seattle, I'd been more concerned about what would happen to Rachel if the only person she had to lean on was her mother.

Now I knew the answer, and it fucking sucked.

"Dammit, Rachel," I muttered. "What have you gotten into?"

I was alone in the car, so no one answered, but I had a sinking feeling I already knew the answer to my rhetorical question. After all, it was the reason I'd been forced to leave in the first place.

Well, not really forced, but staying in Gig Harbor hadn't been an option after Sarah had asked me to leave the Blackwell house. It'd been hard enough living there after my parents' shitshow. Without the Blackwells, I had no one.

Twice I drove past the house before working up the nerve to park. But I didn't get out right away. Memories of the past were still too strong, especially the last time I'd been here. The day I'd found sixteen-year-old Rachel passed out in the bathroom next to half a line of cocaine. Instead of cleaning her up and calling Sarah, I'd called for an ambulance. I'd let them into the house and hadn't gotten rid of the drugs. By the time Sarah had gotten to the hospital, the police had arrived, and Rachel had been officially under arrest for possession of narcotics.

Sarah hadn't let me into the hospital room to see her. Instead, the woman who'd taken me in after my mom died had come into the hallway and screamed at me it was all my fault. And then she'd told me I'd hurt her daughter and I was no longer welcome in their house.

As if it hadn't been my home and they hadn't been my family for seven fucking years.

I rested my forehead on the steering wheel and closed my eyes. When I'd decided to come out here, I'd known it would be difficult, but I hadn't realized how hard it would hit me, being back in town, seeing the house again.

Once I'd pulled myself together, I got out of my car and headed for the house, my head down to keep the drizzle of rain off my face. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught movement in a couple of vehicles parked across

the street. Even from here, I recognized one of them as a local reporter. More specifically, the same reporter who made a point to find me every year on the anniversary of my mother's death to ask me questions I didn't want to answer.

I walked faster, hoping none of them would notice me before I reached the door. Avoiding them at least made it easier to get to the door and ring the doorbell without overthinking things.

When Sarah opened, my first thought was that she'd lost weight since I'd last seen her—and she hadn't had much extra to lose—and the second thought on the heels of the first was that she looked remarkably well-put-together for a woman whose daughter was missing.

“Aria?” Her brown eyes widened with surprise, and, for a moment, I wasn't sure if she was going to slam the door in my face or hug me.

She went with the latter.

“Darling! How wonderful it is to see you!” After nearly choking me in a hug, she pulled me into the house after her. “I'm so glad you're here. I wanted to call you, but I didn't know if you had the same number.”

“I saw Rachel on the news. What happened?” I asked, as I disentangled myself from Sarah's embrace.

The smile on Sarah's face faltered. “I don't know. She's just gone. I've called her and texted her and she hasn't answered. None of her friends know where she is.”

“Have you tried checking her credit card activity?” I suggested. “ATM withdrawals?”

“Oh.” Sarah looked surprised by my suggestion. “Well, um, Rachel doesn't exactly have any credit cards or a bank account anymore.”

My eyebrows shot up. “What?”

Sarah shrugged. “She might have one of her own, I suppose, but I doubt it. It's not like she has a job or anything.”

I frowned. “What happened to the cards you paid for? Or her trust?”

“I had to cut her off financially.” Sarah looked away as if she was ashamed of what she was admitting. “I was just enabling her habit.”

I was glad she’d finally come to that realization, but it didn’t seem like the best time to mention that.

“Anyway, I’m sure the police are looking into that sort of thing. That’s their job, after all.” Sarah smiled brightly. “Everyone’s been so nice, asking after me, making sure I’m taken care of. Do you remember Pastor Brown from First Baptists?”

I shook my head. We’d never attended church on any sort of regular basis, but occasionally, Sarah had gotten it into her head that we should go to a service or two, usually around the holidays or when she felt like causing a stir.

“Well, he’s just as gorgeous as he was before you left, and he’s made a point of checking in on me every day since Rachel went missing.” Sarah linked her arm through mine. “And Jessie Freeman actually gave me free coffee the other day...”

I let Sarah’s voice fade into background noise, just like I’d done so many times when I lived here. She’d always been a fan of talking about herself, and it seemed even Rachel’s disappearance hadn’t changed that. I’d come to be here for Sarah, but I’d forgotten exactly what that entailed. Lucky for me, I’d come straight here and now had the perfect excuse to check into my hotel room, which would get me away from Sarah’s never-ending monologue about all the attention she was getting.

It was good to be home... or was it?

Chapter Two

Ethan

I STARED at the contact info on my phone like it was a snake. Part of me was itching to call, and the other part of me wanted to bail on this whole rabbit hole endeavor. I'd left Gig Harbor right after graduation and never looked back – for good reason.

But Rachel's face haunted me. Those big blue eyes and the far-too-familiar features.

I just had to know.

I punched in the number, half-expecting Kris McPherson to see my name on his caller id and send me straight to voicemail. I mean, it'd been twenty years since we'd last spoken.

“Hello?”

“Kris?” I cleared my throat, feeling like a damn high schooler again. “Kris McPherson? It's Ethan Cole. We went to school together?”

“Ethan! Man, how've you been?” Kris sounded genuinely interested, but also completely exhausted.

“Been good,” I admitted. “Look, I know it's been a long-ass time, but I saw a story about a missing girl from Gig Harbor, and I thought I'd see if there's anything I can do to help.”

“Yeah, Rachel Blackwell.” Kris sighed. “Her mom was in our class. Sarah Blackwell. She and the kid changed their last name back to Sarah's maiden name after the divorce.”

Shit.

I'd been telling myself all night that Rachel couldn't be Sarah's daughter. Sarah had gotten married right after high school, so her name – and any kid's name – wouldn't have been Blackwell. Rachel's features had just looked so much like Sarah's that I hadn't been able to completely discount it. Now, Kris was confirming my worst fear.

“Are there any leads on the girl? Where she could be or what happened to her?” I asked. Sarah must be frantic, worried sick about her little girl.

“Nothing yet,” Kris said. “It’s like she vanished. My guys are on it, but it’s been over forty-eight hours.”

I wasn’t a cop, but even I knew that wasn’t good.

“We’re not giving up though,” Kris said. After a beat, he asked, “Are you planning on coming up for the reunion next week? It’s twenty years.”

“I wasn’t.”

“You should,” Kris said. “It’d be great to catch up with you. Grab a beer and talk about what we’ve both been up to.”

I was about to tell him I had no desire to go back to Gig Harbor, but then Rachel’s face flashed across my TV again. Somehow, I found myself saying something I hadn’t expected.

“Now I’m thinking it might be nice to come up for a bit.”

“That’d be great,” Kris said, sounding genuinely excited. “You won’t believe how much has changed...and how much has stayed the same. I’d love to show you around.”

“I think I’ll actually come up early,” I decided. “Tonight even. Spend the week there. See if I can do anything to help with the search for Rachel.”

“Well, when you get here, call me and I’ll meet you for a drink.”

“Is the White Lion still around?” I named the only bar I remembered.

“Sure is,” Kris said. “Remember Floyd Dorsey? Couple grades ahead of us? He runs it now.”

“How about we meet there?” I suggested.

Kris agreed, and we arranged a time to meet. After hanging up, I booked a room at the Inn at Gig Harbor. The drive wasn’t long, but if I was gonna have a drink with Kris, I didn’t want to worry about driving home. Plus, if I intended to help find Rachel, it’d be much easier to just be there.

I was a little surprised at how appealing I found the idea of involving myself in the search for a girl I didn't know. I didn't ignore AMBER Alert or the bad shit that happened, but I never really got actively involved. I had to admit that a large part of my reason for going back to Gig Harbor, both for the reunion and to search for Rachel, was to show everyone what I'd become.

Growing up, I'd been scrawny and poor, two things that hadn't made me very popular. I hadn't hit my major growth spurt until after I graduated high school, so I'd been an easy target for a lot of the larger, more popular guys, especially the ones who came from money. Now, I was three inches taller, a hell of a lot more muscular, and rich enough to buy half the town.

And it wasn't just my childhood bullies I wanted to show up, either.

Sarah was the one who got away. The woman who'd broken my heart because her father hadn't thought I was good enough for her. I didn't know if he was still alive, but I really wanted to show Sarah that he'd been just as wrong about me as everyone else.

Maybe it was petty of me, but anyone who was treated like shit when they were younger would take any opportunity to brag about how good their life was now.

So, steeling myself for the onslaught of memories that would come as soon as I started seeing familiar landmarks, I drove up to Gig Harbor.

I had a plan in place for my time here: Check-in, then go meet Kris for drinks. I had a feeling I'd need the alcohol and the time to process the crap that wouldn't stay buried. Then, tomorrow, I would go see Sarah and see if there was anything I could do to help.

Chapter Three

Aria

"...AND that's when I knew I had to get both pairs of shoes. I mean, I couldn't risk someone noticing that I was wearing cobalt shoes with an azure dress."

My cheeks hurt from fake smiling like a lunatic for way too long, and I was starting to get a headache from listening to Sarah go on and on about every teeny-tiny detail of her life over the last three years. I'd been here for more than an hour and really needed to get the hell away. I'd tried using the excuse that I needed to check in at the hotel, but she'd just talked right over me like a freight train.

I might not have minded so much if she'd been talking to me about Rachel or about what the cops were doing to find her, but she'd barely mentioned her missing daughter at all.

A noise came from the front of the house, accompanied almost immediately by a man's voice.

"Sarah, babe, where are ya?"

Sarah jumped up from her seat like she'd been bitten by a snake. "I'm in here, Richard. We have a guest."

"I was gonna say the same thing." The speaker came into the living room. He was probably a little over a decade older than Sarah, with thinning gray hair and dark, beady eyes. Average height, he was slightly overweight, though his suit was expensive enough that it hid the extra bulk well.

Following him was a bald guy who was probably younger than the first man, though it was hard to tell by how much. His mustache and beard were light brown, with no gray I could see, and his blue eyes were shrewd. He wore a suit too, but his was definitely not expensive.

"Marty." Sarah went to the second man and clasped his outstretched hand.

I noticed that all the happiness had vanished from her expression, and she now looked as if she'd spent the entire day wringing her hands and pacing the floor.

“Sarah. How are you?” Marty leaned down and kissed Sarah’s cheek.

“Who’re you?” The older man asked bluntly as his gaze ran over me.

I repressed the urge to wipe my hands over my arms and instead answered his question. “I’m Aria Reed.”

The man’s eyebrows shot up. “You’ve grown up.”

Well, that was a creepy-as-fuck comment. “Do I know you?”

“Aria, this is Richard Connors, my fiancé,” Sarah said as she came over and wrapped her arms around one of his. She then gestured to the other man. “And this is Detective Marty Pickman. He’s the lead on Rachel’s case.”

“Aria Reed?” Detective Pickman frowned. “You’re Curtis Reed’s daughter. Curtis and Ellen.”

I stiffened, bracing myself for the inevitable questions that followed that proclamation.

“Ellen tutored me in math when I was a freshman,” Marty said. “She was a good woman.”

Tears suddenly burned my eyes, surprising me. It had been a long time since I’d cried over my mom. Being back here wasn’t just calling up memories of living in the Blackwell house. It was all my miserable, tragic past. All the things I’d tried so hard to get away from.

I needed to change the subject.

“Do you have anything new about Rachel?” I asked. “Any evidence of an abduction or that she disappeared on her own?”

The detective and Richard exchanged looks.

“I know about Rachel’s drug use,” I said.

“We’re still investigating all possibilities,” Marty said.

That was pretty much what I’d expected, and I couldn’t say that I blamed them. Even I wasn’t sure whether or not Rachel was in danger. And even if she was, it might only be from herself. Years of drug addiction and

disappearing for days meant that the police couldn't rule out that Rachel hadn't just gone off on her own. But that was why I knew I had to be here too. Because if they decided to write her off as an addict who'd walked away from her life, I needed to be here to pick up where they left off.

"So, there aren't any new developments in the case?" Sarah asked Marty. "Because we haven't heard from her either."

"Unfortunately, no," Marty said, "nothing new."

As Sarah basked in the attention from her new clique, I seized the opportunity to make a swift exit. "Gotta grab a bite and check into my hotel," I blurted, bolting before she could guilt-trip me into sticking around.

Driving through town was like stepping into a time capsule. Gig Harbor had barely changed in the three years I'd been gone. I pulled into Gino's Pizza, my old stomping ground, and ordered my usual takeout. With time to kill, I wandered into the comic bookstore next door, just like I used to as a teen trying to avoid my less-than-stellar home life.

"Anything I can help you with?" A man asked the question without looking up from the comic book he was reading.

I had to do a double take to make sure I recognized him before I approached the counter with a smile. "Jason? Jason Ellis?"

Hearing his name, the dark-haired man looked up, surprise showing on his face when he registered who I was. "Aria Reed. Damn, girl. Haven't seen you since graduation."

"I'm in Seattle now," I said. "I work for a web design company there."

"Nice." Jason leaned back in his chair and spread his arms. "What do you think of my place?"

"Yours?"

He grinned. "Sort of. My brother, Gordon, and I bought it last year off Mr. Randall's kids after he died."

"Mr. Randall died?" I frowned. "That sucks. He was always so nice to me."

“Yeah, he was a great guy,” Jason said, his expression sobering. “He hired me here right out of high school. Always treated me good.”

“So, you and Gordon own it now?” I looked around. “He’s what, four years older than us?”

“Five,” Jason said. “He handles the books and stuff like that, and I get to do the fun stuff.” He held up his comic book. “Like getting to read the newest editions before anyone else.”

I smiled. “The place looks good.”

“Thanks.” After a beat, Jason asked, “You’re back because of Rachel, right? Because she’s missing?”

I nodded. “I saw it on the news and knew I needed to come back, see if I could help with anything.”

“I didn’t really know her,” Jason said, “but you know how it is in small towns. Even the people you don’t know, you still kinda know.”

“Preach,” I muttered as my phone buzzed, telling me the pizza was ready.

“Bet it’s not like that in Seattle, huh?” Jason asked.

“Not even close.” I laughed. “I’ve lived in the same apartment building almost the whole time I’ve been there, and I barely know half the people.” I waved my phone. “It’s been a blast catching up, but my food’s calling.”

“Well, it was good to see you again,” Jason said with a smile. “If you get the chance, swing by again.”

“It was, and I will,” I promised.

I was clutching my precious pizza like it was the winning lottery ticket, as I strolled over to the Best Western hotel. The name “Best” is a bit of a stretch, but hey, it’s better than “Worst Western,” right? Anyway, I got myself checked in and hauled my ass up to my room.

By some miracle, my pizza was still warm enough to enjoy. I plopped down on the bed; the springs groaning in protest, and dug into that greasy goodness. Ah, the perfect combination of cheese, sauce, and self-loathing. As each slice

disappeared into my gullet, the room seemed to get smaller and more depressing. There was no way I was going to spend the rest of the night cooped up in this glorified closet, mindlessly watching whatever mind-numbing crap was on TV. I needed to go out, do something, anything, to get my mind off this mess.

So, with a last, lingering look at the empty pizza box - a cruel reminder of my fleeting happiness - I decided it was time to hit the streets.

I'd bailed on Gig Harbor before my twenty-first birthday, but we all knew where the bars were, including the one within stumbling distance.

Just as I made my great escape from the hotel, the sky decided to take a leak. But growing up in the Pacific Northwest, you learn to embrace the wet stuff. A little drizzle wasn't going to stop me.

The White Lion was, as expected, packed to the gills on a Saturday night. I grinned as I elbowed my way to the bar. There, in the sea of inebriated humanity, was a single empty seat. And, lucky me, it was right next to a guy who looked like he'd just stepped off the cover of a romance novel - sandy brown hair, chiseled jawline, the works.

"Hey, is this seat taken?" I asked, fully prepared to fight someone for it if necessary.

He turned toward me, and suddenly I was on the receiving end of a stare from a pair of blue eyes so intense, they could've melted glaciers. His gaze did a once-over of my entire body, and I got to admit, it set off a few internal fireworks.

"It's all yours," he rumbled, his voice the kind of low, sexy growl that could make anyone weak in the knees. "I'm Ethan Cole."

Well, Ethan Cole, it looked like my night just got a hell of a lot more interesting.

Chapter Four

Ethan

I WAS NEARLY DONE with my beer when Kris McPherson swaggered through the door. The guy had aged like a fine wine. His black hair remained a pristine shade of midnight, and only the tiniest crinkles at the corners of his dark eyes hinted at his age. It was impressive, considering the stress that came with being a police captain.

“Hey, Ethan,” Kris greeted me, plopping down next to me at the bar. His face was a canvas of worry and weariness. “Thanks for coming out here. I wish it were under better circumstances.”

“What’s the latest on the investigation?” I asked, doing my best to sound nonchalant despite my growing anxiety.

Kris shook his head, frustrated. “We’re pretty much grasping at straws. Rachel’s been running with a sketchy crowd lately, so it’s damn near impossible to figure out what’s happened to her.”

“Shit,” I muttered, raking a hand through my hair. “Well, I’m here to lend a hand, however I can, man.”

Kris managed a weak smile. “I appreciate that. We could use all the help we can get.”

Just then, Kris’s phone blared, forcing him to step away and escape the cacophony.

“Back in town for the upcoming reunion?” the bartender asked as he handed me my second beer of the night.

“How do you figure?” I was curious. I hadn’t mentioned anything about the reunion.

He shrugged. “My stepmother is heading the planning committee. I’ve seen and heard the names of every member of the graduating class a bazillion times over the last couple of weeks.”

I gave him a wry smile. “Let me guess, Melanie Clearwater?”

“Got it in one.” He laughed.

“She’s always been a force of nature,” I said. Melanie and I hadn’t been friends, exactly, but she hadn’t been one of the students who’d bullied me in school. She’d been involved in everything, a member of nearly all the committees and organizations, if not heading them.

“That hasn’t changed,” the bartender said before moving off to answer one of the other patrons calling for him.

“Ethan.” Kris came back up to the bar but didn’t sit down. “I’m sorry, man, but I have to go. There’s a search being organized for tomorrow for Rachel, and I need to speak with the organizers.”

“Yeah, you definitely need to go do that,” I said. “When you get the details about when and where, text me. I’d like to be involved.”

“Will do.” Kris clapped me on the shoulder. “You need someone to call for a car?”

I shook my head. “I’m gonna finish up my beer and then head back to the hotel.”

“All right, then. I’ll see you soon, and if you need anything, call me.”

I told him I would, and he left, calling out farewells to other people as he went. People really dug him, I mused, not even a little shocked. Kris had always been one of those kids who wasn’t exactly part of the cool crowd, but nobody really had a beef with him either.

As I nursed my beer, a heaviness draped itself over me. With Kris gone, the reality of being back in Gig Harbor started to hit me like a ton of bricks. It wasn’t just a few immature douchebags who’d bullied me in school or the fact that I’d grown up poor that had made me flee. There were some memories so dark here that even proving all those jerks wrong wasn’t enough to make them go away.

I sighed and took a heftier swig. Going back to my room wasn’t exactly appealing, since all that awaited me there was mindless TV, but sticking around here didn’t seem worth it either.

That's when a total babe with long, dark brown hair and killer green eyes sidled up, asking if she could snag the seat next to me. She was tall, with legs for days encased in dark jeans, and a body that was nothing short of fantastic.

And, unless my radar was way off, she was way too young for me.

Still, that didn't stop me from making my introduction.

"I'm Aria Reed," she said, flashing me a smile.

"Got plans to meet someone?" I asked, laying on the charm. If she did, I'd take that as my cue to skedaddle.

"Nah." She flagged down the bartender and ordered a shot of bourbon and a beer before swiveling back to me. "Couldn't stand being cooped up in my hotel room all night, so I thought I'd swing by here."

"Just visiting, then?" I asked.

Aria bobbed her head. "What about you?"

"Same," I said, letting my eyes linger on her. "I hail from Seattle."

"No way, me too!" Her smile lit up. "Where in Seattle? Maybe we've bumped into each other and didn't even realize."

"I'm fairly certain I'd remember someone like you," I admitted with a grin. "I live on West Highland, near Kerry Park."

"My roommate and I live downtown," she said.

I cocked an eyebrow. "So, would that be 'roommate' or 'room-mate?'"

"Is that your way of asking if I'm single?" Aria took a sip of her drink and shifted on the stool, angling her body toward mine. Her gaze dropped to my left hand, and I loved that she didn't even bother trying to be discreet about it.

"And if it is?" I asked, grinning.

"Then I'd want to know if you were single, too," she said. "No ring just means you're probably not married. I'd rather hear it straight from the horse's mouth."

“I could lie,” I pointed out.

“You could,” she agreed. “But I’ve got a sixth sense for that stuff. I can tell when someone’s lying to me.”

“I’m single,” I assured her. “No roommates to speak of either.”

“They’re not so bad,” she said. “At least mine isn’t.”

We kept up the chit-chat until some beefy dude bulldozed his way between us, his back to me.

“Hey, there, beautiful. Can I buy you a drink?” He completely ignored my polite attempt to get his attention.

I shifted, trying to figure out the best way to step in without starting a brawl, but it turned out Aria could handle herself just fine.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I’ve already got a drink,” Aria said with a sweet smile. “But maybe you can buy my friend a drink?”

She gestured over his shoulder at me. To my surprise, the guy turned and looked at me, confusion plastered across his face. Then, suddenly, he frowned and sighed.

“Nah, that’s okay. I’m not into dudes.” He patted my shoulder with enough force to send a smaller guy tumbling. “But you’re a good-looking guy. I’m sure you’ll make some other dude really happy. Just not me. I’m straight. Very straight. Anyway, gotta take a piss.”

And with that last pronouncement, he staggered away.

“Well, that was...a delightful shitshow,” Aria remarked, casting a bemused glance my way. We shared a chuckle before she had a bright idea. “Let’s play ‘Never Have I Ever.’”

I laughed. “Never Have I Ever? What, pray tell, is that?”

“You haven’t heard of it?” Aria asked, one eyebrow raised. “It’s a drinking game, or an icebreaker if you will.”

“Nope.” I decided not to mention that it was probably popular with the twenty-something crowd, and I was closer to forty than twenty. But who’s

counting, right?

“Well, then,” mischief danced in Aria’s eyes, “we’re definitely doing something about that.”

“You’re going to have to teach me,” I said, playing along.

“Are you a good student?” The question should not have sounded as dirty as it did.

“I can be,” I replied, matching her tone.

She gave me a searching look and must’ve liked what she saw because she kept her eyes on me as she called to the bartender for two shot glasses and a bottle of tequila.

“Alright, it’s super simple,” she began. “I say something that I’ve never done, and if you’ve done it, you take a shot. Then it’s your turn.”

“Like if you say you’ve never gone skydiving, I’d have to take a drink because my buddy and I just did that yesterday,” I said.

“Not the most thrilling example, but yeah, that’s the gist of it.” Aria grinned as she poured tequila into the two shot glasses.

“Not thrilling?” I raised an eyebrow. “You wound me.”

She laughed. “Ready to play?”

I picked up the shot glass. “Alright. Show me how it’s done.”

“Okay.” She thought for a moment and then said, “Never have I ever...gone skydiving.”

My eyes narrowed. “Seriously?”

She shrugged. “Lesson one, all’s fair in love and getting hot guys drunk.”

I grinned at her. “You think I’m hot?”

She gestured toward the glass in my hand. “Drink up.”

I tossed back the shot. “My turn.”

“Go for it.”

I took a moment to remember the correct phrasing and then said, “Never have I ever... gone skinny dipping.”

Her eyes locked with mine as she reached over, picked up the glass, and drained every drop. I swallowed just as hard, thoughts of Aria naked, skin slick and glistening with water, dancing through my head.

I poured us two more shots.

“My turn.” She studied me for a minute, and I could almost see the wheels turning in her head. “Never have I ever lied about my,” her eyes flicked down to my crotch, “measurements.” When I didn’t reach for my drink, she asked, “Really? Never?”

“Trust me, darling, when you have what I’ve got, there’s no need to lie.”

Her cheeks turned pink, and her tongue darted out to trace her bottom lip.

“Are you two going to drink those?” A petite blonde inserted herself between us. “Or are you going to give them to me to get a party started for the three of us?”

“Sorry, honey. Not interested in sharing,” Aria said. She threw back her shot. “I’m going to go play a round of pool. Ethan?”

Her tone was casual, but I knew this was a test of sorts. I could go with the blonde who wanted to drink and definitely had sex on the mind, or I could play pool and explore the chemistry between Aria and me. Chemistry that may end up leading to sex, or it may not.

It wasn’t even a choice.

“Sorry, miss.” I smiled at the blonde as I took my own remaining shot. “But I believe I’m being challenged to a game of pool.”

“Your loss,” the blonde called after me.

“She looks like she could be fun,” Aria said, her voice teasing.

“Not interested.”

Aria threw me a smile and pointed at the pool table. “You know how to rack ‘em, right?”

“I think I can manage,” I said cryptically. Maybe it was a bit unfair of me, but I didn’t tell her that I’d spent a good portion of my free time in college making money off arrogant rich kids by beating them at pool.

With a sharp crack, Aria broke, her shot expertly placed, and I watched her sink three balls in quick succession. It was hard not to feel admiration and intrigue as it dawned on me that, like me, she hadn’t been forthcoming about her pool-playing prowess. But instead of being irked, I found the sight of her skillfully clearing the table, denying me even a single shot, surprisingly alluring.

“Well played,” I conceded with a grin.

Aria sauntered toward me, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “You lost.”

“I did,” I agreed, “although I’m not sure it’s quite a fair outcome since I didn’t even get to play.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Regardless, you need to pay up.”

“Pay up?” I feigned surprise. “I don’t recall making a bet.”

“Hmm,” she mused, tapping her chin thoughtfully. “I suppose it wouldn’t be right to take your money. I’ll just take your shirt instead.”

The surprise registered on my face, but as I caught the gleam in her eyes, I decided to rise to her challenge.

“I’ve never played strip pool before, but sure, why not?” I began to unbutton my shirt, but Aria closed the distance between us, her hands covering mine.

“Let’s not get you arrested for public indecency,” she teased.

“Really?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. “Any particular reason?”

“Because then we wouldn’t be able to indulge in some private indecency.”

Her words caught me off-guard, but before I could recover, she leaned in close, her floral-scented hair tickling my nose. “Is there anything stopping you from inviting me back to your room?”

“Want to ride with me or take your own wheels?” I shot back.

“I walked here. Let’s take your car,” she replied, linking her arm with mine.

My skin buzzed from the contact, and arousal made my jeans feel way too tight as we ditched the bar and headed to my ride. We kept quiet during the short drive, but our hands stayed locked, that simple touch keeping the connection alive. When we rolled up, I told her to hang tight while I opened her door.

“Chivalrous,” she remarked, as I took her hand, guiding her out of the car. “Cute, but not necessary.”

I grinned. “Oh, it was absolutely necessary.” Instead of letting go, I reeled her in closer, my eyes locked onto hers.

As it dawned on her what I was up to, I lowered my head and snatched her lips. Damn, they were even softer and more tempting than I’d imagined. The way she pressed against me, her mouth eagerly meeting mine, was beyond anything I’d anticipated. She nipped at my bottom lip, her tongue teasing mine, and I wondered who was really calling the shots here.

My hands found their way to her ass and as she clung to my shirt, I realized it didn’t matter. If this was the heat and electricity generated by a single kiss, I couldn’t wait to get her naked and underneath me.

We were going to be fucking explosive.

Chapter Five

Aria

HEAD SPINNING. Earth shaking. Yeah, people say that crap all the time, but it never made sense until Ethan's lips crashed onto mine. It was like someone lit a damn fuse in my head that exploded into fireworks throughout my body. Little sparks of pleasure igniting every place we touched.

When he finally lifted his head, I felt like I was practically buzzing.

"I couldn't wait one more second to know what you taste like." Ethan's voice was rougher than sandpaper.

"And?" I raised an eyebrow. "What do I taste like?"

His eyes had gone dark, like the sky at midnight. "Sin."

That shouldn't have been such a turn-on, but damn. "And that's just my mouth."

Ethan growled, and I swear to God, it made everything south of the border flood. "Room. Now."

He dragged me through the inn and into his room with the finesse of a caveman. I barely had time to register the conference table, TV, and some comfy-looking chairs before we were in the bedroom, and all I could see was the king-sized bed.

Oh, and the freaking hot tub in the corner. Nice touch. Too bad I was more focused on the fact that Ethan and I were wearing way too many clothes.

Seemed like Ethan was on the same wavelength.

I watched, spellbound, as he tore off his shirt, unveiling a chiseled torso with just the right amount of fuzz and a trail leading from his navel to disappear beneath his waistband. He hooked his thumbs in his pockets and gave me a steady look.

"I believe my shirt is all you won from me," he said. "Anything else, you're gonna have to make an even swap."

“So, if I wanna find out if you’re a boxers or briefs kinda dude,” I joked, “I gotta ditch some threads too?”

“Bingo,” he said, winking.

With a smirk to match his, I kicked off both my kicks. “Your move, hotshot.”

“You’re pushing my buttons,” he warned.

A spark of heat shot through me, and I was tempted to see how far I could nudge him before he cracked. But then he shifted, and all those tasty muscles tensed, and I chucked that idea out the window. There were way better things I wanted to do with him.

Or to him, for that matter.

Without a word, I pulled off my shirt and tossed it toward the dresser. His shoes and socks followed, and then I stripped off my jeans, leaving me in just my plain cotton bra and panties. They weren’t anything special, chosen for comfort since sex hadn’t been on my mind when I’d left the hotel, but Ethan seemed to like them well enough if the way he cupped himself through his pants was anything to go by.

I put my hands on my hips and dropped my gaze to his pants. “Well? Boxers or briefs?”

His fingers flicked open the button of his jeans and then he eased them over his hips.

“Boxer briefs,” I said hoarsely. “Nice.”

Nice seemed like an understatement for strong thighs, a trim waist, and a thick bulge. I felt like I barely had time to appreciate it, though, before he caught me around the waist and spun us around to the bed. My back hit the mattress and I let out a squeak that turned into a moan as he settled his body over mine, my legs automatically opening to give him a place to rest. The hard length of him rested over me, the heat from his body slipping over my skin like the most sensual touch.

I ran my hands up his arms, tracing my fingers over his forearms and biceps to his shoulders, then down his chest, appreciating every dip and curve.

“I don’t see a tattoo,” I murmured. “Did you cheat at our game?”

He grinned down at me, then rolled off me in one smooth motion, turning so I could see the intricately designed tattoo that covered his upper back. Before I could touch it the way I wanted, he was back over me, this time kissing his way across my collarbone and then down between my breasts. When he reached the waistband of my panties, I felt him chuckle.

“Found yours.” He nudged the elastic aside and pressed his lips against the trio of letters I’d had etched just above my right hipbone.

“My mom’s initials.” The confession slipped out before I had a chance to really think about it, but I quickly pulled myself together. “I really don’t want to talk about mothers right now.”

“Right.” He nipped at my side. “I believe something was said about private indecency?”

I wiggled underneath him. “Then what are you waiting for?”

He raised his head far enough for me to see the wicked glint in his eyes...and then he proceeded to remove my panties with his teeth.

After dropping my underwear on the floor, he spread my legs and crawled between them, dropping kisses along my inner thighs as he went.

“Take off your bra.” His words were muffled, but understandable. “I want you to get those pretty nipples of yours nice and hard for me.”

Thankful that I’d gone with a front clasp bra today, I did as he said and let my bra fall away. As I cupped my breasts, Ethan’s breath moved over my skin, sending a shiver through me. I looked down the line of my body just as he pressed his mouth to my sensitive flesh. He ran his tongue along the seam of my lips, and I rolled my nipples between my thumbs and index fingers. They tightened as I plucked them, sending little jolts of pleasure through me as Ethan’s tongue explored, parting my folds and dipping into my core. When the tip circled my clit, my head fell back and my fingers tightened on my nipples, a myriad of sensations rolling over me.

I tried to focus on each one, to distinguish between the wet heat of his mouth lightly flicking against my clit and the strength of his fingers as he held my

thighs apart. The sharp pinch in my breasts as my hands convulsively clenched. The fabric of the bedspread under my back, soft but not the sort that came with familiarity and time, but rather the kind that came with cost.

A finger slid inside me as he wrapped his lips around my clit and I cried out, my back arching at the burst of pleasure that ran across my nerves. His tongue moved over the sensitive bundle of nerves as his finger moved in and out of me, steadily building the pressure inside me. As I neared a climax, he lightly set his teeth on my clit and added a second finger, working in tandem to send me careening over the edge.

His fingers kept working inside me, fingertips rubbing over a spot that drew out my orgasm into something that rode the line between ecstasy and pain. Only when I reached down to push him away did he stop. While my body continued to twitch from microbursts of pleasure, he started kissing his way back up my body. When he reached my breasts, he pushed my hands aside and began to lavish as much attention on my nipples as he had on my pussy.

I groaned as each pull of his mouth seemed directly connected to my still throbbing clit, but I didn't ask him to stop. Instead, I ran my fingers through his hair, nails scratching against his scalp, digging in every time he used his teeth. By the time he raised his head, both of my nipples were hard and swollen, the cool air against wet flesh doing nothing to soothe their aching.

At some point, Ethan had removed his underwear and now I finally got a look at what I'd only been feeling before. A thick shaft I suspected I'd barely be able to circle with my hand jutted out from dark brown curls, its long length bobbing up toward rock-solid abs. I didn't have a long list of previous lovers, but I had a feeling that I could've slept with dozens of men and not come across such a magnificent specimen.

I needed him inside me.

As if he'd read my mind, he rolled a condom over his cock and then returned to where he'd been between my legs, his body covering mind. With my height, I rarely met someone who made me feel truly small, but Ethan wasn't just taller than me. His broad shoulders and chest, combined with powerful legs and cut arms, nearly overwhelmed me in the best possible way.

Our eyes locked and held as I felt the tip of him nudge against me. My breath

caught as he eased his way inside, stretching me inch by inch until I felt like I couldn't take any more.

"So full," I moaned as I dug my nails into his shoulders and tried not to squirm.

"Not done yet." Ethan's voice was strained.

My eyebrows shot up. "You're joking."

One side of his mouth tipped up. "I told you I didn't need to lie about measurements."

Balancing himself on one elbow, he hooked his other arm under my leg and raised it. When he leaned forward, he slid even deeper, hitting the end of me as I cried out. Ethan muttered a curse and stilled, his forehead dropping to rest against mine for a moment.

"Are you okay?" he asked hoarsely.

I nodded and put my hand on his cheek. "Better than okay."

He rocked against me, watching my face for any sign of discomfort. When he didn't see anything, he moved faster, though still far from the frantic pace I'd expected based on that first kiss. He fucked me with unhurried, deliberate strokes, each one filling me so completely that the sensations threatened to overwhelm me. His eyes held me, kept me from flying apart, and I gripped his arms, raising my hips to meet him.

"Fuck, Aria, you feel amazing." He bent down to press his lips to my neck. I felt the sting of a bite, then the soothing of his tongue.

"Not so bad yourself," I replied, the last word coming out on a gasp as he ground against me, putting the perfect amount of pressure and friction on my clit. "Now, please, faster."

"As you wish." A flash of humor crossed his eyes before it was replaced with heat.

The urgency that we'd lost came back with a vengeance and we stopped talking. Everything became us and the fire between us, the inferno it promised. Every thrust stoked the flame, every caress made electricity dance

across my skin. I dug my fingers into his hair, writhed underneath him. I wanted this to last forever, but I also needed to come before the need drove me insane.

Fortunately, my body decided for me and between one stroke and the next, all that burning pressure exploded into white-hot bliss. As I basked in pleasure, he called out my name and his body tensed above mine, his expression frozen for a brief moment in complete ecstasy. Then he dropped onto me, the full weight of his body on mine for half a minute before he rolled off me onto his back.

“Well, damn,” I said, once I could form words again.

“Understatement of the century,” Ethan panted. We lay there for a couple of minutes before he added, “If you wanna get cleaned up, you can use my bathroom.”

He wasn’t exactly kicking me out, but he sure as hell wasn’t inviting me for a sleepover either. Not that I wanted to crash here. This was a fling, a way to burn off that crazy sexual tension between us and have some fun. Plus, it got my mind off the real reason I was back in Gig Harbor.

“Thanks,” I said. “I’ll be quick.”

When I finished showering and returned to the bedroom for my clothes, Ethan was dressed again, though he’d left his shirt unbuttoned, giving me a final peek at those killer abs. He flashed me a smile that was warm, but not nearly as spicy as the ones we’d exchanged earlier.

“Do you want me to drive you back to your hotel?” he asked. “Whatever you want, really.”

“I’m good,” I said, grinning as I crossed over to him. Standing on my tiptoes, I pecked his cheek. “Thanks for an amazing time. Enjoy the rest of your stay.”

Something flickered in his eyes. “You too.”

I didn’t bother telling him this was probably the only fun I’d have on this trip. Instead, I made my way downstairs where a cab was waiting outside. On the short drive back to my hotel, I noticed how much more relaxed I felt, like I

had everything under control. Exactly what I needed.

It wasn't until I was walking down the hall to my room that a twinge of guilt snuck in. Guilt that while I'd been having the best sex of my life, my sister was out there somewhere, in God knows what kind of condition or danger. I unlocked my door and shoved all those thoughts away. Yeah, I came to look for Rachel, but she wasn't my responsibility. I couldn't have done anything else tonight, and if this cleared my head for tomorrow, it was a good thing.

With that in mind, I got ready for bed and, shockingly, had no trouble at all falling asleep.

Chapter Six

Ethan

AS I CHUGGED down the last drop of my morning coffee, my mind was still busy replaying the mind-blowing events of last night, when suddenly my phone buzzed, interrupting my not-so-innocent thoughts. It was a text from Kris:

Search party for Rachel around the harbor in thirty minutes.

Oh, Rachel. Yeah, I should probably be focusing on her, or at least her mom. But nope, my brain was all about Aria, the human distraction. Why, brain, why?

I had to deal with this, pronto.

So what if Aria lived in Seattle too? And, okay, maybe “combustible” was the only way to describe the fireworks we had last night. But c’mon, relationships were so not my thing. Then again, I didn’t get the vibe that Aria was itching for a “happily ever after” either.

Time to evict her from my thoughts, like, now.

Where’s everyone meeting? I texted back.

When I rocked up at Skansie Brothers Park twenty minutes later, I was impressed by the turnout for Rachel’s search party. I even recognized a few faces. Sarah had been popular back in the day, but who we’d been as teens didn’t always match up with our adult selves.

I was living proof of that.

“Ethan, thanks for coming out.” Kris came over and shook my hand. “We need as many eyes as possible since we don’t have much to go on.” He sighed. “Honestly, there’s no evidence of anything.”

“Hopefully we’ll find something today,” I said.

“So, what’d you get up to after I left last night?” Kris asked. “Did you run into any familiar faces?”

The memory of Aria writhing beneath me slammed into my brain, and I had to yank my thoughts back to reality to avoid an embarrassingly teenage boner situation.

I shook my head. “I hung around for a while, shot some pool, then headed back to the inn.” I kept it intentionally vague. Kris was a buddy, but we hadn’t been close in years. “Where do I sign up for the search?”

“Over there.” Kris pointed. “Gotta run, but I’ll see you around, buddy.”

I’d just finished signing up when I heard a familiar voice saying my name. I turned and found Aria looking as surprised to see me as I was her.

“Ethan, what are you doing here?”

“Looking for a missing girl,” I said, “which I assume is the same reason you’re here.”

“It is.” Aria moved closer, curiosity burning in her eyes.

I had a few questions of my own, but neither of us had the chance to ask them because we got interrupted by a familiar female voice.

“There you are!”

Just like that, I was eighteen again, staring at the most stunning redhead I’d ever seen. Sarah’s hair was the same fiery color as it had been back then, and the same wild curls. She was thinner, almost scarily so, but I figured she hadn’t had much of an appetite lately.

I scrambled for something to say, all my previous conversation starters flying out the window.

Then Sarah went straight to Aria and wrapped her arms around her like they were old friends.

“I’m so glad you came,” Sarah said. “I know it’ll mean a lot to Rachel that you’re here. She’ll be so excited to see you when we find her. We’ve both missed you so much.”

What the hell was going on here?

I shifted, and the movement caught Sarah’s attention. She turned away from

Aria and looked at me for the first time.

“Hi.” I smiled at her, wondering if I should shake her hand or go for a hug.

“Well, hello there.”

The lack of recognition on her face stung more than it should’ve. I knew I’d changed since she’d last seen me, but we’d known each other intimately, not to mention we’d gone to school together our entire lives.

“I’m Sarah Blackwell, and this is my daughter, Aria.”

Oh, fuck.

The realization of how badly I’d messed up sent a shiver down my spine, like someone filled my veins with ice water. Sarah hadn’t been pregnant back in school, which meant Aria had to be younger than I’d thought. But just how much younger? Yeah, let’s not go there.

“Foster daughter,” Aria chimed in, saving my sorry ass.

“Right,” Sarah nodded. “I wouldn’t want anyone thinking I was ancient enough to have a twenty-one-year-old.”

I breathed a sigh of relief, feeling like I’d dodged a bullet. I mean, I’d assumed Aria was at least legal, seeing as we met in a bar, but I’d guessed she was more mid-twenties. Still, twenty-one was a hell of a lot better than the nightmare scenario my brain cooked up.

“I didn’t catch your name,” Sarah said, throwing me that flirty smile that used to torment my teenage daydreams.

“Ethan Cole.” I snatched her hand before she could connect the dots. As I shook it, I could see the gears turning in her head.

“Ethan.” Sarah paused, then opened her mouth to say something else.

“Ms. Blackwell,” an older woman in a ‘Bring Rachel Home’ shirt butted in. “It’s time for us to start.”

“Oh, right.” Sarah seemed caught off guard as she looped her arm through Aria’s. “Come on, Aria. I need your support while I address everyone.” She shot me a glance. “Thanks for coming, Ethan.”

As I watched the dynamic duo stroll away, I silently prayed they wouldn't start swapping stories. Hooking up with Aria last night? Yeah, that was a massive facepalm moment, and I sure as hell didn't want the shitstorm that would follow if either of them found out what I'd done with the other. For their sake, and mine.

Shit.

I never should've left Seattle.

Chapter Seven

Aria

SARAH DIDN'T GIVE me a chance to say goodbye to Ethan or dig into why their interaction had been so damn bizarre. Sure, nothing they said was out of the ordinary, but there was definitely something off. I couldn't quite nail it, but I noticed a change in Sarah when Ethan introduced himself. Like she recognized him.

“Can I have everyone’s attention, please?”

I nearly jumped out of my skin as Marilyn Saltzman’s voice blasted through the megaphone, cutting through the crowd. I’d only met her for a hot second when I first showed up, but I warmed up to her almost immediately. Seriously, anyone who dedicated their life to volunteering for the National Center for Missing Adults was a freaking superhero in my book.

“...Sarah Blackwell.”

The crowd clapped as Sarah took the megaphone; the spotlight shifting to her.

“Thank you all so much for being here.” Sarah sniffled and dabbed at her eyes with a dramatic flourish. “It means the world to me that you all care enough about my Rachel to show up this morning.”

I started zoning Sarah out. I’d spent years listening to her sob stories and wasn’t in the mood for her self-serving, narcissistic bull crap. During the three years I’d been away, I tried to convince myself that maybe I’d been too young to understand her point of view. But now that I was back, I could see I’d been right on the money all along.

Marilyn reclaimed the megaphone and started giving instructions, yanking my mind back to the task at hand. While I wanted to support Sarah, she wasn’t the reason I was here. Rachel was.

Once I got the lowdown on which group I’d been assigned to, I moseyed over, swapping nods with a few familiar faces. And then I spotted Ethan and mentally unleashed a string of expletives. What were the freaking odds? Both

of us from Seattle just happened to bump into each other at a bar and then again here. If I was the type to believe in fate, I might've thought it was some cosmic sign, instead of a series of whacked-out coincidences.

Considering our cringe-fest of an encounter less than fifteen minutes ago, I wasn't exactly stoked about getting too close and suffering through an awkward silence. But, unfortunately for me, as the group leader assigned us spots in the search line, I wound up next to the last person I wanted to be anywhere nearby.

"Hey." Ethan tossed me a smile, but it lacked that devilish twinkle I'd seen the night before, the one that made his eyes come alive.

I couldn't tell if the change was because of the serious situation, the wonky vibe between him and Sarah, or maybe he was having second thoughts about our no-holds-barred night together. I seriously hoped it wasn't the last one. We'd been straight-up dynamite together, and I still felt that electric pull. I didn't want that magic ruined by a nasty case of regret.

As we began plodding along the path they instructed us to follow, I decided to take my lead from him regarding our little rendezvous. If he wanted to chat and flirt like we had done at the bar, cool. Or if he preferred to act like it was some crazy dream, I could play along, too.

After trudging in silence for nearly half an hour, I figured he'd made his choice, and it was to sweep everything under the rug.

I attempted to concentrate on the search instead of the tantalizing man beside me, but trust me, it was no easy feat. In that moment, we were sauntering across sandy terrain, not wading through thick brush, and he was right there, mere inches away, just within reach. Close enough for my peripheral vision to capture him, and the undeniable desire that lingered in the air.

Finally, in a desperate attempt to clear my head, I shifted my focus to the people on the other side of me, a pair of girls who looked like they could be around Rachel's age, maybe slightly older. I didn't recognize them, but with over three hundred kids in my graduating class, I couldn't say for sure they weren't closer to my age. Maybe they'd become friends with Rachel after I'd hit the road.

“Do they seriously think we’re gonna just stumble upon her on the beach like she’s been out here sunbathing?” The taller of the two women, a blonde, asked her friend.

“I don’t think they’re gonna find her at all,” the raven-haired one said, oozing sass. “Not until she wants to be found, anyway.”

“You don’t think someone kidnapped her?”

The dark-haired one laughed, a snarky, dismissive chuckle. “For real? We both know Rachel is probably shacked up with some random dude, high as a kite, with no clue that people are searching for her.”

“C’mon. The cops ain’t that dumb. I’m sure they checked her boyfriend’s place.”

“I just said ‘a guy’. Doesn’t have to be her boyfriend. Addicts like her will screw anyone who’ll give ‘em dope, especially if they’re broke.”

“She’s never had the best taste in men, that’s for sure.”

The pair fell silent again, but I’d heard more than enough. I wanted to snap at them, tell them to show some damn respect, that Rachel wouldn’t do something like that.

Except they were right. And it stung.

We needed to take the search seriously because Rachel could be in danger, but the things they’d said about her drug use and her taste in men hit the nail on the head. And what they didn’t know only made it worse.

About a year before I’d left, Rachel and her fling-of-the-week broke into a liquor store one night and then swiped the owner’s car. Since she’d been a minor when they were caught, he’d convinced her to take the fall for everything. And she’d done it. No amount of common sense thrown at her could change her mind. It’d only been Sarah’s connections and cash that had gotten her off with probation.

And as soon as they had released her into Sarah’s custody, Rachel and Romeo had vanished for a week. She’d only come back after he’d bailed with the drugs and whatever money Rachel had stolen from her mom. Even then,

Rachel had made excuses for the loser.

An annoyed sound from my other side had me glancing over at Ethan. The irritated expression on his face and the way he kept side-eyeing the girls made me suspect that he'd overheard them.

"Is it true?" he asked in a low voice, cutting like a knife. "The gossip they're spewing about Rachel?"

I winced but answered honestly. "Rachel's been a hot mess ever since her dad bailed when she was a kid. He basically chose some other woman over Sarah and Rachel, and it seriously messed her up."

Ethan frowned, a troubled expression on his face. "No kiddin'?"

I shrugged. "There's a reason we have the phrase 'daddy issues.' Rachel's manifested with drug use and cringe-worthy dating decisions."

"Damn."

"It doesn't matter," I declared, steadfast. "No matter what she's done, we still need to find her and make sure she's okay."

"And maybe this time, she'll get the help she needs," Ethan said.

"If she's up for it," I replied. When he shot me a sharp look, I added, "That's often the problem with addicts. They have to want to be helped."

He looked away, but not before I caught a glimpse of how my words had upset him. I felt bad if I'd somehow hurt him, but it was the truth, especially with Rachel. She'd never wanted to get clean.

I gave myself a mental shake and reminded myself that I wasn't here to solve anyone's problems. I was here to find my sister. After that, we'd see what happened.

Chapter Eight

Ethan

WE'D SEARCHED that damn harbor high and low, and what did we find? Sweet fuck-all, that's what. Sure, there was plenty of the usual garbage lying around, especially with the snow melting and all. But as for Rachel? Not a single frigging trace.

There we were, the saddest excuse for a search team you'd ever seen, dragging our sorry asses back to the starting point. The general atmosphere was about as sunny as a wake. Seriously, I've seen guys at the bar after losing a bet with happier faces than this lot.

And then there was Sarah. Poor girl was trying her best to keep it together, but she wasn't fooling anyone. Every now and then, her face would crumple like a cheap suit when she thought she was in the clear. It was enough to make a grown man want to bawl his eyes out, or at the very least, hit the bottle.

I glanced over at Aria, just in time to see her slipping away without a peep. A wave of regret hit me, but I told myself it was the right move. Sure, the chemistry we'd had the other night was off the charts, and damn, she still looked hot as hell. But come on—it was a one-night stand, not some grand romantic destiny. Seeing her here, of all places, and finding out she was Sarah's foster kid? That was just life's twisted sense of humor, not a cosmic invitation. Besides, it was crystal clear that keeping my distance from Aria Reed, both in this godforsaken town and back in Seattle, was the smart play.

"Thank goodness the rain held off," Kris said, joining me. "That would've made things even more miserable."

I sighed. "I don't know how you do this. All this work and nothing to show for it."

"I try not to look at it that way," Kris replied.

I raised an eyebrow. "Hundreds of people just spent hours scouring the harbor, and all we've got is sand in our shoes."

“But now we’ve eliminated this entire area,” Kris countered. “Finding nothing was actually something.”

I shook my head, chuckling. “I wish I had your optimism.”

He shrugged. “It’s either this or get old and bitter. I don’t have a choice about the former, but I do about the latter.”

“Next time I’m frustrated about some software glitch or a business deal that fell through, I’ll try to keep that in mind,” I said.

“Want to grab some dinner?” Kris asked. “This is the first break I’ve had all day. I didn’t even get to try the trail mix and oranges they handed out.”

“They weren’t very filling,” I admitted. “I could really go for something more substantial.”

“Meet me at The Gourmet Burger Shop in fifteen?” Kris suggested.

“Still have the best burgers in town?”

“You know it.”

WHEN I PULLED into the parking lot of The Gourmet Burger Shop, I spotted at least a dozen familiar faces from the search. No surprise there; this joint was known for serving up the best burgers in town.

Kris joined me just a few minutes later, and we snagged a table tucked away in the back. After placing our orders, I tackled the proverbial elephant in the room.

“Is it just me, or is everyone in here eyeing you like they’re debating whether it’s cool to crash our meal?”

Kris shot a quick glance around and sighed. “Nah, it ain’t just you. People have been hounding me everywhere, dying for the latest scoop on Rachel’s disappearance.”

“Is that a new thing?” I asked. “Strangers chatting you up about work when

you're off the clock?"

He made a seesaw motion with his hand. "Used to depend on the person, but now it's like everyone's got a stake in this case."

"Pretty blonde goes missing, and the world flips out," I remarked.

"We don't get many missing persons in Gig Harbor," Kris said. "And with Sarah Blackwell being her mom..." His voice trailed off.

I nodded, getting the picture.

"I've been lucky," he continued. "We don't have much violent crime around here, and nothing I've dealt with has involved anyone I really knew."

"Until now," I added.

He nodded. "Until now."

"Are you actually working the case?" I inquired. "I mean, captains rarely do fieldwork, right?"

"I'm more hands-on with this case than others," he admitted, "but it's officially Marty Pickman's case."

I stiffened. "Marty Pickman?"

"He made detective two years back," Kris informed me. "Closed a couple of robbery cases and a mugging involving some tourists."

That didn't exactly set my mind at ease. There was only one reason a guy like Marty would want to become a cop, and it wasn't to help people.

But then again, it had been twenty years since I'd last seen him, and I'd changed. Maybe he had too.

"Our department isn't massive, but I have Pickman solely on this case, which is keeping the press off my back," Kris continued.

"For someone who's supposedly focused on cracking the case, he hasn't discovered much." My words came out harsher than intended, and Kris shot me a look. "Sorry."

“Pickman’s not slacking. There’s just nothing to find,” Kris said, sighing.

“Sarah reported Rachel missing?” I asked. “Was Rachel still living at home?”

Kris shook his head. “Nah, Rachel hadn’t lived at home for over a year. But even before that, she’d spent plenty of time at so-called friends’ houses.”

“You mean dealers and addicts,” I said. At Kris’s questioning look, I added, “Heard some things today about Rachel.”

Kris rubbed his forehead. “Rachel was a troubled kid,” he said. “Got mixed up with the wrong crowd, drugs, and booze. Sarah couldn’t keep her in line.”

Remembering how hard-headed and stubborn Sarah had been when I’d known her, I could only imagine what her daughter was like.

“Most of the force thinks Rachel’s off on a bender,” Kris confessed. “Or she overdosed.”

“I’m sure you’ve checked all the usual drug dens,” I said. “Wouldn’t she be there if she overdosed?”

“Not if one of her pals found her first and didn’t wanna risk getting busted.”

I muttered a curse, and Kris nodded in agreement.

“We’re still tracking her latest boyfriend,” Kris said. “He’s a bit of a drifter and knows how to dodge the cops. Been in and out of jail since he was a juvie in Texas.”

“Parents?” I asked.

“Both died when he was twenty,” Kris said. “He has a cousin from Gig Harbor, which is how he wound up here, and he’s been a pain in our ass ever since.”

Something clicked in my head, and I frowned. “Ever since? How old is this guy?”

Kris thought for a moment before answering. “Twenty-three? Twenty-four?”

“Wait, how old is Rachel?”

“Nineteen.”

Shit.

I shifted uneasily in my seat. I’d been involved with Sarah during our senior year of high school. Twenty years ago.

Except that was just a coincidence, right? After all, Sarah had also been dating the man she married right after graduation. Of course, Rachel was his daughter. He wouldn’t have married Sarah if she was pregnant with another man’s child, and she wouldn’t have let me go all these years without telling me if Rachel was mine. Sarah must’ve gotten pregnant right after they got married. The math still worked.

“Ethan?” Kris said my name in a way that showed he’d said it twice already.

“Sorry.” I gave him a smile. “Got lost in my thoughts.”

“It happens.”

“I meant to ask before. Is the reunion still on?” I changed the subject. “Or did the committee decide to cancel or postpone because of all this?”

Kris shook his head. “Trust me, it would take a natural disaster to get ‘em to cancel the reunion. Sarah’s even insisted we keep it going.” He grinned at me. “Regretting coming back?”

I honestly didn’t have an answer for that question, rhetorical or not.

We finished our meal, making small talk about the reunion and catching up on each other’s lives. But my thoughts kept drifting back to Rachel and the slim possibility that she might be my daughter. It was an unsettling thought, and I wasn’t sure if I wanted to know the truth or not.

As we left the burger joint, Kris clapped me on the back. “Hey, man, don’t sweat all this Rachel stuff. We’ll find her, and everything will work out. You’ll see.”

I nodded, trying to put on a brave face. “Yeah, I know. Thanks, Kris.”

But as I headed back to my hotel room, my mind raced with questions and doubts. What if Rachel was my daughter? What would that mean for Aria

and me? And what about Sarah? I hadn't seen her in years, but the thought of her still stirred up a whirlwind of emotions.

The truth was, I couldn't shake the feeling that my past was coming back to haunt me, and I had no idea how to deal with it.

Chapter Nine

Aria

AS I WATCHED Ethan shoot the breeze with the search crew, an itch of curiosity crept up on me—what was this dude’s story, anyway? Sure, he looked like the type who’d go all out to lend a hand to someone in a jam, but his reaction to Sarah and the gaggle of gossipy gals yapping about Rachel made me think he had some skin in the game. But you know what they say about curiosity and cats, right? Best to mind my own beeswax, I figured.

With that thought firmly lodged in my brain, I walked away from him without a word, doing my best to suppress the nagging voice in my head, the one that wished we could just abandon all this drama and dive headfirst into a round two of last night’s mind-blowing escapades. But no, I had more important things to worry about - like finding Rachel.

As I pondered my next move, Sarah came barreling towards me, sobbing and hugging me like a long-lost friend. Caught off guard, I hugged her back, only to realize that she had an audience - a bunch of reporters, of course. What a surprise.

“No one found anything,” she cried, making sure the reporters caught her most photogenic angle. “Not a single hint she came here at all.”

I patted her back, struggling to keep a straight face. “It’ll be okay. We’ll find her.”

“Where could she be?” Sarah sniffled, still putting on a show for the cameras. Don’t get me wrong, I knew she cared about Rachel in her own twisted way, but her concern always seemed pretty shallow.

“I’m so glad you’re here right now,” she continued, patting my cheek like I was still a little girl. “And you’re staying, right?”

“For as long as I can or until we find Rachel,” I said.

“And you’re staying at the house, of course. Your old room is just the way you left it.”

I seriously doubted that. “I have a room at the—”

“Aria, you mind me now.” She tried to give me a stern look, which was honestly kind of adorable.

Now, under normal circumstances, there was no way I’d stay with Sarah after the way she’d kicked me out. But if I was there, in my old room, I could snoop around Rachel’s room for potential leads. So, I reluctantly agreed to her offer.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll stay.”

Sarah hugged me again, making a big show of wiping her cheeks before wrapping her arm around mine and turning us so that we were both facing the reporters.

“Thank you all for coming today to cover the search for my daughter,” she said, her voice trembling for added effect. She let out a shaky breath and continued, “Unfortunately, we didn’t find her, but I’m not giving up. With my other daughter here at my side, I’ll keep searching for as long as it takes.”

Shit. Now, whatever news outlets these people worked for would have my picture next to Sarah’s, and a caption that referred to me as her daughter. And if I tried to correct them, I’d look like a petty brat who wasn’t grateful to a woman who took her in. Just great.

Forcing myself to smile a stiff, fake smile, I gritted my teeth and waited for this whole charade to be over, hoping against hope that it would lead us closer to finding Rachel.

I CONSIDERED TELLING Sarah I wanted to stay at the hotel for one more night, especially since it was too late in the day to score a refund for today’s booking. But surprisingly, the hotel clerk had seen me on the news with Sarah and, after a quick call to the manager, they approved my refund. It seemed like people in Gig Harbor still had a soft spot for Sarah, or maybe they just sympathized with a grieving mother. Whatever the reason, I wasn’t about to argue. My recent promotion didn’t mean I could throw caution to the wind with my budget.

Once in my car, I took a deep breath to prepare myself for the emotional rollercoaster I was about to embark on. Sure, I'd been in the house since my return, but this time, it would feel different. It would be like stepping into a time machine.

I steeled myself and drove straight to the Blackwell house, resisting the urge to take a detour just to avoid confronting my past for a little while longer. As I pulled up, a swarm of reporters surrounded my car, bombarding me with questions I couldn't quite hear. When it was clear I had no intention of answering, they reluctantly backed away. My subtle tap on the gas might've helped speed up the process.

Upon knocking, Sarah flung the door open and pulled me into one of her bear hugs. You know, one of those hugs that lasts just long enough for the paparazzi to snap the perfect shot. Then, she dragged me inside, her nonstop yapping and perfume hitting me like a freight train, as she led me upstairs like I was a total stranger to the place.

"And voilà, just as you left it!" she exclaimed, swinging open the door to my old bedroom like some kind of game show host.

Now, I got to admit; the room looked exactly how I remembered it - as if nothing had changed since the day I'd packed my bags and hit the road. But then I noticed that "unchanged" actually meant everything was covered in a layer of dust from years of being forgotten.

"Well," Sarah said, glancing around with that "oh shit" look you get when you realize there's a problem. "I'll let you settle in. Just come down when you're ready for some dinner."

With that, she split, leaving me to heave a sigh of relief and shut the door behind her. I lugged my bag over to the bed, emptying my crap and arranging it so I could find everything in a jiffy. The whole thing was dull as dishwater, but it gave me a few ticks to wrap my head around being back in this oh-so-familiar joint. Gave me a weird case of *déjà vu*, if you know what I mean.

I was only eleven when my mom died, and I ended up bunking with the Blackwell's. I rarely mulled over that day, but with all the crap that had happened since Rachel vanished, a tidal wave of memories came crashing down, and I was too beat to fight them.

“It’s gonna be fine, Aria,” Rachel had said, tailing me into my room like a lost puppy on that godforsaken day. “You’re my sis now, and we’re gonna be family till the end of time.”

“I just wanna go home,” I sniffled, wiping my eyes with the back of my hand. “I want my mom.”

I clamped my eyes shut, trying to fish out the happier moments. After all, not all my memories in the Blackwell crib were a total drag. If I hit rewind to before the car wreck, there were plenty of good times with Rachel.

“I want the mermaid,” Rachel had whined, sticking out her bottom lip like a pro. “You get the cowgirl.”

I didn’t bother reminding her that just last week she pinky swore I could pick the doll I wanted. Rachel was always making promises and then forgetting them. Mom said it was because she was just a kid, and I had to play it cool. One day, she’d get it.

“Fine, Rachel. I’ll play with the cowgirl.”

“Thank you!” she squealed, practically strangle-hugging me. “I love you, Aria.”

I shook off the memory and wiped away my tears. Rachel and I had a complicated relationship, but she was the closest thing to a sister I’d ever had. I never really got comfy calling Sarah “Mom,” and I hardly ever thought of her as my mother. But it was a piece of cake calling Rachel my sis. And until everything went to shit, she loved telling people I was her big sister.

“C’mon, Aria,” Rachel had begged once. “This is what sisters do for each other, right?”

“Cover for your grounded ass so you can sneak out to some forbidden shindig, and meet a guy you ain’t supposed to?” I’d shot back.

“Exactly.” Rachel flashed that grin that made her bright blue peepers sparkle. “Pleeease.” She just had to stretch that word out.

“Fine,” I’d huffed. “But you gotta promise to be back before your mom wakes up. I ain’t gonna try to sell her the story that you were out for a

morning jog in a sparkly top and a miniskirt.”

Rachel shot me that sheepish look, the one that meant she didn't actually feel bad about getting me in hot water a few months back when Sarah didn't buy my piss-poor attempt at lying.

I let out a small sneeze as I stripped the dusty bedding and tossed it into the laundry basket, grimacing at the thought of sleeping on it. Grabbing some cleaning supplies from their usual spot, I spent a few minutes wiping down surfaces before treating myself to a much-needed shower. Once I was clean and refreshed, I remade the bed with fresh sheets.

With that task out of the way, it was time to face what I'd really come here to do.

While Sarah was taking a breather downstairs, I tiptoed across the hallway like the stealth master I was, making my way to Rachel's room. I hesitated at the door, sucked in a deep breath, and then busted in. And holy shit, that room was clean. Like, way the hell too clean. We're talking serial-killer levels of cleanliness here. Who even lives like that? Damn, Sarah must've been keeping it spotless—or maybe she roped the maid into it. Wouldn't put it past her.

The bedspread and pillows were new, still purple—Rachel's favorite color. And oh, that goddamn carpet. Sarah had spent a freaking month finding the exact shade of lilac Rachel wanted, but it took Rachel a mere two days to burn a hole right through it with a lit ciggie. Classic Rachel. My eyes darted to the bedside table that hid the scorched spot, a permanent reminder of her “oops” moment.

I started with the dresser, digging through its surface and drawers, sifting through clothes and other junk. But nope, nothing that would give me a clue about her whereabouts or what happened to her. Not that I truly expected to find something there, anyway.

See, if Rachel's vanishing act was connected to the dark side of her life, she'd have hidden any incriminating shit somewhere private. Contrary to popular belief, gals who want to keep a secret don't stash it in their underwear drawer—especially not when they had a nosy-ass mom like Sarah, who didn't know the meaning of boundaries.

I moved on to the next hidey-hole, dead set on uncovering the truth about my sis's disappearance.

The closet was only half-full, with a modest selection of outfits hanging up and a neat row of shoes underneath. Above, I spotted some familiar-looking boxes, each labeled with their contents.

I grabbed the one marked "school shit," dumped it on the bed, and rifled through it. Yearbooks, awards, certificates—all totally useless.

Next up, I fetched a box of photographs but didn't even bother looking through them. Rachel had long since ditched physical photos in favor of her cell phone, so no way she'd have anything useful in there.

After turning the closet inside out and coming up empty-handed, I knew there was only one more potential hiding place.

I kneeled, peered under the bed, and wriggled halfway underneath to get a better look at the frame. Sarah had busted Rachel's first pack of smokes, hidden under her mattress, in no time. But as my eyes landed on the book taped to the frame, I couldn't help but blurt out, "Fuckin' jackpot."

With a bit of effort, I yanked the book free and retreated to my room to give it a closer look. I tried not to get my hopes up, but when I opened the front cover, my pulse went batshit crazy.

Rachel Laurell Blackwell, age 18 through

This was exactly what I needed—a glimpse into Rachel's life after I'd left.

I started at the beginning, heart pounding, as I uncovered the secrets my sister had been hiding.

Today's my eighteenth birthday and the first thing I did was sign myself out of this hellhole...

Chapter Ten

Ethan

BACK IN MY ROOM, after me and Kris ditched the burger joint, my mind was spinning like a hamster on a wheel. I'd done it all: paid Sarah a visit, joined the search party for her kid, shot the breeze with old classmates, and showed off my "success story." Hell, if I craved the reunion, it wasn't like I couldn't swing by on the big day.

As I debated giving Jake a ring and getting his two cents, a knock on the door snapped me out of my thought spiral. Aria popped into my head, and I practically sprinted to the door. Grinning like an idiot, I flung it open...

And there stood someone who was most definitely NOT Aria.

The bald dude, sporting a light brown mustache and beard combo, wasn't ringing any bells right away. But when his blue eyes narrowed, and he shot me a pissy look, a teensy bit of familiarity started itching at my brain.

"Ethan Cole, I need to have a word with you." He flashed his badge, and suddenly it all snapped into place.

"Marty?"

"Detective Pickman."

He stepped forward, and I had mere moments to decide whether to move aside or get up in his grill. His badge won out. The last thing I needed was Kris discovering I'd clashed with his pet detective just because I didn't want him in my room. Technically, it wasn't even my room, so who the hell knew the legal mumbo jumbo?

Regardless, it pissed me off how he waltzed in like he owned the joint.

Typical asshat move.

"Alright, Sherlock, what do you want?" I snapped.

"Why are you here?" Marty demanded.

"At the inn?"

“Don’t be a smartass. You know what I mean.” He shot me a glare. “Why are you back in Gig Harbor?”

“Seriously? You come busting into my hotel room to grill me about a hometown visit when I haven’t done jack shit?”

“I’ll be the judge of that.” He crossed his arms over his chest like an angry gorilla. “You’ve been MIA for twenty years, and now that you’re back, we’ve got the biggest crime this town’s seen in decades.”

I sighed. I used to think detectives had, like, super brains or something. But maybe Marty was just channeling his inner dickhead.

“So, I’ll ask you again, what are you doing back in Gig Harbor?”

“I came for the reunion,” I tossed him a half-truth because the whole shebang wasn’t his damn business. “And if you’re yapping about the missing girl, I wasn’t even here when she vanished.”

“Oh, really?” Marty narrowed his eyes. “And how do you know that?”

I bit back the urge to call him a moron but couldn’t stop the sarcasm from oozing out. “Well, Einstein, I was at a bar in Seattle with some pals when I saw the news. I can give you their names and digits if you wanna double check.”

“Fine.” He waved his hand like he was swatting a fly. “Names and numbers.”

I took a deep breath to keep from losing my shit and then rattled off Jake’s and Abigail’s names and their contact info.

“So, you’re telling me you came home for the reunion, and it’s just a freaking coincidence it’s the same time as Rachel Blackwell’s disappearance?”

I knew cops rephrased questions to trip you up, but I didn’t care to point out I’d already answered him.

“Like I said, I was still in Seattle when Rachel went missing. I didn’t even know the girl.”

“If you didn’t know her, why were you at the search today?” Marty smirked, thinking he’d caught me in some wicked act.

“Cause I’m not a heartless prick,” I shot back, arms crossed. “We went to school with Sarah, so I’d have to be a grade-A douchebag to sit around in my hotel room when I could be out looking for my friend’s daughter.”

“Friend?” Marty let out a harsh laugh, as grating as it was back in school. “You and Sarah?”

I clenched my jaw and bit back a torrent of words.

“You haven’t been harassing her, have you?” Marty asked. “She’s got enough shit going on. She doesn’t need you adding to it.”

“You wanted to know why I’m here, and I told ya,” I snapped. “I handed over names and numbers, even though there’s no freaking reason for you to ask—”

“No reason?” Marty cut in. “However long you’re in town,” he said, “you stay the hell away from Sarah Blackwell.”

It wasn’t a question or a request, but before I could figure out the best—and least violent—way to tell him where to shove it, he walked out, leaving the door wide open behind him.

“Motherfucker.” It took all my self-control not to slam the door.

I knew I’d probably run into Marty while I was in town, maybe even at the reunion, and I had mentally prepared for his grade-A assholery. But I never thought he’d basically accuse me of snatching—or worse—Rachel, just because I’d been hung up on her mom. The whole thing made my head spin like a frigging carousel.

I took the hottest shower I could stand, hoping it’d wash away some of the tension that had knotted up my muscles. The white noise did clear my noggin, but as soon as I got out and dressed, those pesky thoughts started hounding me again. I tried to shove them aside as I got onto my laptop and pulled up my email. I’d planned to check on any messages I’d missed over the weekend, but I found myself rereading the first line, my annoyance with Marty festering into full-blown irritation.

It had always been like this with him. He hadn’t been a big kid when we were in school together, but he hadn’t been as scrawny as me either. And while his

family wasn't rolling in dough, they'd been middle class, living in one of the swankier areas. The main thing that'd set us apart, though, was his penchant for tormenting kids like me.

Marty Pickman's visit churned up some seriously rotten memories.

"Hey, Cole, is that dirt on your jeans, or did you shit yourself?" Austin Mosely hollered down the hall, his mindless minions snickering like hyenas.

"I bet it's both," Marty Pickman chimed in, all too eagerly. "I bet he wipes his ass with his jeans 'cause he's too broke for toilet paper."

I felt my face heat up, but I ignored the taunts and the laughter that followed. I'd hoped high school might mean we'd all grow up, but apparently, some of us were stuck in a perpetual state of immaturity.

I shook my head, giving it a mental shove to the side. Screw that memory.

Sarah had been one of the few people in high school who'd been kind to me, a frigging oasis in a desert of jerks.

I sighed. That was why I couldn't just bail on her now. Sure, Sarah and I had baggage, but she'd been good to me during one of the shittiest times in my life. The least I could do for her was stick around for the week before the reunion, show some support, and help look for her kid.

Chapter Eleven

Aria

A QUICK GLANCE at the door assured me it was locked. Snooping around this house without being caught was the goal here.

The opening pages of Rachel's diary had my blood boiling like a kettle left on the stove for far too long.

Let's jump back three years, right after high school graduation. My life was a disaster movie sequel. It was no secret that Rachel had been running with a sketchy crowd, getting wasted and dabbling in some less than legal substances. The climax? Catching her red-handed, trying to nab my mom's wedding ring and a necklace mom had given me when I was ten.

Well, I wasn't about to let that shit slide. I confronted Rachel, ready to let Sarah in on her little klepto episode. Rachel went ballistic, screaming and chucking stuff at me like a monkey in a zoo. The ruckus drew Sarah upstairs, who - shocker - took Rachel's side. She didn't outright tell me to gift-wrap my stuff for Rachel, but she sure as hell said I was making a mountain out of a molehill.

That was classic Sarah. Whenever she got dragged into a scrap between Rachel and me, it was always my fault. I was either supposed to hand something over, shut up, or just plain misinterpret the whole damn situation. Sure, Sarah never laid a finger on me, but she was miles away from being the model mom she'd been pretending to be recently.

But that night - the one where I caught Rachel trying to snatch the last two meaningful items from my past - was the last straw.

I snapped.

I told Sarah that Rachel needed serious help, like rehab-level intervention. World War III ensued. Rachel insisted she was fine, and that I was the one who needed fixing. In the end, Sarah asked me to leave. Not just for the night, but for good. She claimed my presence was toxic for Rachel.

So, off to Seattle I went, severing all ties with the Blackwell's.

Never could I have predicted the shitstorm that followed my departure. Sarah, it seemed, moved on to a new dude in record time—some guy Rachel referred to as “Dick.” Richard, obviously. Within two months of their lovey-dovey escapades, he persuaded Sarah to have Rachel committed.

Not to rehab, like my suggestion, but a freaking mental institution. And against the poor girl’s will.

Rachel remained stuck there until her eighteenth birthday.

Thank fuck I’d locked the door, or else I might’ve stormed downstairs and given Sarah the bitch slap she deserved. As lousy as Sarah’s parenting had been, iffy at best, I never thought she’d go full-on evil stepmother with Rachel.

Fury simmering inside, I plunged back into the journal, letting the unimportant crap slip through my mental sieve, and honing in on the juicy bits that might come in handy.

A bunch of the entries were just Rachel’s typical whining, blaming everyone else while dodging responsibility, and honestly, it was mostly bullshit. If that was all there was to it, I would’ve chucked the diary after just a couple pages. But no, there were nuggets of gold hidden in there, too. Moments where she expressed regret over some of her choices.

...I turned nineteen today, and nobody gives a shit. I miss Aria. She always made my birthdays a big deal. I’ve been thinking about the day she left. No, the day Mom booted her out because I was being a spoiled brat. I was stoked to see her leave back then. But I didn’t realize all the things she’d done for me. I wish I could tell her I’m sorry and that I miss her, but fuck knows where she is...

My eyes prickled with the threat of tears as I set the journal aside, doing my best to keep it together.

The entry I’d just read might’ve been a one-off, triggered by a wave of nostalgia and nothing more. But a part of me clung to the hope that Rachel genuinely missed me. I never blamed her for Sarah giving me the boot. Sure, I believed actions had consequences, but she’d only been sixteen at the time. Sarah was the adult in the room, after all.

I funneled my sadness into rage, knowing Rachel was still out there somewhere. Sitting on my ass and crying over the past wasn't going to help me track her down.

Picking up the journal again, I dove back in, not stopping until I hit pay dirt.

A name.

Lee Cohen.

Rachel's latest squeeze. They'd hooked up shortly after she turned nineteen and, as of a month ago when she penned the last entry, they were still a thing. Not much else was revealed in that last entry, but it confirmed their relationship status.

"Lee Cohen," I muttered, giving the name a test drive.

It rang a bell, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. Setting the journal aside, I whipped out my laptop and started searching for the name in conjunction with Gig Harbor. The pieces clicked into place soon enough. Jay, Lee's brother, was in the grade between Rachel's and mine. Lee had been the sketchy older sibling everyone steered clear of...unless they were after drugs or booze. Even back in the day, he'd been more than happy to cater to anyone with the cash. I knew he wasn't the one who'd gotten Rachel hooked, but I knew that once they got together, he became her personal dealer. Or maybe it was the other way around - the drugs came first, then the so-called 'romance.'

Either way, he was the guy I needed to have a chat with. I hoped the cops had done their due diligence and grilled Lee already, but someone like him would probably be more willing to talk to a gal like me instead of a badge.

The real challenge was tracking him down. I had a few leads on where to start, but most of them weren't the kind of joints I wanted to waltz into solo at night, hometown or not. It'd be sketchy enough in broad daylight.

I had some work to take care of in the morning, but after that, I'd bite the bullet and start my hunt for Lee Cohen.

Chapter Twelve

Ethan

I COULDN'T RECALL the last time I had woken up with a completely free day ahead of me, especially not on a Monday. While munching on breakfast, I shot Kris a text, but he quickly responded that there was no news since our last chat.

Taking advantage of the sunny weather, I opted for a drive around town. As a kid, I had explored every inch of Gig Harbor on my bike, and now I wanted to see what had changed.

I left the Inn, driving aimlessly, letting my thoughts drift. Sometimes, stepping away from a challenging problem helped me process it better. The area surrounding the Inn was a mix of familiar and new businesses, family-owned diners, chain restaurants, and touristy shops. But as I ventured further from the harbor, the landscape shifted to a more residential vibe.

Suddenly, I recognized the houses. They weren't the shabby, cramped homes from my side of town, but the ones I had admired while biking past them as a kid. The same houses I had passed during my senior year when visiting Sarah.

As I parked in front of the impressive Blackwell residence, the name on the mailbox confirmed that Sarah still lived there. A couple of news vans were parked across the street, but I paid them no attention. The house was just as stunning as I remembered, though it seemed to have lost some of its charm.

Before I knew it, I was out of the car and walking toward the front door. Despite my last encounter with Sarah, my feet carried me forward. Reporters behind me started murmuring, questioning who I was and why I was there.

Ignoring them, I knocked on the door. After a moment, it opened, and Sarah's face lit up with delight.

“Ethan!”

I barely had time to prepare myself before Sarah threw herself at me. My arms instinctively wrapped around her to keep us both steady, but she took it

as an invitation to cling even tighter. Behind me, I could sense the reporters snapping away, but Sarah seemed unfazed.

“Let’s head inside,” I suggested quietly, trying to pull away. “You don’t want the press twisting a hug between old friends into something it’s not.”

Sarah backed off, feigning offense as she playfully smacked my arm. ““Old friends? Really, Ethan? Is that all we were?”

She sauntered inside, pausing just past the threshold to beckon me with a finger, a flirty smile on her face. I followed her, shutting the door behind me without giving the reporters another glance. I wasn’t sure if they’d gotten a clear shot of my face, but I wasn’t about to make it easy for them.

“I was hoping we’d have some time to catch up before you left,” Sarah said, leading me into her living room. She gracefully lowered herself onto the couch, a seductive move that seemed all too familiar. Patting the spot beside her, she invited, “Please, sit.”

“You were pretty busy yesterday,” I replied, taking a seat at the opposite end of the couch. “I’m really sorry for what you’re going through.”

Her expression shifted instantly, the flirtatious sparkle in her eyes vanishing. She sniffled delicately. “Thank you. That means a lot.”

“Is there anything I can do?” I asked. “I’m in town until the reunion—”

“Taking a bit of a vacation?” Sarah inquired, leaning forward.

That’s when I noticed her outfit. Skin-tight turquoise yoga pants and a white tank top with a low scoop neck. Low enough that if it hadn’t been so tight, she would’ve flashed her bra.

Except, the outline of her nipples visible through the fabric made me think she wasn’t wearing one.

Shit.

“Did I catch you at a bad time?” I asked, trying not to sound too flustered.

“Not at all,” she replied, grinning. “It’s always a good time to see an ‘old friend.’”

“I didn’t interrupt a workout or anything?” I inquired, attempting to keep my eyes glued to her face.

Her brow furrowed in confusion for a moment, then she laughed and gestured at her attire. “Oh, this? No, this is just my ‘lounging around the house’ outfit.”

Racking my brain for a change of subject, I asked, “Any updates on Rachel?”

Sarah sighed, leaning back against the cushions, her face etched with frustration. Maybe I was an ass, but I couldn’t help wondering if she was frustrated about the lack of news or that I hadn’t spent the entire conversation ogling her body. It was awful that I could even think that, considering her current situation, but both times we’d met in person, her emotions seemed to swing like a pendulum.

I knew people reacted to stress differently, but the timing struck me as...odd. I’m no psychologist, but I found it strange how quickly she could switch from flirtatious to sad and back again whenever her daughter or an audience was involved.

“Nothing,” she finally answered. “Marty calls every morning with updates, but there’s been little to report.”

“He stopped by to see me,” I mentioned cautiously.

“That’s nice of him,” she responded.

Her comment led me to believe Marty hadn’t filled her in on our conversation. While I didn’t want to divulge all the details, I couldn’t resist saying, “He told me to stay away from you.”

Sarah giggled, a flirty lilt to her laugh. “Oh, that Marty. What a sweetheart. He’s been so protective of me throughout this ordeal. Such a caring soul.”

I searched for a sincere response and settled on, “I’m glad he’s looking out for you.”

As if a lightbulb had suddenly switched on in her head, Sarah straightened up. “I’m such a terrible hostess. Can I get you something to drink? I have juice, sparkling water, wine, scotch... I’m not sure what you like these days.”

The way she phrased it almost made me chuckle. “Water would be great, thanks.”

I rose when she did, but instead of sitting back down when she left the room, I wandered around, examining the photos that captured Sarah’s life since we’d last crossed paths.

There were several photos of Rachel at various ages, sometimes accompanied by another girl who, after a moment’s hesitation, I recognized as Aria. I quickly averted my gaze from those images, unwilling to associate the woman I’d slept with to the young girl playing alongside Sarah’s daughter.

I paused at a picture that must’ve been taken on the day Rachel was born. It captured Sarah in a hospital bed, cradling a red-faced infant in her arms. A hand rested on her shoulder, the only sign of another person’s presence. The intimate touch suggested it was Sarah’s husband—or rather, ex-husband—but I couldn’t determine if he’d been cropped out intentionally or removed after the divorce.

A small smile crept onto my face. I’d never met the man, but I’d resented him for a long time. He’d wielded his wealth and family’s influence to trap Sarah in their marriage after she’d wanted out, and he’d been the reason her father had forced her to end things with me shortly before graduation. Mr. Blackwell had demanded she marry someone with a prestigious name and substantial fortune, qualities I lacked. When Sarah’s involvement with Derek Hill surfaced, Mr. Blackwell had threatened to disown her if she dared to break up with him.

I still hadn’t figured out how Mr. Blackwell had discovered our relationship. We’d been cautious at school and avoided public outings. I’d been her “dirty little secret” for months, meticulously ensuring no one suspected we were lovers.

The familiar sensation of anger and disgust stirred within me, its intensity surprising me after all these years. I’d told myself countless times that I understood why she’d kept us hidden. We’d barely been eighteen and were still in school. She’d vowed that once we were in college, we’d go public with our relationship, confident that people would accept us as a couple.

Except we’d never had that chance, thanks to Derek and Mr. Blackwell.

I shifted my attention from the baby photo to the next picture on the fireplace mantle and found myself rooted to the spot.

It was a recent photo. Sarah stood beside an older man with thinning gray hair and a slight paunch, which his expensive suit effectively concealed. Their pose was unmistakably romantic, his hand resting on her hip and partially on her backside—a possessive gesture that matched the jealous expression in his dark, beady eyes.

And then there was her hand on his chest. Her left hand, adorned with a massive diamond ring on a significant finger.

“Here’s your water.” Sarah materialized beside me, offering a bottle.

I took it, this time noticing the ring. “I apologize for not congratulating you earlier. I hadn’t realized you were engaged.”

“Oh, yes.” She beamed at me as she leaned in, as if to get a better view of the picture. “Richard Connors. He’s new to the area. A businessman, not unlike yourself, I understand.”

I couldn’t help but reveal my surprise. “I thought you didn’t recognize me yesterday.”

“I didn’t,” she admitted. “And I’m truly sorry for that. I just haven’t seen you in so long, and you’ve grown up so much.” She placed her hand on my arm in a way that felt anything but platonic. “But once I realized who you were, I had to see what you’d been up to all these years. And you’ve been busy.”

Her fingers flexed on my arm, and I retreated under the guise of returning to the couch. She was engaged, her daughter was missing, and she was flirting with me. I might’ve been reading too much into it, but I doubted it. Sarah followed me, sitting down so that her thigh pressed against mine.

Nope. Definitely not imagining it.

We both heard the front door open, but Sarah didn’t move until a man’s voice called her name. The smile plastered on her face remained, but she stood up and smoothed her hands over her clothes. “In here, honey.”

The man who sauntered into the living room was the same one from the

picture. His suit looked just as pricey, but with a slightly different hue. Clearly, the guy had as much money as I did. Some fellas might splurge on a single suit for every occasion, but this dude clearly had plenty of disposable income.

Yep, Sarah definitely had a type.

“Who are you?” he asked, sizing me up with a glance.

“Richard, this is Ethan Cole, an old classmate.” She strolled over to him and pecked his cheek. “Ethan, meet my fiancé, Richard Connors.”

“Nice to meet you.” I extended my hand and flashed him the polite, professional smile I reserved for work-related encounters.

He returned the same kind of smile and tried to crush my hand with that macho squeeze some guys do to compensate. Opting for the high road, I didn’t retaliate, but I also didn’t let on that I noticed anything out of the ordinary with his handshake.

“In town for the reunion?” Richard asked, giving me another once-over. “I assume you don’t live here, as Sarah’s never mentioned you before.”

“I live in Seattle,” I replied. “While I’m here, I thought I’d check on Sarah, since her daughter is missing.”

“Hm. Yeah, Rachel.” Richard slung his arm around Sarah’s waist in that age-old possessive manner. “Any developments?”

“Nothing new,” she sighed, leaning into him.

Despite her position, her gaze locked onto me, and I recognized the fiery expression in her eyes. That was the look she’d always sported right before she demanded I strip and fuck her senseless.

And that was my cue to leave.

“Well, I should head out now,” I announced. “It was nice seeing you again, Sarah, and meeting you, Richard.”

“I’ll show you out,” Sarah offered.

Richard’s grip on her tightened. “I think he knows the way.”

“I do,” I confirmed.

I made my exit before Sarah could argue, and as I approached my car, I spotted a familiar face strolling up the side of the road.

“Aria?”

Her head snapped up, her expression shifting from surprise to, much to my satisfaction, delight. The intense reaction from my body caught me off-guard.

“Ethan, what are you doing here?” She changed direction and ambled toward me, hitching her backpack higher on her shoulder.

“I went for a drive and ended up here. Thought I’d see if Sarah had any news about Rachel.” I glossed over the details and dove straight into what I wanted. “Since we’re both here, how about you join me for lunch?”

She glanced back at the house, then turned her attention to me. “I’d love to.”

Chapter Thirteen

Aria

BLAZING ONION WAS, like, the holy grail of eateries in Gig Harbor, so when Ethan dropped the bomb that he'd never set foot in the place, I was all, "Dude, we're so grabbing lunch there." And, you know what? He didn't even put up that macho front some guys do, like they're the kings of decision-making. Nope, he was cool with it.

"So, what were you up to this morning?" Ethan asked, steering us towards the restaurant like a moth to a flame.

"Ah, you know, work," I said. "But the weather was absolutely amazing, so I couldn't stand being cooped up inside."

"Freelancer? Self-employed or something?"

"Nah, just a regular desk jockey. My boss was all, 'Sure, you can take time off, but you gotta work remotely.'" Not in the mood to prattle on about my job, I changed the conversation. "How long has it been since you last set foot in this town?"

He hesitated, as if counting the years inside his head. "Twenty years."

"Wow. Wait, didn't you say you were back for some high school reunion?" I vaguely remembered it from our first chat.

"Yeah, that's the whole reason I'm here."

He looked like he was bracing himself for the age question, but I let that one slide. I mean, I could do the math, and besides, who cares? He was good-looking, funny, and we clicked so well. That was all that mattered.

We started chatting about our favorite food spots, and he told me about his childhood haunts. We finally settled down at Blazing Onion and ordered some food, all while discussing the crazy changes we'd noticed since coming back to town.

"Hey, so, uh, you can tell me it's none of my business, but how did you end up living with Sarah?" he asked, curious.

I hesitated a bit before answering, “Sarah and my mom, Ellen, were best friends, you know?” I started. “Rachel’s a couple of years younger than me, but we’ve been close pretty much forever.”

Ethan’s face got serious, but he kept quiet.

“Anyway, when I was eleven, my mom passed away in a drunk driving accident.” I didn’t bother mentioning that the wasted driver behind the wheel was my dad, who’d been in jail ever since on manslaughter charges.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Ethan said, sounding genuine.

“Thanks,” I replied, giving him a smile to show I appreciated his sympathy.

“When Sarah found out I didn’t have any other family, she applied to be my foster mom. Her ex was outta the picture by then, so it was just her and Rachel. Rachel was over the moon that her best friend would become her sister. I might call Sarah my foster mom, but we never had a real mother-daughter bond. Rachel and I, though...we were like sisters.” My throat tightened, and I sipped water to regain control.

Ethan filled the silence, sparing me any awkwardness. “My friend’s the police captain, and he told me they’re doing everything they can to find her.”

“You believe him?” I kept the skepticism out of my voice.

“I do,” Ethan said. “He’s a good man. And I know there’s a lotta rumors about what Rachel was mixed up in, but he said they’re following every lead.”

“Have they talked to Rachel’s most recent boyfriend?”

“I think they’re still looking for him,” Ethan said.

“You know, I may have a vague idea of where he could be.” I slyly pulled out Rachel’s journal from my bag. “So, I did a little snooping in Rachel’s room—don’t judge, we’ve all been there—and stumbled upon this little gem. Anyway, the gist of it is that she was knocking boots with this dude named Lee Cohen, who was her dealer.”

Ethan’s eyes widened like saucers, and I swear I could see the surprise practically making his jaw hit the floor.

“I actually went to school with Lee’s bro, and that guy was sketchier than a doodle in a math textbook,” I rambled on. “Even if the police track him down, I doubt he’ll spill the beans to them.”

“Cause of the whole drug situation, right?”

I bobbed my head in agreement. “Exactly. But I think he’ll talk to me.”

I saw the moment Ethan realized what I wanted to do. His horrified expression would’ve been funny if circumstances were different.

“You wanna talk to a drug dealer alone?”

“Actually,” I chimed in, “I was kinda hoping you’d tag along. His pad is in a really sketchy part of town, and if he ain’t there, the other joints aren’t any better.”

“I got your back,” he replied a little too quickly.

It made me wonder if Ethan’s eagerness was for my benefit or Sarah’s. I wouldn’t go digging for answers, though. His connection to Sarah was one big question mark, and his reasons for being at her house felt a bit iffy. But it wasn’t my place to go snooping. We’d spent a steamy night together and now we were partners in crime, but that didn’t mean we had to spill our guts to each other.

“Thanks,” I said, accepting his help.

“Do you wanna head out right after lunch?” he asked.

“Got any other plans?”

He shook his head. “I’m all yours.”

His words sent a little buzz through me, but I squashed it down, refusing to let any mushy feels get in the way. I wasn’t here to play lovey-dovey; I was here for Rachel. We chowed down the rest of our meal in silence, feeling the weight of our mission looming over us.

BACK IN HIS WHEELS, Ethan hit me up for the address. I rattled it off, fully expecting him to need some guidance, but he looked like he had the route down pat. It wasn't too shocking that he'd know which way to head—the line between the 'prime' and 'shady' parts of town was pretty dang obvious. But as we inched closer, I picked up on his familiarity with the hood. It was either a wicked sense of direction or a sign that he'd been hanging around these parts more than I'd ever have guessed.

Ethan pulled into the run-down apartment complex's parking lot; my thoughts yanked from reminiscing to the current situation.

He didn't say a word as we made our way into the building. There wasn't any need for a key or to be buzzed in. Hell, we didn't even have to open the door. Someone had left it propped wide open.

"It's hard to believe this place could have less security than when I came here five years ago to pick up Rachel," I whispered.

"You came here alone as a teenager?" A hint of surprise crept into Ethan's voice.

"No, I had a friend I'd call when I had to do stuff like that," I said. "We weren't close, but his little brother hung in the same crowd as Rachel, so we watched each other's backs whenever we would go get them."

"He couldn't come with you today?" Ethan asked, his voice heavy with concern.

I moved ahead of him on the stairs. "About four months after I left, he went to Tacoma to get his brother from a house party. A couple of dealers took exception to his presence and shot him."

"Fuck," Ethan muttered, his jaw clenched. "I'm sorry."

"If I'd still been here, I would've gone with him," I confessed. "I tell myself that I would've just been killed too, but survivor's guilt is a real bitch."

"Aria—"

"We're here." I knocked on the apartment door. After a minute of waiting, I knocked again, harder this time.

“He ain’t there,” a woman’s voice came from behind us.

I half-turned, positioning myself to see her, but also monitoring the other door. I felt Ethan shift as well and knew that he was watching both ends of the hall, so no one could surprise us.

The woman peeking out from behind her still-chained door had the sort of tired expression that came with a lifetime of stress and hard work, with little to show for it. In Seattle, my friends and I volunteered at homeless shelters and women’s shelters, so it was a familiar look.

“Who’s not there?” Ethan asked.

The woman glanced at him and then focused on me. “Lee doesn’t trade dope for skin.”

It took me a second to work out what she meant, and as my cheeks flushed, Ethan made a sound like a growl.

“She’s not a prostitute,” he ground out.

The look the woman gave him clearly conveyed her disbelief and assumptions about his role in all of this.

“I’m not,” I said, taking a step toward her. “Rachel Blackwell, the girl who’s missing? I know she’s Lee’s girlfriend.”

“You’re cops then?” She started to close the door.

“No, I’m her sister.”

She paused. “She never mentioned having a sister”

I shook my head. “Foster sister. I grew up with her. I tried to keep her out of trouble.”

“Didn’t work,” she said.

“No,” I let my grief show on my face and in my voice, “it didn’t.”

I felt her studying me, as if she was trying to figure me out, and I just let her. This was why I thought I’d get more than the police could. I wouldn’t push, and I would let them see me. I wasn’t a threat. I just wanted my sister home

safely.

“Lee’s cousin came and got some stuff yesterday.”

“His cousin?” I asked. “You wouldn’t know his name, would you?”

“Of course, I do. He grew up in that apartment over there.” She nodded toward the door to the right of Lee’s. “Miller. Kid’s name is Stevie Miller.”

The name wasn’t familiar, but it was something. “Do you know where we can find him?” I asked.

“Most days he’s two streets over, sitting on a bench next to the old playground.”

“Thank you,” I said. “We really appreciate it.”

She glanced at Ethan again. “You know what to do if he gives you any trouble?”

“Don’t you worry, ma’am,” I said with a smile. “I can make him behave himself.”

She seemed satisfied by my answer and closed the door with a solid thump. I turned to Ethan, who was trying to hide a grin.

“I meant it, by the way,” I said as we walked back toward the stairs.

Ethan followed. “Meant what?”

I looked at him and beamed. “That I can make you behave.”

A laugh bubbled up from him. “You know, I believe that.”

Ethan knew the place the woman was talking about and got us there in record time. Sure enough, sitting on the bench was a dark-haired, bearded man who looked to be in his late twenties. His body went stiff the moment he saw us, and I put my hands up.

“We’re not cops.”

His eyes narrowed. “Sounds like something a cop would say.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m Rachel’s foster sister.”

He looked at me harder. “Rachel? Lee’s Rachel?”

Well, now, that was a slow pitch if I’d ever heard one. “That’s why we’re here,” I said. “I need to talk to Lee. Find out when he last saw Rachel.”

“And you swear you ain’t cops?”

“I just want to find Rachel,” I promised. “I’ll leave your name out of it.”

Less than ten minutes later, Ethan and I stood in a narrow alley between two apartment buildings while Stevie went inside to get Lee. The scruffy guy that came into the alley had a scrawny build and agitated demeanor, which told me he didn’t just sell his product.

“You’re Aria?” He glanced at me and then away. “Rachel talked about you.”

“Then you know I just want what’s best for her,” I said. “I need to find her. When did you last see her?”

“I don’t know. Two weeks?” He shrugged. “What day is it?”

“Monday,” Ethan said. “The eighth of May, if that helps.”

“She dumped me.” Lee’s face took on a hangdog expression. “Last time I saw her, she said she had something better to do, bigger goals or something, and she didn’t want to be with me anymore.”

I took a step toward him. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Does that mean she wasn’t living with you at the time she went missing?” Ethan asked.

Lee shot him a dirty look. “No. When she dumped me, she moved out too.”

“Do you know where she went?” I asked, drawing his attention back to me. “Any place or person I can start with?”

Lee shook his head and sniffled, then wiped a grimy hand across his nose. “If I knew, I’d tell you. I want her to be safe. I mean, I love her, you know.”

I wanted to tell him that if he loved her, he wouldn’t have been supplying her with drugs, but I didn’t. He was an addict too, and needed just as much help as Rachel did.

“I believe you. But maybe you know something without knowing it,” I suggested. “Did she say anything at all about what this ‘something better’ was? A person? A job? A place?”

“No. Just that it was better than me.” He rubbed the back of his hand over his eyes.

I started to thank him, but then a thought occurred to me. “Do you think something’s happened to her, or do you think she’s just hiding from everyone? Or she scored some premium stuff and holed up with it somewhere?”

“Sometimes she forgets what day it is,” he said. “Maybe that’s what happened.”

“It’s possible,” I agreed. The longer she was gone, however, the less likely I thought it was. My gut said that if she hadn’t overdosed, something was keeping her from contacting anyone. I couldn’t see how she wouldn’t know that people were looking for her.

“You think if you find her, she’ll want to come back to me?” The hopeful light in Lee’s eyes was almost too much.

“I don’t know,” I answered honestly. “Maybe you should work at getting off the drugs and then you can help her get clean, too.”

For the first time, Lee’s eyes met mine. He held my gaze for a moment but didn’t say a word. When he walked away, I felt a pang of disappointment, just like I used to feel whenever Rachel ignored me, telling her the same thing.

“We should go,” Ethan said, dabbing my elbow.

I nodded and followed him back to his car. I waited until we were on our way out of the neighborhood before speaking.

“I think he told us everything he knows. He wasn’t lying.”

“I agree,” Ethan said. “Though he didn’t really seem to know much.”

“No, he didn’t,” I said. “But that ‘something better’ seems like a lead, albeit a rather vague one.”

“You’re planning on chasing it anyway, aren’t you?”

I grinned at him. “It’s like you read my mind.”

“I hope it’s not overstepping, but I think we should keep investigating together.”

“All right,” I agreed, “but the first time you hold me back or pull some macho shit, we’re done. We’re either equal partners or nothing.”

After he slowed to a stop at a light, he turned toward me and held out a hand. “Agreed.”

I shook his hand, ignoring the way his touch made my pulse jump. “Now, what do you say we find something to eat? I’m hungry.”

“We could get delivery to my hotel room.” There was heat in his eyes. “We can come up with a game plan while we eat.”

Maybe he had some master plan to woo me, using this whole thing to get me back between the sheets. And honestly? I’d be totally cool with that.

Hell, maybe another round of insanely passionate sex was exactly what I needed to clear my head.

Chapter Fourteen

Ethan

"OKAY, SO WHAT'S THE DEAL?" I asked the moment I hung up the phone after ordering our pizza. "Do we have a bona fide kidnapping, or is Rachel just off doing some teenage shenanigans?"

Aria sighed, her face darkening like an incoming storm cloud. "I wish I could say she's never done something like this before, but she pulled a Houdini once and didn't come home for three days after a party. She was only fourteen."

"Damn," I said, trying to imagine the chaos that must've caused. "Sarah must've gone ballistic."

Aria's expression told me I'd missed the mark by a mile, and I cursed under my breath, turning away so she wouldn't see my frustration. "So, uh, what'll you have to drink?"

"Water's cool," she said, grabbing the remote. "I'll switch it up when the pizza gets here. Do you mind if I turn on the news?"

"Knock yourself out," I said, snagging two bottles of water from the fridge.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, but I ignored it for now, handing Aria her bottle. Seconds later, the damn phone buzzed again.

I frowned and made a move for my phone, but then a knock at the door grabbed my attention. By the time I paid for the pizza and plopped down next to Aria on the couch, my phone had buzzed its way through the cha-cha slide twice more. Out of nowhere, Aria made this godforsaken sound.

I snapped my head up to see her gawking at the TV; her face turning whiter than a sheet. I followed her gaze and felt my heart do a freaking somersault in my chest.

The TV was on mute, but we didn't need sound to understand what was going on. There it was, big-ass headline letters below a picture of Rachel.

Body Found Believed to be Missing Girl.

Aria snatched her purse and started rummaging inside like she was searching for buried treasure. I yanked out my phone, which showed I had three texts from Kris. Before I could open them, Aria blasted her voicemails on speaker, and Sarah's voice filled the room.

"Aria." Sarah sounded wrecked, like she was teetering on the edge of a total meltdown. "Please, I need you here. They're saying someone found a—a body and it might be... Jesus, I can't even say it. Where the fuck are you?"

Aria had gone full stone-cold statue mode, her face frozen in shock. I wanted to reach for her, but we barely knew each other, and who knows if that'd be the right move?

Through Aria's phone, Sarah's voice cracked as she wept. "What if it is her? How am I supposed to live without her? It can't be her. It just can't be."

The voicemail ended, leaving Sarah's sobs haunting the room.

"I gotta call her back." Aria got up and stomped to the other side of the room.

As she made her call, I checked the texts from Kris I'd missed.

They found a body. Female. Fucking hate this job sometimes.

Headed to Sarah's while Marty handles the scene.

News got wind. Not sure if it's Rachel, but it doesn't look good.

Aria's voice sliced through to my brain. "Sarah, if you'd let me get a damn word in, I could tell you I was out, trying to find..." She cleared her throat. "Your fiancé is there, right?"

My phone buzzed with a fresh text.

Still need an official ID, but we're prepping Sarah for the worst. Right build and hair color. No one else missing in the area fit the bill.

Shit.

I hadn't realized I'd been clinging to a sliver of hope until Kris's words smacked me like a ton of bricks.

"Of course, I care—" Aria's voice spiked before she cut herself off.

Thanks for the heads up, I texted Kris. Not like there was much else to say right now.

Aria sighed. “Sarah, I—” A pause, and then, “Fuck!”

Glancing over, I saw Aria dropping her phone, looking like she’d just been sucker-punched.

“Aria?” I got up and ambled over to where she stood. “I’d ask if you’re okay, but I know that’s a dumbass question right now.”

She shook her head. “I had a plan before, and now I’m just...fuck, I don’t even know.”

I reached out and took her hand.

“Thanks for not spewing bullshit like ‘it’ll be okay’ or ‘time heals all wounds’ or any of that crap people say at times like this.” Aria sighed and finally looked at me. “Especially since Sarah just told me I’m persona non grata at the house. Can’t even grab my stuff.”

I bit back a string of choice words.

“I don’t have anywhere to go.”

That I could fix.

And, man, did I want to fix it more than ever.

“You can crash here,” I said. “As long as you need to. I’ll try to find another room if you’re not cool with me bunking on the couch, but with the reunion coming up, it’s probably slim pickings. Hell, I could even head back to Seattle. It’s not that bad a drive and—”

“Thank you.” Aria shot me a tight smile that didn’t come close to touching the grief in her eyes. “I mean, I could go home too, but with...”

“Stay.” I squeezed her hand. “It’s too late to make any other decisions, all right? Tomorrow, we’ll grab your stuff, and if Sarah goes nuclear, I’ll ask Kris to tag along.”

Her eyes met mine, tears glistening but not spilling over.

“Okay.” She swallowed hard. “I’ll stay.”

My relief lasted all of two seconds before concern and sadness crashed back in. Sure, I’d solved one problem, but it was a drop in the bucket compared to the shitstorm we were facing. Yeah, Aria would be safe here with me tonight, but tomorrow would haul in a whole new mess of problems. I just hoped she’d let me help her with those, too. I wasn’t quite ready to let her go.

Chapter Fifteen

Aria

I JOLTED AWAKE, drenched in sweat, heart pounding like a jackhammer. The nightmare had been so vivid it took me a moment to realize I was in Ethan's hotel room, not back in that godawful argument with Sarah. My wrist throbbed where her nails had dug in, and I couldn't help but rub it, even though there was nothing there.

The darkness of the room felt suffocating, so I stumbled out of bed, grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge, and chugged half of it down. The cold liquid did little to calm the fire raging inside me. The anger and guilt tangled up inside with the memories of the argument with Sarah.

"How dare you stand here, in my house, and accuse me of being a terrible mother!" Sarah had practically screamed at me. "You ungrateful little brat! After everything I've done for you, this is how you repay me?"

"Rachel was stealing—"

"We put a roof over your head! Made you part of our family!" Sarah's face had turned red, features twisted into something ugly.

"Sarah—"

"No! We're done." Sarah dramatically pointed at the door. "Get out!"

"You're kicking me out of my room?"

"Get out of my house!" She stamped her foot like she was the teenager.

"What?"

"Get your ass out of this house!" Her voice became shrill, and she grabbed my wrist, fingernails digging in. "Fucking bitch! Never should've taken you in. I should've left you in foster care. Probably your fault Rachel's so fucked up."

My breath hitched in my throat, and I fought back tears. That had been one of the worst days of my life. And now, with Rachel missing and a body found

that might be hers, the guilt was too much to bear.

I tried to stifle a sob, but it escaped, echoing through the small hotel room.

I hugged my knees to my chest and pressed my forehead down, inhaling deep, steady breaths to regain composure. This wasn't the first time I'd experienced this type of nightmare, although it hadn't happened in nearly a year.

The image of Rachel flickered through my mind, and I struggled to suppress the wave of emotion that threatened to engulf me.

I rose and headed out of the bedroom. The curtains were slightly open, allowing extra light to stream in and cast a silvery glow on everything, including the reason I'd ventured out here.

On the couch, Ethan sprawled out on his back with one arm flung over his head and one hand resting on his bare stomach. The blanket bunched around his waist, leaving me curious if he'd slept in his jeans or stripped down to his underwear. We had already seen each other naked, after all.

I took a step forward, and something about the movement must have registered—or maybe he sensed my gaze—because he stirred. His eyes opened, focusing almost instantly on me, way more alert than I'd ever been upon waking. He sat up, furrowing his brow.

“What's wrong?”

I offered a strained smile. “Everything?”

“How can I help?” He propped himself up on his elbows.

“That,” I said, “was precisely the right question to ask.”

“What—”

The word morphed into a choking sound as I yanked off the t-shirt he'd lent me to sleep in, leaving me clad in only a pair of plain cotton panties.

“I need to get out of my head.” I tugged on the blanket covering him, and he let me pull it off.

The answer to my unspoken question was boxers. A pair of black silk boxers

that did nothing to conceal his arousal.

“Are you sure?”

I knew the underlying question and appreciated it, even as it irked me. “You’re not taking advantage of me.”

He nodded once and settled back onto the couch. “Come here.”

I moved over him, straddling his waist. His hands were warm as they settled on my hips and then slid up. My eyelids fluttered as his thumbs caressed the sides of my breasts. He seemed to know that I didn’t want to talk as he made a humming sound of approval but didn’t say anything. His skilled fingers spoke volumes for him, teasing my nipples into tightened nubs until I was writhing, rocking against his erection.

“Too many layers,” I muttered as I reached for him.

He caught my wrists, and I looked up, the heat in his eyes sending a thrill through me.

“Up here.”

I frowned, not understanding until he grabbed my ass and started pulling me up his body. My shock must’ve shown on my face because he gave me the sort of grin that made my stomach flip.

“Am I the first man to ask you to sit on his face?”

I tried to speak, really, I did, but I couldn’t manage anything more than opening and closing my mouth like a landed fish.

The grin turned into a smirk, and yes, there was a difference. “You’re going to enjoy this.”

What the hell. The entire point of this was to be distracted from all the crazy shit in my head. This definitely would do it.

I let Ethan get me exactly where he wanted me with my knees on the couch, my shins resting on his broad shoulders, and my pussy right over his mouth. With his head at a slight angle, he didn’t even need to move as he pulled my panties aside and pressed his lips to me.

A shiver ran through me the moment his tongue touched me. Soft little licks to start, over one side and then the other before parting my folds and sliding between them. Teasing circles around my entrance and then repeating the movement around my clit.

I started with my hands on my breasts, squeezing the firm mounds, feeling the little points of my nipples against my palms. I'd had men tell me they were too small, but I'd always liked the way they'd fit in my hands. Ethan didn't seem to mind their size. If his enthusiasm right now was any sign, he liked my body very much.

The tip of his tongue flicked back and forth across the top of my clit, and I moaned, my eyes closed as my hips rocked, almost of their own volition. He made that pleased humming sound again and his fingers dug into my ass.

"Fuck, Ethan," I gasped, a wave of pleasure washing over me as he pressed his tongue against my clit.

A touch of teeth had my eyes flying open and my hands falling to the arm of the couch to catch myself before I could tip over. I stared down at him. What I could see of him anyway, which wasn't much. Just those eyes, pupils wide until only the thinnest sliver of blue remained, and that soft sandy brown hair.

Then he took my clit between his lips and sucked, a hard pull that drew from me a thin keening sound that I'd never made before. He chuckled, and the vibration tipped me over with a suddenness that had me biting my bottom lip to keep from screaming his name. Spots danced in front of my eyes as my body shook.

When I came back to myself, I found that he'd slid me down his body so that my head rested on his chest and his cock pressed against my stomach. His hand moved over my hair in gentle, soothing motions, but I wasn't quite ready for this to be over.

I pushed myself up, and he didn't stop me, instead waiting until his eyes could meet mine. I didn't speak, and neither did he, but at that moment, we understood each other completely. I nodded, and he handed me the condom I'd put on the table behind him.

Straddling his thighs, I hooked my fingers in the waistband of his boxers and

peeled them down, revealing a thick, swollen shaft laying on his thigh, too heavy to stand up on its own. I glanced up at Ethan, a bit of mischief sparking in me, and ran my tongue over him from root to tip. He cursed, his hips jerking up in a way I knew was completely involuntary.

Damn, I loved being able to get that reaction from him.

Just because I liked the feel of him in my hand, I stroked him a couple times before giving in and rolling latex over the length of him.

“Thank fuck,” he groaned as I rose over him. “I need to be inside you.”

I let out my curse as I slowly lowered myself onto him, letting his cock stretch me inch by glorious inch. I was tight, but wet enough that there was no pain, just that feeling of impossible fullness that I’d only ever felt with him. When I dropped that final bit, I froze in place, barely able to breathe, unable to think.

A gentle caress of fingertips on my thigh drew my attention.

“I’ve got you.”

I took his hands, lacing my fingers between his and letting him keep me steady as I began to move. I rolled my hips, rose and fell, let myself feel all the ways our bodies connected. As pleasure trickled across my nerves, I closed my eyes and just let all my senses focus on him and me.

Every place where our skin touched was like an electric charge passing from his cells to mine. The coarse hair on his legs chafed my over-sensitized skin, spreading a different sort of heat. Our breathing came in ragged pants, punctuated by moans and other sounds. His scent was all around me, something clean and spicy and decidedly male. I felt like I could wrap myself up in that scent and sleep for a year.

The pressure inside me reached a nearly unbearable point, and I dropped my hand to where my body was joined with his. I’d barely touched my clit before his hand pushed mine away and his thumb stroked over that little bundle of nerves. Once, twice, and then I exploded. Beneath me, Ethan’s hips pushed up into me one more time before he called out my name. His muscular arms wrapped around me as I slumped onto his chest, my mind blissfully blank.

I could finally sleep.

Chapter Sixteen

Ethan

"I KNOW WHAT I SAID, David, but things have changed." Aria's voice, tense as a tightrope, yanked me out of dreamland.

"No, she's not okay." Aria's voice cracked, and she cleared her throat before continuing her phone conversation. "They found her body yesterday." She paused, then said, "No, they haven't officially identified her."

A flash of anger burned away the last of the sleep in my brain. I didn't need to hear the other end of the conversation to know that this David dude had asked some dumbass question.

"My foster mom's gonna need help with the funeral, and I need to be here to support her."

Before I sat up, I checked I wasn't giving a free show. I had a vague recollection of ditching the condom and pulling my boxers up, but I didn't want to flash Aria while she was on the phone with her boss.

"Yes, David, I'll keep working remotely as much as I can." Frustration crept into her voice. "Yes, I know I have more responsibilities now, and I appreciate you being so flexible."

I frowned at the tension radiating from her entire body, and a surge of protectiveness hit me. I wanted to go to her, to shield her from everything causing her pain.

Starting with the asshole boss.

"Yes, I'll let you know when I'm coming home." She hung up and muttered a string of curses aimed at the jerk on the other end of the line.

"He sounds like a real gem." I let the sarcasm practically drip from my words.

Aria sighed and rubbed her forehead. "It's my boss. I get why he's pissed. I was just promoted on Friday afternoon, and the first thing I did Friday evening was call off work for who knows how long."

“It’s not like you decided to jet off to Vegas for a vacay,” I pointed out. “Any boss who’s got a problem with an employee taking time for something like this ain’t a good person in my book.”

“He’s got a business to run.” Her response was more automatic than genuine.

“So do I, but I make sure my people have what they need,” I said. “I expect the best from them, but I give them the best in return.”

She looked over at me. “Sounds like a great place to work.”

“Your boss better watch his back,” I said, “or I’ll snatch his best employee.”

“Who said I’m his best?” One corner of her mouth twitched up, which was at least part of what I’d hoped to accomplish.

“Aren’t you?” I countered, teasing.

Suddenly, she tilted her head and gave me a strange look. “You just offered to hire me, but you ain’t got a clue what I do for a living.”

“That’s true,” I admitted with a laugh. “I guess I figured I’d find something for you to do.”

She raised an eyebrow. “What kinda girl do you think I am?”

If I hadn’t spotted the glint of humor in her eyes, I might’ve believed she was truly insulted.

“If it eases your mind, I run a legit business,” I said. “A software company, as a matter of fact.”

She gave me a look of complete surprise. “Seriously?”

“Yeah, why?” I was confused.

“I’m a web designer.”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it, and after a moment, she joined in. It wasn’t really that funny, but with everything that’s happened in the last couple of days, our emotions were more scrambled than a plate of diner eggs.

The thought of eggs made my stomach growl.

“What do you say we order room service?” I asked. “We got a shit-ton to do today and tackling it on an empty stomach isn’t the smartest move.” I noticed the shadow that flickered across her eyes and quickly added, “Gotta go get your stuff back, after all.”

She took a deep breath, banishing the darkness from her expression. “Right.” She glanced down at the robe she’d thrown on. “Guess I’d better get cleaned up.”

Neither of us lingered in the shower or over our breakfast, as if we both sensed that too much time stretched between us would make avoiding the elephant in the room damn near impossible.

Not like the rest of the town gave a rat’s ass about that.

As we turned onto Sarah’s street, I realized this was going to be way more of a bitch than I’d initially thought. I couldn’t believe Gig Harbor had that many damn reporters. At least a dozen vultures were swarming in front of the house, as close as they could get without trespassing. And there, to make sure no one crossed the line, were a handful of cops.

But another figure caught my eye. Marty Pickman was moseying toward the front door.

“We’re gonna have to wait,” I said, jerking my chin toward the detective. “He ain’t gonna be thrilled to see me.”

“No, we don’t,” Aria said, her face pale but her voice steady as a rock. “Rachel used to sneak out all the time. I know how. Park over there.”

A weird sensation of déjà vu washed over me as Aria led me through a wooded area toward the back of the house. The trees were taller, and the brush thicker than it’d been twenty years ago, but I recognized the path we were taking. I’d walked it myself more than once for the same damn reason.

Getting into the Blackwell house on the downlow.

Aria opened a door that was just as hidden now as it had been back then. She shot a glance over her shoulder. “It’s darker than a crypt, so stick close.”

I could’ve found my way to the back stairs and into the upstairs supply closet

blindfolded, but I sure as hell didn't mind having permission to be close to her.

"Sarah always claimed this was for the housekeepers," Aria whispered. "Rachel and I figured it was more likely built so the man of the house could get a little extracurricular action on the side."

Considering this was how Sarah used to sneak me into her bedroom senior year, I had to agree that the explanation hit the nail on the head.

When we stepped into the supply closet, for one batshit moment, I thought Sarah would be there waiting for me, just like she had been during those few steamy months we'd been together. Funny how once upon a time, that idea might have appealed to me, but now, the only woman I had any interest in getting hot and heavy with in a dark room was the one standing right in front of me.

Aria's room used to be a guest room when Sarah was growing up, but not the one Sarah and I had used for our rendezvous. She'd been terrified of the housekeeper finding...evidence of our little trysts. It was easier to hide it in the guest room.

Or so she'd claimed. I'd been a horny teenager in love, and I believed her. As an adult, I doubted that was the real reason, but honestly, I couldn't give a rat's ass anymore.

"It'll only take me a hot minute," Aria said, yanking a bag from under the bed.

"Need me to do anything?" I asked, trying to pretend that being back in this room wasn't making my skin crawl.

"Can you grab my stuff from the bathroom?" She pointed toward the door.

I was in the bathroom when I heard it.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

Shit.

I stepped out of the bathroom just in time to see Sarah storm into the bedroom, making a beeline for Aria.

“Sarah! Stop.” I lunged, grabbing her wrist.

“Ethan?” Sarah took a step back from Aria. “What are you...?”

Her voice trailed off as her eyes darted from me to Aria and back again. The moment they widened, I knew she’d figured out there was something brewing between Aria and me.

“Let me guess.” Sarah was all smiles now. “You used that back entrance to get up here.” She shot a glance at Aria, even as she laid her hand on my chest. “Just like you did twenty years ago.”

“Ethan?” Aria looked at me, confusion clouding her face.

Sarah ignored her, zeroing in on me. “March until...when was that last time? Right at the end of May? Right before graduation.”

Aria made a sound that made me look at her. She had a stricken expression on her face. “Rachel was born at the beginning of February.”

I frowned, not understanding until Sarah dropped her bombshell.

“Yes, she was.” Sarah gave me a little smirk. “We sure had a fun last month, didn’t we?”

It hit me like a ton of bricks, making me take a few steps back. I’d had a fleeting thought about Rachel’s parentage when I’d learned how old she was, but I’d pushed the notion aside. Now, with more specifics, I couldn’t ignore the implication, not when it was possible that I was...shit.

“Oh, babe. It feels so much better with bare skin.”

The memory hit me like a sucker punch, and I couldn’t shake the gnawing realization.

I really could be Rachel’s father.

“I thought I told you to stay the fuck away from Sarah.”

Marty’s voice yanked me out of my head, and I suddenly realized that Aria had vanished. Sarah had shifted to the side, and Marty loomed in the doorway, a sneer stretching across his face.

“You always thought you were too damn good to follow the rules.” He whipped out a pair of handcuffs. “Turn around. You’re under arrest for trespassing and breaking and entering.”

Well, shit.

Chapter Seventeen

Aria

I FELT like I was going to puke.

Sarah and Ethan were once a fucking couple.

My foster mom and the man who'd rocked my world. Twice.

And that didn't even factor in the twisted math I'd just done. Rachel had always looked like Sarah, so it hadn't seemed weird that there wasn't any resemblance to the man Rachel called dad. Except if Sarah was telling the truth, he might not have been Rachel's father after all.

My foster sister's dad could be the man I'd slept with.

Twice.

This was some seriously fucked-up shit, and I had no idea where to even begin unpacking it.

What I knew for certain was that I needed to get the hell out of here.

As I stepped out of the bedroom and rounded the corner, I crashed into a firm, broad body and let out a startled yelp.

"Whoa, sorry there." A pair of hands grabbed my shoulders and steadied me.

I TOOK a step back and got my first look at the man in front of me. A little under six feet tall with brown hair and hazel eyes, he was attractive, though not with the sort of classic, clean-cut features and chiseled jawline Ethan had. His smile was pleasant enough, and that took the edge off my initial panic.

"Who're you?" I asked, aware that I was being rude but not caring.

"Andy Conners." He held out a hand. "I'm Richard's son."

"Richard. Sarah's fiancé." I shook his hand. "I'm—"

"Aria Reed." His smile widened. "I know. I've seen pictures of you."

I noticed he didn't say that Sarah had mentioned me, but that wasn't really my chief concern right now.

Andy's smile faded. "Are you okay? Do you need some help?"

I didn't know if it was the kindness in his voice or if I was just tired.

"I just want to get out of here."

His expression grew serious, and he reached for me as if he intended to take my arm, but then thought better of it.

"Come with me."

I followed him, hoping I wasn't making a mistake. Trusting another stranger didn't seem like the smartest move, but I'd reached the point where I just couldn't care less.

The two of us ended up in a small room that Sarah had always referred to as a mudroom. When Rachel and I were kids, it'd been where we'd left our dirty boots and our coats after playing outside. Now, it was empty save a pair of old rubber boots that I suspected had once been mine.

"You lived here for a while, didn't you?" Andy asked, concern on his face. "With Rachel."

"Seven years," I said. I swallowed hard. "But I've known her longer than that." Another pause. "Knew her."

"Shit." Andy touched me this time, taking my hand and giving it a squeeze. "I'm so sorry."

"You knew her too," I said.

He shook his head. "Not well. I mean, I'm older than her, so by the time our parents started dating, I was out on my own."

"So, you're just visiting?" I asked, more to keep there from being any silence than because I was interested.

"I have a place of my own," he said, "but I thought I should be here for a couple of days. You know, with everything going on."

He'd been here, I realized suddenly. Not just right now, but through the whole thing.

"What happened?" I asked. "Do you know anything about what happened to her?"

He leaned against the wall, his hands in his pockets.

"I know she'd been staying with her boyfriend for a while," he said.

"What about yesterday? How did they find her?" I forced myself to ask, even though a part of me questioned the wisdom of it.

He grimaced. "Are you sure you want to hear this?"

"Not really," I said honestly. "But I need to know."

His eyes narrowed as he studied me for a moment before nodding. "I'll tell you what I know."

My stomach flipped, and I was regretting eating this morning. I folded my arms and tried to pretend that I could handle this.

"Go ahead."

"Yesterday afternoon, a teenager was taking his girlfriend out in his dad's speedboat. They spotted something in the water and when they got close, they saw long blonde hair and realized it was a woman."

I gritted my teeth and willed myself not to cry or throw up.

"She'd been in the water for a couple of days." Andy's voice was gentle, but nothing could take away the horror of his words, though I appreciated him trying. "There was...head trauma."

I pressed my lips tight together to keep any sound from escaping. A whimper or a scream. I didn't know, only that something wanted to tear free.

"The detective told Sarah that they don't know what it's from yet," Andy continued. "He said it could be foul play, but it could also be an accident." His eyes flicked to mine and then away. "Or suicide."

I let my eyes close, and my head fell forward.

“The coroner is going to make a positive ID first,” Andy said, his voice sounding closer. His hand landed on my shoulder. “But the body’s the right size and shape, same hair color. And there aren’t any other Gig Harbor women missing. I’m so sorry.”

I put my hands over my face and fought for control. I’d known it as soon as I’d heard she was missing that this was a possible outcome, but I’d tried to stay positive. I’d reminded myself of all the other times Rachel had taken off and then shown up days later, as if nothing had happened. Then they’d found a body, and I’d told myself that I had to accept that it was most likely Rachel. I’d thought I’d prepared myself.

Now I know the truth. There was no way to prepare for something like this. Nothing that could ease the pain I felt knowing that my sister had been taken from this world in such a violent manner.

And nothing I could do to change any of it.

Chapter Eighteen

Ethan

HANDCUFFED AND STUCK in a police interrogation room, arrested for breaking and entering and trespassing, I realized that was just the background noise of my life right now.

The main event was the bombshell that Rachel might've been my daughter. My possibly dead daughter. Yeah, my brain was doing the hamster wheel thing, going in circles nonstop, and not getting anywhere.

Sarah, me, a baby. How the fuck did I miss all that? And how did Sarah morph from the love of my life to... whatever she is now?

The door swung open, and in strolled Marty, his face sporting that annoying, self-satisfied smirk I'd grown to loathe. He slapped a file folder onto the table and leaned in, all dramatic-like.

"I told you to stay away from Sarah Blackwell."

Zip. Zilch. Nada. No response from me.

"And yet, I found you in the bedroom of her daughter, Aria."

Again, I kept my trap shut. I could've asked for a lawyer, but I figured that'd just piss Marty off even more. Besides, I knew I'd been there without Sarah's permission, but it was for a damn good reason.

"What were you doing there?"

I stayed silent, and Marty slammed his hands down on the table. "Were you there to kill Sarah's other daughter, too?"

I couldn't help my surprise. "What?"

Marty straightened, clearly pleased with himself for making me speak. "You killed Rachel, and now you want the other daughter too?"

"I didn't kill anyone." That was safe enough to say, right?

Marty leaned back in his chair, stroking his chin like he was pondering

something deep. “Maybe you weren’t there to mess with Aria. Maybe she was in cahoots with you. Showed you how to get in the house so you two could rip off Sarah. That the plan? Jealous daughter teams up with an older dude who’s got a thing for her mom?”

No way I was going to let Aria take the heat for this. “I didn’t need anyone to show me how to get into the house. Sarah showed me the ropes back in high school.”

Marty’s eyes narrowed into little slits. “Why the hell would she do that?”

I fired back, “Maybe Sarah was sick of the typical douchebags and wanted someone who could appreciate her as a person.”

Marty’s jaw was so tight, I thought his teeth might crack. I could see his brain going into overdrive. “So, you’re saying you and Sarah were an item in high school? Funny, I don’t remember her ever bringing you up.”

I shrugged, trying to play it cool. “Maybe she didn’t wanna bruise your fragile ego.”

Marty’s face went red, and it was clear I’d scored a hit. Like many boys back in high school, Marty had a crush on Sarah. “I knew Sarah pretty well back then, and she didn’t strike me as the type to sleep around.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Maybe she was just better at keeping secrets than you thought.”

Marty slammed his fist on the table, his anger oozing out of every pore. “Bullshit! No way in hell you and Sarah were a thing.”

A smirk escaped me. “Man, you’re just salty ‘cause you were crushing on Sarah back in high school, and she went for me instead.”

I kicked back in my chair, playing it cool, while watching him try to wrap his head around it.

Marty’s face had gone from red to full-on eggplant as he paced. “You know what? I think you’re lying to cover your ass. Maybe you and Rachel had a thing going? Or did she shoot you down? That why you offed her?”

I couldn’t even begin to untangle the rat’s nest of questions he’d just thrown

at me.

Right when Marty was getting in my face, the door burst open, and Kris walked in. “Back off, Detective Pickman.”

Marty tried to argue, but Kris cut him short. “Ethan, you’re good to go. Sarah’s not pressing any charges.”

Marty tried to butt in again, but Kris shut him down. “He’s not a suspect. Unless there’s some secret evidence you’ve been hiding from me.”

Marty shook his head, looking like a deflated balloon.

“Alright then, Ethan, you’re free to go.”

Chapter Nineteen

Aria

THE PITTER-PATTER of rain on my car's roof offered a familiar comfort, something I craved in this whirlwind of emotions. I drove without direction, yearning to escape the house and Ethan. Guilt gnawed at me for ditching him, but the truth bomb that had just dropped made it impossible to turn back.

Sure, I'd figured that he and Sarah once had something going on, but I'd thought maybe a childhood crush. Never in a million years did I think they'd slept together, let alone after he'd hooked up with me, knowing Sarah was my foster mom. And then there was the twisted timeline that made it possible for him to be my foster sister's dad.

The Wilkinson Farm Park lot welcomed my car, but I wasn't here for the view. My head found solace against the steering wheel, eyes shut, as I tried to steady the storm raging in my mind.

It was just. Too. Much.

I never should've returned to this godforsaken place. I'd failed to help Rachel, and the one good thing that'd emerged from this chaos flipped on its head when I discovered way too much about Ethan's romantic past.

Maybe hitting the road back to Seattle was my best bet.

I needed advice.

Whipping out my phone, I dialed the one person I could trust for solid guidance.

"Aria?" Madison's worry seeped through her voice. "I saw the news and wanted to check in, but I wasn't sure what you were up to or who you were with."

"It's okay," I replied. "But now I'm stuck trying to figure out my next move."

I filled her in on Sarah's fury and my stealth mission back into the house for my stuff. I conveniently left out the Ethan saga. There were more pressing matters.

“If you head back, you might miss the funeral,” Madison pointed out.

“Yeah,” I agreed, “but honestly, I doubt Sarah would even let me attend.”

“On the flip side,” Madison chimed in, “coming home doesn’t mean you can’t drive back for the funeral.”

She had a point. Distance hadn’t been the barrier keeping me away these past few years.

“You could head home, dive into work and enjoy your promotion, then return for the funeral if you decide that’s what you want,” Madison suggested.

Madison’s idea was solid. I’d drive up and back in a single day. No need to linger where I was unwelcome, stuck in a place teeming with dark memories.

After all, I wasn’t needed here for Sarah’s arrangements or the police’s investigation. Now that they had a body, they’d need to determine the cause of death and proceed accordingly. They’d figure out what happened and handle any arrests they deemed necessary.

I sighed, rubbing my forehead as if it could ease the tension headache.

“It’s more than just the funeral bothering you,” Madison declared.

“If the coroner rules the death a suicide, accidental, or undetermined, I can see the cops closing the case with little additional investigation,” I said. “And if it’s ruled a homicide, they’ll laser in on the obvious suspect.”

“Rachel’s boyfriend,” Madison chimed in. “Or, rather, ex-boyfriend, right?”

“Ex, yeah,” I confirmed. “Lee. When the cops hear they broke up, they can spin a lovers’ quarrel gone wrong.”

“But you don’t think he’s involved?” Madison inquired.

“He enabled her drug use,” I admitted, “but I don’t think he’d hurt her, even accidentally. He really liked her.”

“I know it’s been a few years since you last saw her, but any idea who’d wanna hurt her?” Madison asked.

“I’m clueless about her life since I left, but Lee said she dumped him for

something better. Maybe someone better.”

“Who could be behind all this?”

“It’s as solid a theory as any.” I sighed. “Not like I can figure out who they are, though.”

“Check her phone,” Madison suggested. “Texts, calls, maybe even emails.”

“I would,” I said, “if I had her phone.”

After a beat, she asked, “Do you know her provider?”

I caught her drift. “I won’t ask you to break the law.”

“You didn’t,” she replied. “I’m offering.”

Tears stung my eyes, and I choked back a sob. “Thank you.”

“I’ll get on it,” she said. “I’ll update you once I find something.”

“Thanks,” I repeated, giving her the info she required.

As our call ended, I set my phone aside but didn’t fire up my car. The rain had eased, but I wasn’t ready to hit the road.

I trusted Madison to hack Rachel’s phone, but her laptop might also hold crucial intel. The cops likely had it, but maybe I could get access somehow.

The phone buzzed in my hand, and I answered without checking the caller ID.

“Hello?”

“Aria.” A snuffle punctuated my name. “I’m so sorry.”

“Sarah?” I frowned. What the hell did she want now?

“I was a mess, and I took it out on you. I’m so sorry.” A muffled sob escaped her. “I lost my baby. I don’t want to lose you too. You’re the only family I have left.”

I wanted to ask her where that family love had been when she’d kicked me out three years ago or when she’d screamed at me for not answering her call

instantaneously.

Or earlier today, when she'd snarkily mentioned her past with Ethan.

But she had a point. She'd lost her daughter.

"You're upset," I said, my voice cold. "Understandable."

"Will you come back?" she pleaded. "Please. It would mean so much to me."

I pressed my fingers to my temples. "You want me to return to the house?"

"Yes, very much so," Sarah rushed. "Can you please do that?" After a beat, she added, "Soon?"

That was all the confirmation I needed to know she had some hidden agenda for inviting me back. She was way too eager, especially after sounding like she'd been crying earlier.

Under normal circumstances, I would've told her to shove it, but this time, I had my own reasons.

The cops might have Rachel's computer, but I knew my sister. Despite the changes over the years, her journal showed me that some things remained constant. If I could sneak back into the house and her room, I might find electronics the cops overlooked.

"I'll be there in a few minutes."

Chapter Twenty

Ethan

AFTER A LONG, hot-as-hell shower in my hotel room, I felt somewhat human again, but I still needed a stiff drink. Or five. So, I was more than eager to meet Kris at the bar where we'd met before. I figured I could use some company that wasn't Marty the Asshat Detective.

"Who found her?" I asked, after we'd both downed our first shots.

Kris' face twisted, and I thought he might clam up. But he sighed and spilled the awful truth about two innocent kids stumbling upon a corpse. Just peachy.

"The coroner says she was in the water for a couple of days," Kris said, knocking back another shot. "Dead before she hit the water. Maybe even for a day or two."

"Before we even started searching," I muttered, feeling the weight of futility settling on my shoulders.

"Sadly, that's usually the case," Kris said. "Unless there's a ransom call ASAP, most missing people don't make it past the first twenty-four hours."

"You think it's foul play, then?" I asked.

Kris shrugged. "Honestly, I'm stumped."

I cleared my throat. "But you're sure it's her?"

Kris ordered another shot, and I felt a pang of dread. Downing expensive whiskey like that couldn't mean anything good.

"They confirmed her identity through dental records," he said, lifting his glass. He drained it in one go. "I just came from telling Sarah."

"Fuck," I muttered, signaling the bartender for another round. We both needed it.

"Yep, that's the word."

"You didn't wait for DNA confirmation?" I asked, trying to sound casual.

For a paternity test, I needed DNA to compare mine to. I wasn't sure if I really wanted the truth, but I liked the option.

"With the dental records, we don't need to," Kris said.

"Has anyone reached her dad? Derek Hill?" I asked.

"Spoke with him on my way here." Kris looked disgusted. "Derek's been in Europe for years with his new wife and kids. Said he'll try to make it back for the funeral, but to tell Sarah not to wait on his account."

"Son of a bitch!" I gritted my teeth, resisting the urge to punch something.

How could anyone abandon their child like Derek had? Maybe he suspected Rachel wasn't his, but he'd raised her for years. I always knew he was a prick, but this took the cake.

"Never been a fan of his," Kris said, "but this is next level douchery."

We sat in silence, stewing in our thoughts. Mine involved various ways to inflict pain on Derek Hill, and I had a feeling Kris's weren't much different.

"I'm gonna pry a bit," Kris admitted, swiveling my way. "Feel free to tell me to piss off if I'm overstepping."

I braced myself, figuring I knew what was coming, but I nodded anyway.

"The DNA talk, Rachel's dad—does that have something to do with your chat with Marty earlier?" Kris's face was all buddy-buddy, not Detective Kris. "You and Sarah were a thing right around when she'd have gotten knocked up, yeah?"

"Yep, we were."

Admitting it felt like unloading a backpack full of bricks. I wanted to talk, weirdly enough. Jake would've been my go-to guy for a heart-to-heart, but Kris was here, and he'd known me back in the day. If anyone could get what it was like for me, it was him.

"Shit," Kris muttered. "I knew you had the hots for her, but I never figured she'd..." He trailed off, looking sheepish.

"Never figured she'd go for a guy like me." I finished the sentence he

couldn't. "It's cool. I know who I was back then. Who I was, and who she was."

"How long did it last?" Kris asked.

"A few months." I downed my drink. "She kissed me behind the gym on Valentine's Day and invited me over the next night. Sarah showed me how to sneak into her house without anyone noticing. She told me how sweet I was and how she needed a sweet guy."

After ordering a couple more beers, I kept the story rolling, telling Kris about Sarah and me getting it on that same night. I didn't mention she was my first, but we'd been tight enough back then that I bet he knew already. I told him about all the lies she'd fed me, how we had to keep things hush-hush for now, but everything would change after graduation, how she'd ditch Derek and we could run off together. And I told him about showing up at her house two days before graduation, where she dumped me, saying her dad would disown her if she didn't stick with Derek.

"Damn." Kris shook his head. "What a piece of work." When I shot him a look, he added, "I know she's grieving now, but that doesn't change the fact that she was a royal pain in the ass to treat you like that."

Before I could reply, something on the TV snagged our attention.

The shot showed the front of the Blackwell house with a banner at the bottom reading: MOTHER OF SLAIN TEEN TO SPEAK.

"What the hell is she up to?" Kris grumbled.

The front door swung open, and out strutted Sarah, her red curls flawless. Her makeup was on point, and her outfit looked like it belonged in a fashion magazine. The blue and white print dress seemed more like something you'd wear on a casual date than for a grieving mother who'd just been told her nineteen-year-old daughter's body had been discovered in the harbor.

She wasn't grinning, but she wasn't sobbing either. I had a feeling that if I were closer, I'd see that familiar twinkle in her eyes. She had all those reporters eating out of her hand and knew the local networks—maybe even more—were amplifying her audience. She was in her element.

And there, to her right, slightly behind her, stood a visibly uncomfortable Aria.

“Dammit, Sarah.” I raked my fingers through my hair. “What are you dragging Aria into?”

Chapter Twenty-One

Aria

COMING HERE, I knew Sarah had ulterior motives for wanting me at the house, and yet, she outdid herself by hosting a press conference on her front lawn. I mean, come on! She got the news of Rachel's death not even ninety minutes ago. Dental records confirmed it—my best friend, my sister, was dead. And what did her mom do? She was busy dolling up, trying to look like a grieving mother without overdoing the makeup.

As if I didn't already know, I asked Sarah what the hell she was thinking, doing this. And she gave me some bull about wanting the press to hear the truth from her instead of those pesky rumors. Yeah, right? Like the cops wouldn't be announcing themselves.

Then, she blatantly told me to doll up too, because she wanted me by her side. Fuck that, but I didn't say it. Instead, I just changed into some decent jeans and a shirt and brushed my hair. I didn't bother to hide the fact that I'd been crying—swollen eyes, puffy face, the works.

Following Sarah out to the porch, I could hear the reporters buzzing. I kept my eyes down, because I was just a prop here, and I knew I'd lose it if I saw anything but sympathy in their faces. Sure, some of them might be decent folks, but they also had their share of vultures. And those were the ones I wanted to tell where they could shove their cameras.

“Hello, everybody.” Sarah didn't bother raising her voice, but she never needed to. The woman had this freaky talent for grabbing everyone's attention, and this time, it wasn't any different. “Thank you all for coming during this heart-wrenching time for me and my family.”

I gritted my teeth as she snatched my hand, giving it a tight squeeze. Jesus, it took every bit of restraint not to yank my hand away. Lucky for me, she let go after a hot second.

“First, I have to confirm what many of you already suspect.” She sniffled, tears welling up in her eyes. “The body found in the harbor last night was that of my precious daughter, Rachel Laurell Blackwell.”

She paused, allowing the news to sink in. The crowd remained silent, offering her a moment to collect herself.

“Captain Kris McPherson came by earlier this evening to tell me that the coroner had made a positive identification. Unfortunately, there’s still no ruling on the cause of her passing.” Sarah wiped her tears, her voice cracking. “Detective Marty Pickman assured me he will not rest until he uncovers the truth about what happened to my baby girl and brings everyone involved to justice.”

I shifted my weight, wondering how long Sarah was going to keep this up. She had a gift for being able to talk without really saying anything.

“I’ll take a few questions now, while I feel up to it.”

I squeezed my eyes shut instead of rolling them for everyone to see. Not like I was the star of the show, but with my luck, someone would catch me and make some dumbass story about me not giving a fuck about Rachel.

“Miss Blackwell, you think Rachel took off and just OD’d?”

Sarah’s surprise and offense looked real, but who knew? How could she not see that one coming? Pretty much everyone I’d talked to have that theory.

I tuned out her response and the rest of the Q&A. Nothing new here. All I wanted was to get back inside and do some digging of my own.

Finally, Sarah threw up her hand, saying she was beat. I followed her in, relief washing over me as the door slammed shut.

“That was so brave of you, darling.” Richard planted a chaste kiss on Sarah’s cheek.

“Thanks, babe.”

The guy didn’t look like a babe, but who am I to judge? He wasn’t my fiancé.

“Alright, let’s get started.” Sarah turned to me, her eyes all business. “I need you to speak right after I do.”

“Speak?”

“At the funeral, obviously,” she said. “We can’t have it at the funeral home,

though.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Are you kidding me?” Sarah’s voice dripped with disdain. “There’s not nearly enough room. I’ll call Pastor Bob, make sure he’s available. The choir can prepare a few tunes, too.”

I wanted to ask if she’d found religion in the last three years. Because the Sarah I remembered only went to church when she wanted attention. Like the Sunday after my mom died. She dragged Rachel and me to the same church where we held Mom’s funeral, making sure everyone saw what a saint she was for taking me in.

“I’ll do a solo,” she continued. “‘Wind Beneath My Wings,’ I think.”

Richard’s smile tightened, not reaching his eyes. “Maybe it’s better if someone else sings. You wouldn’t want to lose it mid-song. Emotions will be high that day.”

“And we for sure don’t want that god awful screeching recorded and posted online.” Andy’s comment was quiet, but I heard him.

I fought back a snicker. He had a point. Sarah was tone deaf but insisted she had a voice like an angel. I lost count of how many times Rachel and I laughed our asses off when Sarah decided karaoke was her thing.

The humor died as I remembered I’d never laugh with my sister again.

“Want me to write your speech?” Sarah asked, snapping me back to reality.

“What speech?”

“For the funeral.” She said it like I was an idiot. “After I speak, you can say something about our beautiful family and how grateful you are to be a part of it after I graciously opened my home to you.”

I stared at her, speechless. But, as always, she had enough words for both of us.

“I’ll write it for ya.” She patted my cheek. “I know it’s hard for you to find the right words, and you wouldn’t want to screw up Rachel’s funeral.”

“Is the school auditorium really necessary?” Richard asked. “Rachel didn’t have many friends. At least, not anyone we’d want coming around.”

I clenched my teeth, took a slow breath, and exhaled. “I need to go.”

“Go?” Sarah looked shocked. “I told you I want you to stay here.”

“I’m just going to my room.” I bolted before she could reel me back into her twisted planning. She didn’t want my opinion. She wanted someone to nod along and tell her how brave she was.

Maybe I was acting like a bitch, but all I felt was annoyance. It was better for everyone if I wasn’t around her.

I was just a few steps down the upstairs hallway when I realized someone was tailing me. Whirling around, ready to tell Sarah to piss off, I found Andy instead.

“Shit.” Andy held up his hands, all surrender-like. “Didn’t mean to freak you out.”

“What do you want, Andy?” I sighed, suddenly tired.

He gave me this sympathetic smile that made my stomach churn. “Just wanted to say I’m here for you.” He put a hand on my shoulder, giving it a squeeze. “If you need to talk or whatever.”

The way he said it, I couldn’t help but think he was flirting. But, nah, I had to be reading it wrong. He’d been decent so far, and it’d be all kinds of fucked up to flirt today.

“Thanks.” I took a step back, shaking off his hand. “Right now, though, I just need some time with her stuff. You get it?”

“For sure,” he said. “I’ll be around, so holler if you change your mind and want company.”

I nodded and headed to Rachel’s room. I’d been in here just two days ago, but it felt like a lifetime. Hell, even this morning seemed like ancient history. With all the shit about Ethan and Sarah, then hearing Rachel was really, truly dead. It was like I’d lived a century in a few hours.

I came back to hunt for her laptop or tablet, but as I shut the door behind me, memories flooded in, threatening to drag me under. I squeezed my eyes shut and focused on taking slow, deep breaths. I had to keep my shit together.

Despite Sarah's insistence that Rachel hadn't lived here in years, finding the journal hinted that Rachel had been back, whether or not Sarah knew it. When Ethan and I had snuck in this morning, I'd noticed the door swung open easily and without a sound. From experience, I knew those hinges would squeak if not oiled every couple of weeks. The absence of any obstruction from either side made me think Rachel had returned to her room far more frequently than anyone knew.

It made sense. She'd have had access to clothes, a shower, and even food when the place was empty. Hell, I wouldn't have been surprised if Rachel had been swiping cash or stuff she could pawn.

I'd already checked the hiding places I knew about when I found her journal, which didn't give me much hope. But a little was better than nothing. I'd just have to be creative and thorough.

My search of the dresser was more methodical than last time as I felt for false bottoms in the drawers, took them out and flipped them over, and checked each piece of clothing for hidden items.

By the time I made my way around to the bed, I was hot, sweaty, and utterly discouraged. The only thing I'd found was a couple of stray cigarettes and joints in random places where they'd fallen over the years and been forgotten. Nothing useful.

I was on my knees next to the bed, staring at the bedside table, when I realized something.

It wasn't in the same place it had always been. I must not have noticed it the last time I'd been in here because I'd found the journal before I got to the table. But now that I was looking directly at it, I could tell it'd been moved at some point.

I crouched down, getting closer to the base, and confirmed my suspicion. There, between the table and the bed, was the small burn spot we'd covered up. And, if memory served me right, the bottom wasn't flat on the floor.

I tipped the table to the side and had to swallow the triumphant shout that wanted to escape. There, in a sparkling, rainbow-colored case, was a laptop.

Leaning back against her bed, I turned the laptop on and silently prayed that she had gotten no better at choosing passwords.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Ethan

THERE I WAS, sprawled out in my hotel room, not even 8 PM, glaring at the ceiling, pondering the hot mess that had become my life in Gig Harbor. I'd returned to help my ex find her missing daughter, but now, my ex wasn't the saint I'd thought she was, the missing girl was dead and could be my kid, and the first person I'd connected with was my ex's foster daughter. Oh, and she knew I might've fathered her foster sister, and hated me like the plague.

"Shit."

Untangling this tangled web was like solving a Rubik's Cube with a migraine. I'd had some grub, chugged water like it was going out of fashion, but my headache clung to me like gum on my shoe.

Chatting with Kris didn't do the trick, either. Yeah, he knew teen-me, but he didn't know the man I'd become.

A phone call later, Jake answered. "Saw the news. That girl, she's your friend's daughter?"

"Yeah." I croaked the word out.

"Shit, man. I'm sorry."

"Thanks." I cleared my throat. "There's more."

Jake listened, silent as the grave, as I spilled the beans. When I finished, he still didn't say squat for a full minute.

"That's...shit. That's a lot."

"You're telling me," I said dryly. "I don't know what to feel or what's real."

"Sounds like you need to get outta your head," Jake said. "You think best when you're not thinking."

"Hit the bar earlier," I said. "Didn't work."

"I wasn't thinking booze."

Long, dark brown hair spread across my pillow. A strong, slender body pressed beneath mine.

Fuck.

I closed my eyes.

“Aria.”

“You know what I heard in that clusterfuck?” Jake asked. “You’re more worried about how it affects her than what it means for you.”

“Of course, I care about her,” I said. “Rachel might’ve been my kid, but I didn’t know her. Gotta process that, but Aria—Rachel was her best friend, practically her sister.”

“So go to her,” Jake said. “Be there for her.”

“I can’t,” I protested. “Not after Sarah...Aria won’t want me around now that she knows the truth.”

“How do you know? Have you tried talking to her?”

“She left before I could,” I said. “Marty’s interrogation took too long.”

Jake sighed. “For a smart guy, you’re a real dumbass sometimes.”

“Thank you,” I said sarcastically.

“Do you like her?” he asked. “I mean, not to sound like a tween, but do you really like her?”

“I do,” I admitted, “but it doesn’t matter. Too much baggage.”

“Bullshit.”

I scowled. “Thanks. That’s what I needed.”

“No, dipshit, you need a kick in the ass,” he said. “And since I can’t physically do it, this’ll have to do.”

“Jake—”

He cut me off. “Go to her. Unless she tells you to back off, go after her like

you always do.”

“This is different,” I argued.

“How?” he asked. “Age difference? Messy ex-situation?” His voice softened. “The way you talk about her...sounds like she’s worth the mess.”

Before I could digest that, someone knocked on my door.

“Hold on,” I said. “Someone’s here.”

“Need me to call a lawyer?” Jake quipped as I peeked through the peephole.

“No.” My heart hammered. “It’s Aria.”

“I’ll talk to you later,” Jake said. “Don’t be an idiot.”

With that ringing in my ear, I opened the door and stepped back, letting Aria inside.

She was still wearing the clothes from the press conference, and I could see her eyes were red and puffy. The grief was expected. It was the excitement radiating off her that caught me off-guard.

“What happened?” I asked as she entered my room.

“I found something.” She held up a laptop as she walked over to the couch and sat down.

“Is that Rachel’s?” I asked, joining her. “No offense, but you don’t seem like the sparkling rainbow type.”

“I talked to my roommate, and she said the best way to figure out what Lee meant by Rachel having found something better was to look at her phone. Since that’s MIA, I thought her laptop might work just as well.” Aria opened the laptop. “Madison’s still going to look into Rachel’s phone records, but I don’t think we need it.”

“Is your roommate a cop?”

Aria gave me a look that said I’d asked the wrong question. “No, Madison’s just...good with computers.”

“A hacker, then.” I scowled.

Aria waved her hand in the air dismissively. “That doesn’t matter. I found what I was looking for on here.”

She motioned toward the screen where she’d pulled up a website.

“Give Me Some Sugar?” I read the title. “What’s this?”

Even as I asked, I was reading the description.

Connecting like-minded individuals who need a little extra sugar in their lives, Give Me Some Sugar is an exclusive site for distinguished gentlemen of a certain class. All our clients are pre-screened to ensure they’re among the elite, and our discretion is beyond reproach.

Beneath the description were two links. One marked Gentlemen and the other marked Ladies. Aria clicked on the latter, leading us to another page with the option to log-in or set up an account. I wasn’t surprised to see her choose the option to log-in. The next page that loaded contained pretty much what I expected.

Images of Rachel. One of her wearing a black evening gown and then another in considerably less. Fancy lingerie made of silk and lace, all designed to titillate and seduce. Even if there hadn’t been the possibility that she was my daughter, I wouldn’t have felt an attraction to her like this. All I could see was the empty look in her eyes. The hollowed-out cheeks and too-thin frame that came with drug use.

“I took a brief tour around the site,” Aria said. “Everyone uses fake names, of course, and the men don’t have pictures, but if the descriptions are to be believed, they’re not only extremely wealthy but powerful, too. I’m talking about judges and politicians. CEOs and celebrities.”

My stomach churned. “I’m guessing this isn’t just an elite dating site.”

“Hardly.” Aria’s tone was grim. “The women are employees of Give Me Some Sugar. Complete with contracts giving the company the ability to choose who they communicate with, who they meet.”

I felt my temper rising and pushed it back. “Let me guess, it’s not even the

company matching them, either. The men go through the profiles and decide who they want to see and basically buy the women for a night.”

“Pretty much,” Aria said. “And their legal team must be top-notch because they’re very careful about what they do and don’t say. There’s never anything that specifically mentions sex for money, but it’s definitely implied. None of the pictures are nudes, but again, they dance the line.”

“And you think this is what Rachel was talking about when she broke up with Lee?”

Aria nodded. “She created the account around the same time that Lee says she ended things with him.”

“So, she was tired of dating a dealer who could provide her with drugs, but nothing else,” I said. “She somehow found this site and decided this would be a better way to get everything she wanted. Someone to take care of her in more luxury than Lee could give her.”

“I think that’s exactly what happened.” Aria looked up at me. “And I think it got her killed.”

I’d expected a statement like that, but it still hit me hard. I had no issues with dating sites, even unconventional ones, or couples who had business arrangements for relationships. However, this situation involved people in power taking advantage of young women with serious problems. I doubted Rachel was the only one on the site with issues, and it wouldn’t have surprised me if they even coerced women into participating.

“I agree,” I said, taking a deep breath. I needed to know where things stood between us, so I put it all on the line. “Before we get any deeper into this, I must ask, why did you come to me? I mean, you could have taken this straight to the cops. Why come here? Especially after everything that happened earlier today. I figured you’d never want to see me again.”

Aria hesitated, and I thought she might avoid answering altogether. But she finally looked up at me, her eyes filled with a mix of sadness and determination.

“Because I trust you,” she said, her voice firm. “And I know you care about Rachel and about finding the truth. The cops... I’m not sure who to trust. And

even if they are honest, will they dig as deep as we will? They've got other cases, other priorities. You and I, we're focused on this."

I could see the vulnerability in her eyes as she spoke, and I knew she was laying it all on the line, too.

"And as for everything that happened earlier today," she continued, "I won't lie. It threw me for a loop. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized it doesn't change who you are now, or how I feel about you."

I felt my heart swelling in my chest, a warmth spreading through me I hadn't expected. "You mean that?"

"Yeah," she said, a small smile creeping onto her face. "I do."

"I didn't come clean about my past," I said. "And I'm sorry about that."

She shrugged it off. "We've known each other for a few days, and it wasn't like either of us were delving into our deepest, darkest secrets for a fling with a stranger. I mean, it's not like you lied about being married." She glanced at my left hand. "Unless there's an angry wife I have to worry about back in Seattle."

"No," I blurted. "No. No wife. And you're right. Neither one of us unloaded all of our baggage or discussed our sexual histories. Still, I'm sorry it got weird like it did."

I reached over and took her hand, feeling a connection that was about more than just our shared mission. We were in this together, and that meant something.

"Alright," I said, determination setting in. "Let's figure out who did this to Rachel, and make sure they pay."

Aria nodded, her eyes fierce, and we dove back into the dark world of Give Me Some Sugar, ready to avenge a girl who had been victimized by those who should've known better. And maybe, just maybe, we'd find something more than justice along the way.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Aria

I HAD TO ADMIT, I'd expected the question about why I went to Ethan and not the police to come a little sooner than it did. That he'd waited until I'd shown him what I'd discovered and hadn't made this all about him said that I'd made the right choice.

"Have you talked to your friend at the police department?" I asked.

Ethan cleared his throat and leaned back, putting some much-needed space between us. Well, it was much needed by me, anyway, because no matter how much I told myself that I needed to focus on Rachel, I was still insanely attracted to him. Insane because that was the only way to describe how this man made me feel.

But that wasn't the point, I reminded myself.

"I talked to Kris a couple hours ago," Ethan said, helping me refocus my attention. "He told me about the positive ID."

"Dental records."

"We caught the press conference." He gave me a cautious look.

"Not my idea," I said.

"I know." He hurried to reassure me. "You didn't look like you wanted to be there."

"I didn't," I agreed. "I tried to tell Sarah it was a bad idea, but she didn't listen. When she gets an idea in her head..."

"Yeah, I know," he said. "She does what she wants, and no one can talk her out of it. She's always been that way."

I ignored the reminder of his history with her. "So, your friend had nothing new, then?"

"He filled me in on what the coroner knew so far," Ethan said, his face pale. "And I'm glad I didn't get details. My imagination was bad enough."

“Did he tell you the cause of death?” I asked.

Ethan shook his head. “They didn’t have one yet. I got the impression the body...It wasn’t something the coroner could tell right away.”

I knew how that sentence would’ve ended, but I was still grateful that he hadn’t finished it. I was trying very hard not to think about how unrecognizable my sister’s body was.

“Kris said he’d call me as soon as the coroner ruled on the manner of death.” Ethan rubbed his forehead. “He said it should happen sometime tonight or tomorrow morning, but he’d call before the official announcement.”

“I’m guessing he’ll probably tell Sarah too,” I said.

“Probably,” Ethan agreed. “Him or Marty.”

“He doesn’t like you too much,” I said before I could stop myself. “Detective Pickman.”

“No, he doesn’t.” Ethan laughed. “Short story is, we went to school together, and he was an asshole.”

“Sounds like there’s a long story, too.”

“There is, but that’s a trip down memory lane for another time.”

“Right.” I nodded. “Back to your friend. I remember him a bit from when I lived here before, but I wasn’t on a first-name basis with the police like Rachel was. What kind of cop is he? What sort of person?”

“He’s a good man,” Ethan said immediately. “Always has been. I’m assuming that means he’s a good cop, too.”

“Good in the sense that he’s smart,” I asked, “or good as in he’ll do whatever he can to solve a case? Does he do what’s right, even if it’s not the popular choice?”

Understanding dawned on Ethan’s face as he realized what I was asking. “You want to know if he’s going to get justice for Rachel.”

“With her history, even if the coroner says it’s murder, it’s going to be easy to say it was drug-related and let it go at that.”

“Kris wouldn’t do that.” Ethan’s voice was gentle. “If it’s ruled an accident, he’ll make sure he gets as much information as possible to give you all whatever closure you can have. If it’s murder, he’ll make sure Marty investigates it thoroughly.”

“He won’t let the detective just grab Lee and call it a day?” I gave voice to the main thing I was worried about.

Ethan shook his head. “He won’t let an innocent man go to jail for something he didn’t do. I guarantee it.”

He said it with such genuine confidence that my concerns melted away. The ones involved with the official side of getting justice for Rachel, anyway. My worries about them being able to find the truth, however, were still there. They had to deal with warrants and red tape.

I didn’t.

If I could find out what happened, I could give a nice anonymous tip and trust that Ethan’s faith in his friend wasn’t misplaced.

“Let’s look at that site and see if we can figure out what role it played in Rachel’s disappearance,” Ethan said.

As he moved a little closer, I ignored the thrill that went through me. Judging by the little intake of breath when our knees touched, he wasn’t unaffected, either.

Too bad this was neither the time nor the place to act on the chemistry sizzling between us. Maybe one day, when we were back home in Seattle, we’d run into each other, and he’d ask me out for coffee. We could go on a proper date and talk about things that didn’t have to do with death and Sarah and Gig Harbor. We’d just be two people who wanted to get to know each other better. Then he could take me home and give me a goodnight kiss. The sort of sweet kiss that promised more, but not too fast because it wouldn’t be about getting off as quick as possible but about building something that could be bigger than what we’d had here.

“Aria?” Ethan put a hand on my arm and electricity practically crackled. “Are you okay?”

I smiled and tried to pretend that I didn't want to grab him and take comfort in the mindless bliss that I knew he could offer. And not just a few minutes, either. I knew from experience that he could keep me distracted for a good, long time.

"I'm fine," I lied. "Let's see if we can figure out who Rachel was seeing right before she disappeared."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Ethan

WAKING up to a crick in my neck and a persistent ringing was not the best way to start my day. Groaning, I reached for my phone, realizing that I must've slept on the couch - alone - and in a way that would've made a chiropractor cringe. As I answered the call, I tried to ignore the fact that my body was doing somersaults of frustration.

“Hello?”

“Ethan, it's Kris. I have news from the coroner.”

Well, that killed my morning excitement.

I rubbed the sleep from my eyes, forcing myself to focus. “What is it?”

“A homicide.”

I straightened instantly, sleep evaporating like mist. “You have a manner of death.”

“Looks like strangulation and blunt force trauma to the head.”

Kris's tone was professional, but I could tell this was eating at him.

“Shit.”

“Yeah.” He exhaled. “The coroner says her hyoid bone was broken, but the neck tissue is too decomposed for him to determine if it was manual or some sort of ligature.”

“Damn. So, not much evidence, then?”

“Not really,” Kris admitted, frustration seeping through. “No way to know if we're looking for someone who uses a belt, a cord, or their own damn hands. Hell, it could've been a forearm or a pipe.”

I sensed he wasn't telling me all this just because I “should” know. He needed to unload, and he knew I'd keep my trap shut.

“Blunt force trauma,” he continued. “A fancy way of saying they bashed her

head in. Either while they were strangling her or just after. Doc can't tell which one killed her. Too much damage."

His voice wavered on the last word, and I frowned.

"Are you okay?" I asked quietly, not wanting Aria to overhear.

"Pickman might still lead this case, but it's not just a missing person anymore," Kris said. "It's a murder case with plenty of publicity. I can't stand the thought of a homicide going unsolved, but this one... I'm determined to make sure the right person is arrested and convicted."

"Of course, that's what you want." I was thoroughly confused.

"I watched the entire autopsy."

"Fuck." I closed my eyes.

"Yeah, that about sums it up," he agreed. "I've been around dead bodies, even in autopsy rooms. But watching one being done? Whole different ball game."

I could imagine, but I didn't want to.

"I knew her," he said. "And her mom. That made it hard, but I thought I could handle it. What I hadn't counted on was you."

"Me?"

"Knowing she might've been your daughter." His voice cracked. "The whole time, I kept thinking she could be your kid, and you'd never have a chance to know her."

I swallowed hard, battling tears. It wasn't like I hadn't thought about it, but hearing someone say it was different. If Rachel had been my daughter, all I'd have were other people's stories and pictures. No memories of my own. No chance to help her.

"Fuck, I'm sorry," Kris said. "I shouldn't have said that. Or any of it."

"No, it's okay." I fought to keep my voice steady. He already felt bad enough. He didn't need to know how much his words hurt.

“We’re going to Sarah’s giving her the news,” Kris said. “Not all of it, obviously. Just the basics. We’re keeping back the details of the cause of death,” he added. “From the public and from Sarah.”

“I won’t say anything,” I promised.

“I didn’t think you would,” he said. “But keep it in mind if you talk to Detective Pickman.”

“Because you’re going to use the non-released information to find the killer,” I guessed. “Like if someone knows more about the crime than you released, then that’s a red flag.”

“You’ve been watching a lot of true crime shows, haven’t you?”

“A few,” I admitted. “But don’t worry. I plan to avoid Marty as much as possible.”

“You’re sticking around a little longer, then?” Kris asked. “I don’t know if the reunion is still happening.”

“I might be here for a bit,” I said vaguely.

“Look, I have to go,” Kris said. “The press conference will be in about an hour. If you want to give Aria a head’s up, that’s your timetable.”

“Thanks,” I said. “And if there’s anything I can do, even if it’s just being a listening ear, let me know.”

“Thank you,” he said. “I’ll keep you in the loop as much as I can.”

We said our goodbyes and as I set my phone aside; I caught movement out of the corner of my eye. Turning, I saw Aria leaning against the table, her face solemn.

“That was your friend.”

Shit.

I’d hoped for some time to prepare before telling her but asking her to wait while I sugarcoated something horrific didn’t seem right.

“Yes, it was Kris.” I stood and crossed to stand in front of her. “How much

do you want to know?”

“Will there be an investigation?”

“Yes.” I kept my voice gentle. “The coroner ruled it a homicide.”

She nodded; her expression tight. “I suspected it would be. The more I learned about the circumstances of her disappearance, the more I knew something wasn’t right.”

Pushing off the table, she took a shaky breath and crossed her arms, as if she needed to hold herself together. I wanted to comfort her and reassure her, but I couldn’t promise everything would be okay. I knew all too well that losing a family member could change everything, and for some, the pain never healed.

“Did he say—do they know how she—how it happened?” She didn’t look at me as she asked the question.

“He did,” I said carefully. “Do you want me to tell you?”

“I don’t know,” she answered, her voice small. She looked at me, vulnerability etched on her face. “Do you think I should know?”

I reached out and took her hand, hoping she’d take the gesture as a friendly one. I only wanted to offer support.

“Honestly, I don’t think it’s something you should hear,” I said. “Kris will not release it to the public, and he won’t be telling Sarah either. Just know that they have ruled it a homicide and he’ll be doing everything he can to get justice for Rachel.”

“I hope you’re right about your friend,” she said.

“He attended the autopsy,” I said. “The whole thing. He wanted to make sure no one missed anything or took any shortcuts.”

She squeezed my hand before letting it go. “That helps. Thank you.”

“Why don’t you go get changed, and then we’ll figure out what to do next,” I suggested.

“I already know what we need to do,” she said.

“You do?”

“We have to talk to her friends and find out what we can about Give Me Some Sugar.”

I watched her walk back into the bedroom, unable to stop myself, and it wasn't just for physical reasons. I couldn't imagine going through what she'd been through and keeping my eyes on the goal. The depth of her pain and grief was clear in her eyes, but she wasn't letting it control her.

Damn.

I shook my head as the door closed behind her. Aria was such an amazing woman. I could honestly say that I hadn't met another like her, and every moment I spent with her made me want to know her even more.

But this wasn't the right time. Once things were settled here, though, I fully intended to take advantage of the fact that we lived in the same city. We'd clear the air about our intersecting pasts, address potential issues, and then explore whatever this was between us.

And I couldn't wait.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Aria

I HELD it together until the bedroom door closed behind me. Then, the strength drained from my legs, and I sank to the floor, buried my face in my hands, and sobbed. I'd stood strong while telling Ethan I'd expected the homicide ruling, but hearing the confirmation was like a punch to the gut. And he hadn't even explained the details.

My mind leaped to the conclusion that the truth was worse than my worst imaginings, and that was already pretty damn bad.

If I let those thoughts dominate, I'd be useless. So, I forced myself to stand, marched into the bathroom, and took a quick shower to wash away the last traces of my tears. When I emerged into the main room, I was a picture of composure. It seemed to fool Ethan, which was just what I needed.

"Do you have a list of people to talk to?" Ethan asked as we headed for his car.

"I have a few names," I replied. "A couple are people I'd met before, but there were some other names in her journal and on the laptop."

"Where are we going?" he inquired.

"According to Rachel's journal, there's a house where they all go when they need a fix. I think that'd be the most likely place to find them first thing in the morning."

"You think they went to get drugs already?" he asked.

"I think there'll be a bunch of people still there from last night's party." Before he could question me further, I added, "I'm assuming there was a party because, as far as I know, they have parties every night. At least, that's how it was three years ago when I had to pick Rachel up at the party house. Different house, but the same sort of people."

"Why didn't you ever involve Sarah?" he asked.

"Sarah." I gritted my teeth, old anger surging back with surprising force. "I

tried to tell her Rachel needed help. More than once. But Sarah never wanted to admit things were that bad.”

Ethan shook his head, his expression tight with frustration. “That’s fucked up.”

“Trust me, that’s not the half of it,” I retorted. “Sarah’s refusal to see that Rachel needed help is how I ended up getting kicked out.”

Without really thinking about it, I spilled the story of the day I caught Rachel trying to steal my mother’s jewelry. I knew the saying about not speaking ill of the dead, but I believed both sides of Rachel deserved to be shared with Ethan.

“When I heard Sarah was pregnant, I remember thinking I couldn’t picture her as a mom,” Ethan admitted. “Even back then, when I didn’t see who Sarah really was, I knew she was too self-centered to be a good parent.”

We both tip-toed around the elephant in the room: if Ethan had been Rachel’s dad and knew it back then, how would things have been different?

“I tried to take care of Rachel as best I could,” I murmured, guilt bubbling up. “I was three years older, and sometimes I could get her to listen.”

“That wasn’t your responsibility,” Ethan said, glancing at me.

“I let Sarah drive me away, and it just made everything worse,” I confessed. “Not long after I left, Sarah started dating Richard and...”

The emotions crashing over me made it hard to speak. Ethan took advantage of a red light to reach over and take my hand.

“You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to.”

I nodded and looked out the window, pulling myself together once more. I wondered how many times I’d have to do that before this nightmare was over.

It took me another five minutes to say the words. “They had her committed.”

Ethan jerked. “What?”

“Richard convinced Sarah that the best thing for Rachel would be to have her

committed to an institution.” I twisted my fingers together on my lap, staring at them so I didn’t have to look at Ethan. “Not rehab or some fancy hospital. They dumped her in a shitty psychiatric ward outside of town and just left her there for nearly two years.”

“I’m going to kill him.” Ethan spoke from between gritted teeth.

“If I’d been there, it wouldn’t have happened,” I said.

“Sarah kicked you out,” he reminded me.

“Out of the house,” I clarified. “She didn’t run me out of town. I could’ve stayed in Gig Harbor. Gotten a place here and it would’ve been a safe haven for Rachel.”

“Aria.”

“If I’d been here, maybe I could’ve convinced Sarah to let Rachel live with me instead. Maybe I could’ve gotten through to her. Gotten her some real help.” All those doubts I’d had came pouring out.

“Aria, stop.”

Ethan’s commanding tone made me look at him.

“This isn’t your fault. None of this is.” His words were firm, full of conviction. “You were a kid in an impossible situation. Nothing would’ve made a difference if Rachel didn’t want to change.”

I knew he was right, but part of me insisted I could’ve given Rachel options if I’d stayed. One day, I might get to where I could let go of that guilt.

When we arrived at the house, only a few cars were parked out front, but I knew that didn’t mean anything. Addicts didn’t always use normal methods of transportation.

“Let me do the talking,” I said as Ethan and I walked up to the front door. When he didn’t argue, I gave him a warm smile. That he trusted me to take care of myself and handle this just made him even more attractive to me.

Then I was knocking on the door and had to put all thoughts of Ethan away.

It took a few minutes of consistent knocking before the door finally opened.

Lee looked surprised to see us, but not alarmed. His bloodshot eyes gave me a pretty good idea why he was so mellow.

“I need to talk to some of Rachel’s friends,” I said. “I’m looking for Teresa, Kristal, and Donny specifically. Are they here?”

Lee glanced behind him and then shrugged. “They might still be here.”

“Can we come in and look?” I asked.

Lee shrugged again and stumbled back inside, leaving the door wide open behind him. Taking that as an invitation—or at least consent—I went inside.

I tried not to gag at the overwhelming stench of pot, alcohol, bodily fluids, and unwashed bodies.

As we navigated through the haze, Ethan and I engaged some people in conversation, searching for any information about Rachel’s last days.

“Hey, did any of you see Rachel recently?” Ethan shouted above the din, trying to catch the attention of a group huddled together in the corner.

Most of them ignored him, but a girl with a vacant stare muttered, “Haven’t seen her in a while, man.”

“And none of you know anything about her disappearance?” I asked, frustration edging my voice.

The room was filled with the low hum of voices, punctuated by occasional laughter or sudden outbursts, but no one seemed interested in our questions. They were too absorbed in their own worlds, their minds lost in the fog of substances.

“We’re wasting our time here,” I muttered to Ethan, feeling the weight of our mission settle heavy on my shoulders.

But then, just as we were about to give up, we heard a familiar voice. Detective Pickman. He strode through the room with the air of a man on a mission. His eyes narrowed as he took in the surrounding scene.

Ethan and I exchanged a glance. We knew we couldn’t risk being spotted by Marty, not with our own investigation underway. In that split second, I

decided. Before Ethan could think of what to do, I grabbed him by the collar and pulled him in for a fierce kiss. As our lips collided, I pressed my back against the nearest wall, pulling Ethan with me. We were hidden from Detective Pickman's view, our passionate embrace serving as the perfect distraction. I could hear Detective Pickman demanding to know where Lee was, but that didn't seem very important right now. At least, not as important as the man clutching me in his arms.

One large hand cupped the side of my face, his thumb rubbing back and forth along my jaw as he devoured me. Tongue plundering, claiming. Teeth nipping at my bottom lip. Fingers digging into my hip.

This was no pretend kiss. I could feel how much Ethan wanted me. It was in his touch. In the hard length of him pushing against my stomach. In the desperate sounds he made when my tongue tangled with his.

I fisted his shirt in my hands to keep from trying to tear it off him. I wanted to feel skin. All that heat and silk, the thin layer of coarse curls that covered his chest before becoming a thin trail that led straight down. A wave of desire enveloped me, washing away everything else that I'd been feeling.

I hooked a leg around his waist, and he groaned, rocking his hips against me. Mentally cursing the layers between us, I tried to pull him closer, as if I could bring us together through sheer force of will alone.

We continued to kiss, our bodies pressed together, and our minds focused solely on each other, even as we heard Marty apprehend Lee and lead him away. The thought of getting caught only fueled our desire, making the moment even more exhilarating.

I should feel guilty about this, I thought, even as I let myself get carried away by the heat of the moment.

It wasn't until someone in the room whistled and made a crude remark that we finally broke apart, both of us panting and flushed. I could see the heat in Ethan's eyes as he muttered, "I'll go check to see if Marty's gone."

As he slipped away, I leaned against the wall, trying to catch my breath and make sense of the electrifying encounter. In the midst of our desperate search for answers, we'd found a moment of passion, and it left me reeling, my heart

pounding, and my body yearning for more.

Before I could follow Ethan, one of Rachel's friends pulled me aside. The girl's eyes were serious and filled with concern as she whispered, "Rachel had a date through that Sugar website the night she disappeared. She was worried about it, like something was off."

I ventured a guess. "Are you Kristal?"

Startled, she took a step back. "How do you know my name?"

"Rachel talked about you." That wasn't entirely accurate, but close enough to the truth that I didn't feel bad about it.

Kristal's lips twitched in a hint of a smile. "She was nice."

I didn't have time to compare stories, but I kept my impatience out of my voice as I asked, "Do you—did you work for them?"

She shook her head again. "I wanted to, but Rachel said I was too young. Said there'd be guys who would like that, but she didn't want me getting into all that." Kristal's eyes filled with tears. "She told me I could still get out of this shit and make something of myself. She looked out for me."

"She was right." I dug into my purse for one of my business cards and held it out. "If you want to get clean, call me. I'll make sure you get the help you need and have a safe place to stay after."

Sniffling, Kristal mumbled an embarrassed thank you before shoving the card into her pocket and hurrying away. I watched her go, hoping that she'd take advantage of what I offered. It wouldn't change what happened to Rachel or the guilt I felt despite multiple reassurances that it wasn't my fault, but if I could make a difference in that girl's life, it would be something.

But until then, I had other work to do.

Squaring my shoulders, I headed for the door. Ethan and I had a lead to follow.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Ethan

A QUICK SCAN of the scene informed me that Marty had already bolted. A cruiser was haphazardly parked beside my car, half on the gravel driveway and half in the grass. Its passengers were off to one side, bickering with a tall, lanky guy who appeared to have a decent grasp of the law. A shorter dude sporting a mullet and a jean jacket kept chiming in with agreement, shooting daggers at the pair of fresh-faced officers who seemed a bit out of their depth.

That chaos provided enough cover for me to slip past them and make a beeline for my car. I didn't recognize either of the cops, but that didn't mean they hadn't witnessed Marty hauling me in yesterday. The absolute last thing I needed at this point was to waste precious time being interrogated by a couple of rookies.

However, once I was safely ensconced in my car, an entirely different concern overshadowed the threat of being detained.

I'd royally screwed up.

One intoxicating taste of Aria, and I'd lost every ounce of self-control and, evidently, all sense of decency. I'd been practically grinding against her in front of a drug den's gallery of addicts and cops.

"Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck!" I straightened up and slammed my hand against the steering wheel.

I hadn't been able to bring myself to even glance at Aria after I'd stopped behaving like a hormone-crazed adolescent. At the very least, I owed her an apology. Hell, I'd be damn lucky if she didn't slap me and demand I never speak to her again. Granted, she'd seemed to enjoy our little escapade, but that could've been a performance.

When I spotted her approaching the car, I clenched the steering wheel and forced myself back under control. Apology first, then deal with the rest of the fallout. Whatever she wanted, I'd respect.

And I would absolutely not take her back to my hotel room so we could

finish what we'd begun.

My cock protested the denial, but I disregarded it. Contrary to what some morons might've believed, a man couldn't actually die from blue balls.

As Aria slid into the car, I opened my mouth to apologize, but then I registered her expression. Something had transpired.

"I have a lead," she declared, excitement sparkling in her eyes. "Rachel had a date with one of those Sugar guys the night she was last seen alive."

I frowned, puzzled. "Didn't we already know that? I mean, we found that message in her account confirming the date, right?"

"Yeah," Aria concurred, "but now we have an actual person who knew Rachel planned to go on the date...and Rachel was worried about it."

"Okay, that's new," I conceded as I started the car. "But it's not really a surprise, is it? Wouldn't anyone be at least a little concerned if they were doing something like that?"

She shook her head. "I don't know about the rest of the women involved with the site, but Rachel was using it to find a wealthy guy who would take care of her for the rest of her life. Dote on her, give her whatever she desired."

"Which is why she told Lee that she had something better." Another piece of the puzzle clicked into place.

"Derek leaving Sarah really messed Rachel up," Aria revealed. "It was more than a divorce. He chose his mistress over them, to where he insisted Sarah changed Rachel's last name back to Blackwell."

"Bastard," I spat. "I never liked the guy, but the more I learn about him, the more I'd love to have a private conversation with him. What I remember of him is a spoiled rich kid who didn't think twice about taking what he wanted and damn the consequences."

"Whatever he was like, leaving his daughter like he did really did a number on Rachel. She's a textbook example of daddy issues." Aria suddenly looked at me, a stricken expression on her face. "Shit. I didn't even think about you maybe being Rachel's father. I'm so sorry."

I reached over and grabbed one of her hands, giving it a quick squeeze. “It’s okay.”

She shot me a skeptical look.

“Alright, it’s not okay, exactly,” I admitted, “but you don’t need to walk on eggshells around me.”

We rode in silence for a few minutes before I spoke again.

“The girl you talked to, Kristal, she didn’t by any chance have the name of the man Rachel was supposed to meet?” I asked.

“Rachel’s a smart cookie,” Aria remarked. “Sure, she dropped out of school, but she’s always been more intelligent than people gave her credit for. I doubt she would’ve trusted any of her addict pals with the information.”

“Not even Lee?” I inquired. “He seems genuinely concerned about her.”

Aria shook her head. “I think she tried to keep him out of this new chapter of her life.”

“She’d want someone who could actually have her back if things went haywire,” I deduced.

“Exactly,” Aria concurred.

“You sound like you have a candidate in mind.”

“Andy.”

“Who?”

“Richard Connors, Sarah’s fiancé, has a son named Andy,” Aria elaborated. “He’s in his late twenties, so he and Rachel weren’t raised together or anything, but he knew her.”

“You think she trusted the son of the guy who convinced her mom to have her committed?” I questioned.

“I’ve spoken with him,” she revealed. “He seems decent, and I believe if he’d known she needed help, he’d have offered.”

A wave of jealousy washed over me at the fondness in her voice, and I reminded myself that I had no right to feel that way.

“So, we’re going to chat with Andy Connors?” I inquired, striving to sound more nonchalant than I felt. “Do you know his whereabouts right now?”

“Actually,” Aria shifted uncomfortably in her seat, “I was thinking it’d be a better idea for me to go solo.”

My grip on the steering wheel tightened. “Oh.”

She placed her hand on my arm. “It’s not that I don’t want you with me on this. I just don’t think he’ll be open to a conversation if you’re there. He doesn’t know you.”

I refrained from pointing out that he didn’t know her either, but she must’ve read the comment on my face.

“I’m aware he doesn’t really know me either,” she admitted, “but it’s different. He sees me like Rachel. Almost like a sister.”

I wondered if that was how he viewed her but kept that observation to myself. Maybe she was right. Maybe my insecurities were making me interpret more from it than was there.

I pulled into a parking space next to her car, and she half-turned toward me.

“Thank you.”

“For what?” I asked.

“For helping me. With everything that’s happened, I was feeling like I was getting stretched too thin. Thank you.” She pecked my cheek and then got out of the car.

I followed, mentally reminding my cock that a little peck on the cheek wasn’t a green light for anything else. I strolled around my car to where she was leaning on hers.

“Are you going to talk to him now?” I inquired. “I won’t ask to tag along, but I’d like to know where you’ll be. Especially after what happened to Rachel.”

“You’re right. We need to be smart about things,” she said as she opened her

car door. “I’m going to head back to Sarah’s place to see if Andy’s there, but I’ll also shoot him a text and see if he wants to meet. And before you ask, yes, I’ll make sure it’s in a public place.”

She started to get into the car, and I realized I couldn’t let her go without at least addressing what had transpired in that house. Grasping her arm, I pulled her close. I had a moment to see the surprise on her face before my lips met hers. Soft and pliant, her lips parted the instant my tongue traced the curve of her bottom one. With a moan, she leaned into me, and her scent enveloped me. My shampoo and soap mingled with the peaches and cream aroma I’d come to associate with her, and my cock hardened.

When I broke the kiss, every fiber of my being protested, but it was the right thing to do. I held onto her for a moment longer, regaining my balance, and then took a step back.

“Call me when you’re done.” I locked eyes with her, letting her see the heat in my gaze. “Go talk to Andy, but then come back to me.”

“I will,” she promised before getting in the car and driving away.

Something in her eyes told me she knew what I wasn’t saying.

Which was something, since I didn’t really know what I wasn’t saying. All I knew for sure was that the more time I spent with Aria, the less I wanted to let her go.

“This could be a real problem,” I sighed as I locked my car.

Less than a week ago, I’d told Jake and Abigail that I wasn’t looking for a serious relationship, and now I was pondering how Aria and I could continue seeing each other after all of this was over. It made little sense, but then again, nothing since I’d seen the news at the bar that night had made sense. Not things with Sarah and Rachel. Not the instant and intense connection I felt with Aria.

That, at least, was something good that had come out of this mess.

I didn’t know if that’s what Aria wanted too, but the dazed look I’d seen in her eyes after I’d kissed her gave me hope, and if there was anything I needed right now, it was hope.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Aria

DESPERATE FOR A MINUTE TO compose myself, I thought about taking it in the car, but with Ethan's eyes on me, my nerves had other plans. I drove halfway down the street before I found sanctuary in a church parking lot. My head spun like a top, and I couldn't trust myself to drive any further without regaining some composure.

Ethan's kisses had completely thrown me off-balance. Especially the last one. It was just for us—no one else. No one to hide from.

And then those last words he said to me. "Come back to me."

My stomach somersaulted. I didn't know what any of it meant, but one thing was crystal clear: Ethan Cole and I had some shit to figure out.

Just not right now.

Suddenly, the idea of heading back to the house lost its appeal. The media would probably still be lurking, but it was Sarah I really wanted to avoid. She'd be in full planning mode, and I couldn't stomach dealing with her.

Whipping out my phone, I shot a message to Andy. "Hey, I have a couple of questions for you. Think we can grab lunch?"

While waiting for his reply, I checked my work email. It had been a while since I last touched base with anyone, and I knew that if I didn't at least pretend to do something, David wouldn't be happy. Hell, it had annoyed him I'd wanted to stay until after the funeral.

Sorting through emails cleared my head as I answered questions and trashed junk. I'd just finished reading the day's morning announcement email when a notification popped up—Andy had replied.

"Lunch would be great. Tides Tavern in thirty?"

I confirmed and finished up my emails before heading to the restaurant. Arriving before Andy, I requested outdoor seating, eager to soak up the pleasant weather.

As soon as I spotted Andy's smile, I knew we were in for some small talk before getting down to business. We ordered lunch—Soup of the Day for me and a Tides Crab sandwich for him.

With the server gone, Andy's grin turned extra charming. "You were out and about pretty early. Avoiding breakfast with Sarah and my dad, huh?"

"I met up with a friend," I replied, intentionally keeping it ambiguous. I had no beef with Andy, but he didn't need to know I'd left the house yesterday and crashed in Ethan's hotel room.

"Someone I know?" Andy inquired.

I gave a noncommittal shrug. "He's not from around here." Before Andy could pry more, I flipped the script and fired a question his way. "I wanted to ask you about Rachel. Did she ever confide in you about stuff she was up to?"

"Confide in me?" Andy eased back in his chair, a pensive look on his mug. "We chatted, sure, but I wouldn't call us confidants or anything."

"But if she came to you with a concern, you would've listened, right?"

"Definitely," he affirmed. "And in case you're wondering, she knew that, too."

"Did she ever mention Give Me Some Sugar?"

Confusion washed over Andy's face. "The Fall Out Boy song?"

His question yanked a laugh out of me, despite the gravity of my inquiries. "Nah, it's a website."

He leaned in, elbows on the table. "Okay, color me intrigued."

After a brief mental debate, I spilled the beans. "Rachel was involved with this dating site called Give Me Some Sugar that pairs naïve young women with loaded, creepy older guys. And despite what the site claims, I'm pretty damn sure it's a high-end escort service."

Andy let out a low whistle. "You think Rachel was moonlighting as an escort?"

“So, she never mentioned it to you?” I pushed. “No talk of going on any dates?”

He shook his head. “Never heard of it, and I had no clue Rachel was tangled up in anything like that.”

I sighed and massaged my forehead. A headache loomed, but I doubted it was from hunger.

“Hang on.” A lightbulb flicked on in Andy’s eyes. “You think this gig or whatever is linked to her death?”

Our food arrived, granting me a moment to ponder before responding. Just because Andy was a decent guy didn’t mean I could trust him with everything Ethan and I were doing.

“A friend of Rachel’s said Rachel had a date with someone from the site the night she vanished.”

“And you’re positive this date wasn’t with her boyfriend? Lee something? I mean, they lived together, right?”

“Lee Cohen,” I corrected. “And no, it wasn’t with him. They split a few weeks back, right when she began working for the site.”

“For real? I did not know.”

“I talked to Lee,” I admitted. “He said she told him she found something better.”

“And you reckon that’s this website?”

“I do.” I slurped up some soup, humming in delight as the flavors exploded on my taste buds. “This is fantastic.”

Andy gulped down a bite of his sandwich. “This is, too.” After a sip of water to wash it down, he added, “You know, I bet the cops are all over this website already. Detective Pickman seems on top of things, interviewing all of Rachel’s acquaintances. If they told you, they probably told him too.”

He wasn’t being snarky or dismissive, but somehow, it felt like my concerns and ideas were brushed aside in a few sentences. I tried not to take it

personally, but I couldn't shake the thought that he might've taken me seriously if I were a guy instead of a just-out-of-college gal.

Perhaps I should've brought Ethan along. He'd have had my back, no questions asked.

That thought did squat to quell my annoyance.

Damn it. What a waste of time.

I kept my cool and finished my meal with Andy instead of storming off to Ethan's hotel like I was itching to do. But by the time we wrapped up and parted ways, I realized that bolting to Ethan wasn't the smartest move.

Information trumped pleasure in this case, so I hightailed it to the library with Rachel's laptop in tow.

The place had been my sanctuary growing up. Serene. Sparse. Whenever Sarah got on my last nerve or I just needed a breather, I'd escape here. I made a beeline for my favorite nook in the teen section and grinned as I found it vacant. Plopping down in the chair, I whipped out Rachel's laptop and got to work.

I needed the name of the guy she'd planned to meet that night, but it seemed she had told no one.

After cracking Rachel's old password, I dug through her exchanges with the men on the website. A quick skim revealed that whoever she'd been meeting, it was their first rendezvous. The meetup details weren't in any of these messages, but I snagged a username.

All I needed now was to connect the dots to a real-life name.

"Okay, Madison, let's see if what you taught me pays off," I muttered, interlocking my fingers and stretching my arms overhead.

As a website designer, I had some computer chops, but my roommate was on another level. She'd taught me some nifty tricks about hacking. I'd never had a reason to put them to the test before, but now seemed like the perfect time.

An hour later, I gave up. Turns out, the site was way too advanced for an amateur like me. I needed to call in the big guns.

The phone rang once, then twice, and Madison picked up. “What’s the disaster?” she blurted, skipping the pleasantries. “You’d be texting if it wasn’t dire.”

“Listen, I need to hack into this escort service website, but it’s light-years beyond my skill set,” I confessed.

There was a brief pause before Madison ventured, “Let me guess, it’s got something to do with Rachel?”

I filled her in on everything that had gone down since we last spoke, doing my best to keep my voice low.

“Why the whispering? Got a secret admirer?” she teased.

“I’m at the library, duh,” I shot back, impatiently. “Are you gonna help or what?”

“When have I ever bailed on you?” Her voice softened, and I could tell my doubt stung. “I’m sorry,” I sighed. “These last few days have been a whirlwind.”

“I get it,” she reassured me. “That’s the only reason I’m not tearing you a new one right now.”

I held back another apology, knowing Madison liked sincerity over repetition.

“What’s the site called?”

“Give Me Some Sugar,” I mumbled, feeling my face flush despite being alone.

Madison snorted. “Who even comes up with this crap?”

“Beats me,” I said. “But I need the names of the men who use it and the brains behind the operation.”

“Yep, it’s an escort service, all right,” she confirmed. “And whoever designed this site knew their stuff.”

“So, it’s not just me sucking at hacking?” I asked hopefully.

“Well, that might be part of it,” she teased. “But seriously, they’ve got some tight security.”

“Small victories,” I muttered.

“I’ve got a late shift at Royals,” Madison continued. “I’ll bring my laptop, poke around a bit, and then really dig in when I get home. Maybe I’ll have something for you tomorrow.”

“Thank you.” I packed a ton of gratitude into those two words.

“How’re you holding up?” she asked.

“Sucks like a vacuum,” I sighed. “And I’m wiped.”

“How much longer do you think you’ll be there?”

“No clue. At least till the funeral, maybe more. Depends on how the investigation goes.”

“I’ll do my best to get you names, but don’t you dare go after some dangerous dude by yourself.”

I weighed my response. “I’ll do whatever it takes for justice, but I promise to be as safe as possible.”

Madison sighed. “I guess that’s the best I’ll get. Just call if you need anything, okay?”

“Didn’t I just do that?” I retorted.

“Touché.” She chuckled. “Stay safe.”

We hung up, and I shut the laptop. With the website out of my hands, I needed a new distraction.

Like figuring out what the hell to do about Ethan.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Ethan

I MADE it halfway to the front entrance before it hit me that the last thing I wanted was to go back to my hotel room alone. Aria was out there, digging up dirt on this Sugar website, and it didn't seem right to just sit on my ass waiting. I needed to contribute something, anything, to the investigation.

Truth be told, I figured I had two things to offer: protecting Aria when she inevitably did something reckless and having a police contact.

Police contact.

Kris.

I headed back to my car and drove straight to the station. I hoped they already had the intel on the website and Rachel's date, but with Marty hauling Lee in for questioning, I had this gnawing feeling that the detective would zero in on the ex, just like Aria had predicted.

Walking into the station, I spotted Kris by the desk of one of his officers. Their body language screamed tension, and I hung back, praying no one would question my presence, waiting for an opening.

As the officer walked away, I seized my chance and approached Kris.

"Ethan," he said, taken aback. "What are you doing here?"

I gestured for him to step aside with me. "I was wondering if you had any new info on the case you could share."

Kris scrunched up his brow. "You came all the way here to pester me for intel on an ongoing case?"

"Hey, don't make it sound bad." I rubbed the back of my neck. "I just had to escape my hotel room."

"Because you're all in on this case," Kris shot back. "Alright, fine. I'll spill what I can when I can."

"Thanks, man. So...?"

“Right now, Detective Pickman is grilling Lee Cohen. Marty hauled him in this morning from some sketchy drug den.”

“Ah,” I said, “about that...”

Kris’s eyes narrowed. “What the hell did you do?”

“Okay, so Aria and I might’ve done a bit of our own sleuthing, which involved dropping by a certain house this morning to chat with some of Rachel’s pals.”

“You were there?” Kris crossed his arms. “Shit, Ethan. Marty’s already convinced you’re up to no good.”

“I know,” I said, “but we’ve dug up stuff Marty might’ve missed.”

“Like what?”

“Like we’re pretty sure Lee Cohen’s got nothing to do with Rachel’s vanishing act or, you know, the murder.”

Kris shut his eyes for a sec, his shoulders drooping. He looked completely wiped out. “Did you guys confront Lee or something?”

“That’s beside the point,” I said.

“I bet Detective Pickman would beg to differ.”

I shrugged off his remark. “Lee was genuinely torn up about Rachel going missing. Plus, he said Rachel dumped him a couple of weeks ago.”

“That kinda sounds like a murder motive, not the opposite.”

“She claimed she’d found something way better,” I added.

“Again, more motive, not less.”

“I might’ve agreed if Aria hadn’t stumbled upon something on Rachel’s laptop.”

Kris’s head snapped up. “Her what?”

“Aria got her hands on Rachel’s laptop. Don’t ask me how, but she started snooping and found something.”

“Aria has Rachel’s laptop, and instead of telling her to hand it over to me, you let her ‘snoop around’?” Kris was clearly pissed, and honestly, I couldn’t blame him.

I barreled on. “Aria discovered Rachel was mixed up with this website called Give Me Some Sugar. Looks like some kind of escort service. And one of Rachel’s friends told us that, on the last day Rachel was seen alive, she had a date with someone from that site.”

Kris scowled. “That’s news to me.”

“Captain!”

We turned to see Marty stomping our way. The moment he spotted me, his eyebrows furrowed, and a scowl spread across his face.

“What the hell is he doing here?!” Marty practically bellowed.

“Detective!” Kris snapped, cutting him off.

Marty opened his mouth to argue, but Kris overrode him. “Did you learn something from Mr. Cohen?”

Smirking, Marty replied, “Bastard confessed.”

I shook my head, baffled. That didn’t make any sense.

“He said he killed Rachel Blackwell?” Kris pressed. “You got a full confession?”

Marty’s smirk faltered. “Well, not in so many words.”

“Then what, exactly, were his words?” Kris’s patience was clearly wearing thin.

“He said her death was his fault,” Marty admitted.

I couldn’t help but interject. “That proves nothing. I bet if you asked, half the people who knew Rachel would feel guilty for one reason or another.”

Marty narrowed his eyes at me. “Do you feel guilty, Ethan?”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m just saying that’s not the same thing as a confession.”

“You’re not a cop,” Marty snapped. “So, why don’t you stay in your lane?”

Kris stepped in. “You’re right, Ethan’s not a cop. But I am, and Ethan’s right.”

Marty glowered at me, jaw jutting out. “Can’t believe you’re letting some computer geek tell you how to run a murder investigation.”

Kris ignored the jab. “What have you found out about Give Me Some Sugar?”

Marty blinked, startled. “What was that?”

“The website, Give Me Some Sugar,” Kris repeated. “I’m assuming someone you spoke with told you about Rachel working for an escort service.”

Marty’s face turned beet red. “Where’d you hear that?” He shot me a glare. “From him? And how would he know that?”

“Just answer the question, Marty,” Kris commanded.

“This isn’t some big city,” Marty grumbled. “There’s no sex ring working in Gig Harbor. If guys want to pay for sex, they can go to Seattle.”

He shot me a look that was supposed to imply I was one of those guys. I didn’t give a fuck what he thought.

“We follow every viable lead,” Kris insisted. “Look into it.”

Just then, someone hollered for the captain, and Kris bolted off, leaving Marty and me alone with no buffer. It took a mere three seconds for Marty to get all up in my grill, his finger hovering an inch from my nose.

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re up to, Cole, but you better stay the hell away from my goddamn case.” He practically hissed at me. “Why don’t you just go back to Seattle and your shitty life there? No one wants you here.”

I felt a bizarre sense of déjà vu, even though he hadn’t used those exact words before. I had more than one memory of Marty tormenting me in school, telling me I was useless and a nobody.

But I wasn’t that kid anymore.

“Back the fuck off, Marty,” I warned, my tone low and steady.

He bristled. “What did you just say to me?”

I cocked an eyebrow. “Back. The. Fuck. Off.”

“I could arrest you right now,” Marty threatened. “Toss your ass in jail.”

“For what?” I shot back. “Seriously, Marty. What are you gonna arrest me for? Doing your fucking job better than you?” I continued in the same nonchalant tone, watching him sputter. “We both know you’re not gonna do jack shit to me, Marty. So just go on your way and do your damn job before Kris comes back and schools you again.”

For a moment, I wondered if we were going to throw down anyway, but Marty just clenched and unclenched his jaw before stomping off.

I took that as my cue to bounce. I’d done what I’d come here to do, and now all I could do was wait for Aria to fill me in on her meeting with Andy.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Aria

I WENT SHOPPING.

Avoiding the inevitable showdown of thoughts about Ethan and me, I figured shopping would be the perfect distraction. The irony is, I loathe shopping.

Arriving back at Ethan's hotel room with a couple of bags of clothes, I debated whether to share my plan with him. I knocked on the door, and he greeted me with a smile, reaching for my bags.

"I wasn't sure when you'd be back," he said. "I figured we'd need some grub, so I got stuff that would keep."

"Thanks," I replied. "I had some soup for lunch, but that was hours ago."

"Your lunch with Andy."

"Yeah, that didn't go as well as I'd hoped."

"Why don't you get comfy, and I'll set everything out," he suggested. "We can talk while we eat."

I dropped my bags next to the dresser and changed into cozy yoga pants and an oversized t-shirt that kept sliding off one shoulder. If I'd been wearing a bra, the strap would've shown. Undoing my braid, I let out a sigh of relief and rubbed my scalp. I loved my long hair, but sometimes it gave me a headache.

"Do you want wine or beer?" Ethan called out. "Or something non-alcoholic?"

"I'll have whatever you're having," I said, stepping out and eyeing the feast. I whistled. "Were you planning on feeding an army, or are you just extra hungry?"

"I wasn't sure what you'd want," he confessed, looking adorably sheepish.

"Well, this all looks amazing," I said, grinning. "Thank you."

We loaded our plates with fruit, cheese, and crackers, grabbed a beer, and settled on the couch. My stomach rumbled, making us both laugh. Then we ate in silence.

As I enjoyed the food, my thoughts fixated on how to convince Ethan of my idea.

I was still mulling it over when Ethan spoke up. “You said your dinner with Andy didn’t go as well as you’d hoped. What happened? Did he do something?”

I shook my head. “It was a waste of time. He didn’t know anything about the Sugar website, or any date Rachel had.”

“That sucks.”

“I’d really thought Rachel would tell him what she was doing,” I said. “I can’t believe she went on a date with some stranger she met online and didn’t have back-up.”

“You do realize that online dating is a real thing, right?”

“Funny.” I glared at him. “But I did at least get my friend working on getting into the website. She’ll get back to me as soon as she has something.”

“That’s good,” he said.

Setting his beer aside, he turned to me with a serious expression. My stomach twisted. This didn’t look promising.

“I was wondering if we could talk about what happened today.”

For a moment, I thought he’d figured out my idea and was ready to talk me out of it. Then I realized he meant the kiss.

Or, rather, kisses. Plural. And lots of grabbing.

Shit.

I’d come here bracing for an unpleasant conversation about doing something stupid and then ignoring the chemistry still crackling between us. We had enough on our plates, after all.

Ethan took my hands, brushing his lips across my knuckles. The tender gesture caught me off-guard, sending tingles of pleasure racing along my nerves.

“I like you, Aria,” he said. “And we’re good together. At least, I think we are.”

“We are,” I agreed.

“I don’t just mean physically,” he continued. “Yeah, we’re combustible in bed, but I actually like spending time with you.” He winced. “Sorry. I didn’t mean that like it sounded. Shit. I’m not any good at this.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “I’ve enjoyed spending time with you, too. In and out of bed.”

He made a frustrated sound and ran his hands through his hair. “I’m not this guy.”

“What guy?”

He stood and began to pace. “The guy who wants to go out on more than one date, even if it doesn’t end with sex. The guy who wants to see where things go with us because this morning at the house had me wanting to take you right against the wall, no matter who was watching.”

My stomach clenched. I didn’t consider myself an exhibitionist, but I had to admit his words gave me a little thrill.

“When we first met at the bar, I was just looking for a good night.” He laughed. “Hell, I’d literally just told my best friend and his wife that I wasn’t looking for anything serious.”

“But now you are?”

“All I know is when you said you were going to have lunch with Andy, I couldn’t let you go without giving you a kiss that you’d still be thinking about when you were with him.”

I stared at him. “You were jealous of Andy?”

“Hell, I’m jealous of any guy who might steal your attention away from me.”

I had no idea how to respond to that comment. I couldn't remember any man who'd ever been jealous of me. Growing up, it'd been all about Rachel, despite being older. At least half of the guys in my class had flirted with me in hopes I'd introduce them to her. Then I moved to Seattle, became friends with Madison and Lily, and I just became a gateway to my two friends.

"Aria." Ethan reached down, tucking some hair behind my ear before tipping my chin up, so I was looking right at him. "I've never wanted someone the way I want you."

That was when I saw the vulnerability in his eyes and realized he meant every single word he'd just said.

And now it was my turn.

"I'm not any good at this either," I admitted. "I've been all about work and occasionally scratching an itch, but with you, it's been different. I enjoy being with you and I'd be lying if I said I hadn't wondered if this could be something more."

He pulled me to my feet. "I'm so glad to hear that."

I put my hand on his chest before he could kiss me. "But if this is going to be more than a physical attraction, there's something I need to know."

"Anything." He wrapped his arms around my waist.

"Are you still interested in Sarah? Attracted to her?"

He started shaking his head before I even asked the second question. "I came back here thinking that I needed closure for something that should've been closed years ago. Seeing Sarah again made me realize she wasn't the person I thought she was, and that what I felt for her wasn't real."

I wasn't sure if I was supposed to say I was sorry about that or not.

"This." He squeezed me. "This is already more real than anything else I've had."

"Me, too," I admitted.

He bent his head and brushed his lips across mine.

“How about we start slow?” He grinned. “Well, slow-ish, anyway. I want you to stay here with me for the rest of the time we’re in Gig Harbor. And not me sleeping on the couch and you in the bed. Us, here, together.”

My head said not to be impulsive, to tell him I needed time to think it over. It said that it wasn’t a good idea to add one more thing to my already heavy load here.

But every other part of me said it was a great idea.

What the hell.

I really liked him and thought we could have something special.

“Kiss me,” I said. “And then take me to bed.”

Chapter Thirty

Ethan

WHEN ARIA SAID, “Kiss me and then take me to bed,” I couldn’t imagine a more perfect sentence.

“With pleasure,” I muttered, swooping down to steal her lips with mine.

The taste of strawberries from her earlier snack lingered on her lips, and I suddenly found myself hungry for more. A low growl escaped my throat as I scooped her into my arms and headed for the bedroom, never breaking the kiss.

I hardly noticed smacking my knee against the couch as I managed to stay upright and maintain the passionate dance of our tongues. However, when I bumped into the bedroom door, a curse escaped. Aria’s soft giggle told me she didn’t mind my clumsiness, and I grinned, relieved that the mood was still alive and well.

Finally reaching the bed, I playfully tossed her down onto the soft mattress. We locked eyes, and I knew we were ready for the next step in this wild, unpredictable journey.

As I stripped, she greedily watched me, gaze devouring every inch of skin I revealed. When I kicked away the last of my clothes, she crawled across the bed, eyes focused on one thing. Her tongue darted out to wet her kiss-swollen lips, and I groaned, reaching for my cock only to have my hand smacked away.

“Don’t spoil my fun.”

I tried pointing out that this would technically be my fun, but her expression as she wrapped her fingers around my swollen shaft told me she wanted this as much as I did. Then her lips closed around the crown, and I lost the ability to speak.

She hummed happily as the tip of her tongue explored the sensitive bit of flesh. When she ran her fingernails lightly up the bottom of my cock, my entire body jerked, pushing another inch into her mouth. She put a hand on

my hip to keep me steady and pulled back, letting my dick slide from her mouth. Settling into a more comfortable position, she reached for me again, this time using her fist to spread moisture up and down the full length.

And then she got to work, sucking me off like it was her only mission in life.

A slow, wet sensation as she took me as deep as she could. My cock slid over her tongue until the tip was nearly at the back of her throat. The hot suction when she lifted her head made it feel like she could suck my brains out of my dick. Her hand covered the part of me she couldn't quite take, squeezing and twisting until I thought my head would explode.

Just when I thought I couldn't take another second without losing control, she was gone, leaving my cock bobbing in the cool air. I opened my eyes and saw her pulling her shirt over her head. Her pants were already gone, taking her down to a pair of matching pale pink bra and panties.

"Fuck, you're gorgeous," I breathed.

She flushed, the color spreading across her fair skin. "You're not so bad yourself."

"Turn over."

She raised an eyebrow, but I just made a circling motion with my finger. Once she rolled onto her stomach, I leaned over and pulled her up on her hands and knees. Part of me wanted to dive right in, bury my aching cock inside her with nothing between us, but I hadn't gone bare with anyone since...

I shook my head to get Sarah's face out of my mind and pulled a condom out of the bedside table.

Aria looked over her shoulder at me and wiggled her ass. "Hurry up. I need you inside me."

I finished rolling on the condom and then ran my hand over her hip to palm her ass. "You ready for me?"

She pushed back into my hand and nodded her head. "So ready."

I ran my finger over the crotch of her panties and found the fabric damp.

“Damn. Did going down on me get you that wet?”

“Told you it was my fun,” she said, as I pulled her panties down.

I watched her slide a hand between her legs, her fingers peeking from between her folds as she stroked herself. My cock throbbed at the sight, and it was all I could do not to take myself in hand.

“Are you going to make me do all the work?” she teased.

I reached under her and grabbed her wrist. “This pussy is mine.” Using her arm, I pulled her upright and put my lips to her ear. “Mine to play with. Mine to lick and suck until you scream. Mine to fuck.”

I slid a hand up her torso, between her breasts, until I put my fingers around her throat. I didn’t apply any pressure, but she took a shuddering breath, her pulse rapid against my palm.

I smiled. “I thought you might like that.”

My cock pressed against her pert ass, and I flexed my fingers, making her shiver with pleasure.

“I’m going to take you now,” I said. “Fill you up and show you how good the two of us can be together.”

“Yes, please.”

I released her, letting her fall forward onto her hands as I grasped a hip with one hand and used the other to position myself at her entrance. With one smooth stroke, I pushed inside. Her body stretched around me, molding to me like we were made for each other.

“Yesss...” she hissed, her head dropping. “You feel so damn good.”

I couldn’t even speak to tell her what it was like to be inside her again. How perfect she felt; that tight passage clutching my cock as if she didn’t want to let me go. All I could do was feel.

I closed my eyes, rocking slightly as I fought for control. She’d taken me to the edge with her mouth and then that little show with her fingers. It’d be easy to lose myself and take the pleasure hovering just out of reach, but I

needed her to come first. While I didn't quite have the words to express the way she made me feel, I could at least show her that her pleasure would always come first.

Holding that thought in my mind, I withdrew until just the tip of me remained, then drove forward until I completely filled her up. She gasped, her fingers digging into the bedspread. When I repeated the motion, she demanded more, begged for it, and I gave it to her. Hard, deep thrusts at a steady pace that gradually picked up speed until I pounded into her.

As her muscles quivered around me, I knew we were both close. I just needed her to be first.

Reaching underneath her, I slid a finger between her folds, easily finding that little nub of nerves. I made tight circles, adjusting pressure and friction until Aria started whimpering.

"Come for me," I ordered. "I need you to come, Aria, please. Finish so I can come too."

"Almost there." Her words were breathless.

Curling over her back, I put my free hand around the front of her throat. "Is this what you want? What you need?"

"Yes." The word spilled out of her. "Yes, yes, yes, please yes."

My thrusts were shorter, but the way her cunt tightened around my dick as I held her more tightly gave me what I needed to close in on my climax. And it was clearly what she needed too, because between one stroke and the next, she came.

Experiencing Aria's orgasm was like nothing else. The way her breathing increased until she made a long, keening sound. The sheen of sweat on her flawless skin. Her muscles tightening beneath me, around me.

My hand tangled in her hair as I pressed my forehead to her shoulder and tipped over the edge. I called out her name, my vision whiting out until I knew nothing except the bliss burning through me. When I finally collapsed, rolling to the side to avoid crushing her, I couldn't help smiling as I told myself that this was just the beginning.

Chapter Thirty-One

Aria

WAKING up beside Ethan hadn't been on my to-do list, but hey, no complaints. I cracked my eyes open, and there he was, all muscular limbs and the innocent, boyish face he got when he slept. Quite the view, really.

Under different circumstances, I might've been tempted for some morning fun, but not now. Unraveling myself from the blankets, careful not to disturb his snooze fest. All that swirled in my head was how I'd spectacularly fucked up. Yeah, our heart-to-heart was crucial, and I was psyched that he felt the same way about our blazing chemistry, but we were knee-deep in a murder investigation and banging Ethan wasn't exactly solving the case.

As the shower pummeled me, I mulled over our next move, praying that Madison would hit me up soon with some good news.

When I emerged from the bathroom, Ethan was stirring. I flashed him a grin and informed him the bathroom was all his. While he scrubbed up, I ordered some breakfast for us.

Just then, my phone buzzed. My heart did a little happy dance in my chest when I saw the name.

"Hey, Madi. What's the scoop?"

"Bad news," Madison said, cutting to the chase. "I couldn't dig up any real names on the website."

The disappointment sucker-punched me. "What? Why?"

"They've got this whole numbered ID gig connected to the screen names," she explained. "Whoever's running the site probably has a client logbook, like how gambling organizations keep coded books to track who owes what."

"We need that book," I said, a plan taking shape in my head.

"Aria," she warned, sensing where my thoughts were heading.

"No, Madi," I said firmly. "You did your best, and it's awesome. But it's not

gonna give me the name of the dude who met Rachel that night. I think I need to make a Sugar account and go undercover.”

“Have you lost your damn mind?” Madison blurted out.

“What?”

“Have. You. Lost. Your. Damn. Mind?” Madison repeated the question.

I sighed. I should’ve seen this coming.

“What the hell are you thinking, even considering making a Sugar account?” Madison didn’t raise her voice, but she didn’t need to. Her disapproval was crystal clear.

“I’m not an idiot,” I shot back.

“Normally, I’d agree with you,” Madison said, “but you’re talking about signing up to work for an escort service that might be involved in your foster sister’s death.”

I winced. When she framed it like that, it did sound reckless. Idiotic, even.

Still... “I need to get to the truth.”

“I know.” Madison’s voice softened. “I get why you feel like being hands on for getting justice for Rachel.”

She didn’t elaborate, but she didn’t have to. Out of everyone in my life, she was the only one I’d confided in about how guilty I felt about my mom’s death.

“What happened to your mom wasn’t your fault,” Madison reminded me. “And neither is what happened to Rachel.”

“I could’ve done more,” I argued. “Not with my mom. I know that. I was just a kid. But when things got bad with Rachel, I was older.”

“Stop, Aria,” Madison said sharply. “You were a teenager who’d lost both of your parents in a horrible way. Rachel might’ve had parental issues, but she could’ve worked as hard as you did to build a good life.”

A part of me had considered the things Madison said, but I’d always felt

guilty of betrayal. Honestly, I still did.

I changed the subject.

“I’m going undercover,” I said firmly. “If I’m not acting as an agent of the police, whatever I find, they can use in court.”

I wasn’t entirely sure that was how things worked, but it backed up what I wanted to do.

“It’s not a good idea, Aria,” Madison said again.

“I’m going through with this,” I said firmly. “I’ll be as careful as I can, but I’m doing it.”

Madison was silent for a moment, and then said, “Okay, but promise me you’ll think everything through. Don’t do anything impulsive. And please let someone know when and where you’re going out.”

“I promise.”

“I’m going to keep looking through the website,” she said. “Maybe I can find something to help me figure out some more information.”

“I hope you do,” I said. “And thank you.”

We said our goodbyes, and I’d barely set the phone aside when Ethan sauntered out of the bathroom.

He looked at me with a sheepish grin, and I was tempted to pounce on him right then and there. But before I could, our breakfast arrived.

The food was amazing, but my stomach was doing flips over how to break the news to him about my plan. By the time I had picked at most of my meal, I couldn’t hold it in any longer.

“So, remember how I said my roommate was snooping around the Sugar website?” I began.

“Did she find anything?” Ethan asked.

I nodded. “She did, but no names, unfortunately.”

“Damn. Back to square one, I guess, or maybe hand it over to the cops,” Ethan sighed. “Kris might have some luck, though. He told Marty to investigate.”

“But they’d need a warrant,” I pointed out. “And if anyone there’s involved, they’re probably busy covering their asses. Might be too late already.”

Ethan reached across the table, taking my hand and giving it a comforting squeeze. “We’ll crack this case. I swear.”

“I know we will,” I said. Taking a deep breath, I braced myself and let the words spill. “Because I’m going undercover.”

Ethan’s face went stiff. “What?”

“Give Me Some Sugar,” I clarified. “I’m going undercover to find out who’s using the site. Who’s behind it all.”

His grip on my hand tightened briefly, almost painfully, before letting go. He didn’t lean back, though; his entire body was wound up.

“Please tell me you’re joking,” he said finally.

His voice was flat, making my stomach churn. But I forged ahead.

“Madison hasn’t given up, and it’d be awesome if she could score all the clients’ names, but I don’t know if the cops could even use that intel,” I argued. “But if I go undercover and report what’s happening, that’ll give them legal grounds for a warrant.”

“If we have the names, we can snoop into the guys together,” he countered. “Safely.”

I shook my head. “You don’t know how long that’ll take. So far, she’s come up empty. These guys are loaded, they’ll have top-notch lawyers. The kind that can stall warrants and discredit anything Madison digs up.”

“That also means they’re powerful enough to make people disappear,” Ethan said grimly.

“It’ll be quick. If I can get in, I’ll find proof. I owe it to Rachel to at least try.”

Ethan shook his head. "It'll never work. You'll get busted."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence." I pushed back from the table. "Glad I've got your support."

"Don't be like that, Aria." Ethan stood up. "I'm just trying to look out for you. I care about you and don't want you to put yourself in danger like that. Let the pros handle it."

"Pros, like the detective who arrested Lee. You and I both know he had nothing to do with Rachel's disappearance, right?"

Ethan raked a hand through his hair. "You're a web designer who's barely old enough to drink. How do you think you'll take down something like this? It's idiotic. Seriously idiotic, and you could get yourself killed."

I stared at him. "That's really what you think?"

"Yes, Aria," he said, every word oozing with frustration. "You could get killed."

I shook my head and tried to ignore the tears threatening to spill. "Not that part. The part where I'm young and stupid and can't do anything."

"That's not fair. I never said that."

"Yeah," I swallowed hard, "you did."

I stormed into the bedroom and grabbed my bag. Since I hadn't unpacked after getting my stuff back from Sarah's, it took me only a minute to collect my things and Rachel's laptop.

"What are you doing?" Ethan asked, concern spreading across his face.

Slinging my purse over my shoulder, I pushed past him. "I'm leaving."

"Leaving?"

"Yes, Ethan. I'm leaving. You're treating me like a child. And one you don't respect at that." I shot him a glare over my shoulder by the door. "This was a mistake."

I managed not to cry as I hopped into my car and zoomed out of the parking

lot like I was starring in my own personal Fast & Furious. I didn't look back to see if Ethan had followed me, and honestly, who could blame me? Hooking up with him was a brilliant idea, said no one ever. I was so done with romance.

I'd go back to Sarah's place and set up my profile for the website. While waiting for someone to contact me, I'd do some work to keep David happy. When this was all over and I went back to Seattle, I wanted to have a job waiting for me.

Justice. Job. Friends.

That would be my fabulous life from here on out.

And as for Ethan Cole? Well, he could go fuck himself. With a cherry on top.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Ethan

WHAT THE ACTUAL fuck was she thinking? I paced the room like a caged lion. Going undercover at an escort agency was a risky business for a seasoned pro. A twenty-one-year-old web designer with zero training? That was a one-way ticket to Disaster Town, population: Aria.

Sure, Aria's heart was in the right place. I wanted justice for Rachel, too. But we had the cops and her hacker pal on the case. Why did she feel the need to throw herself into the lion's den?

Her reasons were flimsier than a wet paper bag, and I wondered if I'd been wrong about her all along. Maybe the age gap was a bigger deal than I thought.

I glanced around, itching to hit or toss something—anything to burn off this electric current of frustration zipping through my veins. Being in someone else's home, though, my hands were tied. All I could do was pace and stew in my thoughts about all the ways Aria could find herself in deep shit.

“Fuck!”

I should've chased after her.

I shouldn't have let her leave.

It's not that I doubted Aria's capabilities or smarts. It's just that the kind of men running sex rings like this were next-level dangerous. Throw powerful clients into the mix, and you've got a recipe for one ruthless shitstorm. If Aria got mixed up in it, there'd be no telling what could happen to her.

My gut twisted at the thought of her being in danger. My anger came from a place of caring—I just wanted to shield her from harm. But finding justice for Rachel wasn't worth putting Aria's life on the line.

Not that she'd see it that way. Aria was ready to risk it all for the truth, even if it meant she could end up hurt—or worse.

“I've gotta fix this shitstorm,” I muttered. “Make her see reason and let the

cops handle it.”

Easier said than done, though. She’d probably gone back to the Blackwell house, and there was no way I could sneak in there again without getting caught.

“How did I screw this up so royally?” I sighed. “I just wanted to keep her safe. What’s so wrong with that?”

Before I could strategize about Aria, my phone rang, and Jake’s name lit up the screen. My business partner’s timing could’ve been better.

“Hey, Jake,” I said, attempting to keep my voice steady. “What’s the situation?”

“We’ve got an issue with one of our web designers,” Jake replied. “It’s affecting our business. We need to talk this through.”

He laid out the problem, and luckily, we found a solution in no time. My mind was still fixated on the Aria mess, but Jake wasn’t done with me yet.

“Something’s eating at you. Spill it.”

I sighed. He could read me like a damn book, but maybe that’s what I needed. “Remember when you told me to chase after what I wanted?”

I filled Jake in on everything that went down since our last chat, right up to his call. Wrapping it up, I hit him with the big question.

“What the hell do I do?”

“This girl has got you whipped, huh?”

“She was supposed to be a one-nighter,” I confessed. “But when I’m with her, it’s like she’s got this magnetic pull. And when she’s gone, she’s all I think about.”

“You’re in deep, man.”

“You’re telling me.”

“Grovel.”

I scowled. “Come again?”

“You realize you need to apologize, right?”

“Right,” I agreed. “We should’ve hashed it out like adults instead of bickering like kids.”

“Ethan.”

I could practically see him shaking his head. “What?”

“You need to apologize. Full stop. And then grovel.” He paused, then added, “Probably with flowers or chocolate. Maybe both.”

“Even if she was wrong not to talk to me before deciding on pulling a dangerous stunt?”

“Listen up,” Jake said. “She’s an adult, Ethan. She’s been on her own since eighteen, making her own choices, running her own life. You’ve known her for what, a week? Hooked up a couple times? And now you think you get a say in her decisions?”

Shit. I was a grade-A moron.

“Damn right you are.”

I chuckled, realizing I’d spoken out loud. “You’re spot on.”

“As I keep telling you, I’m right most of the time.”

“And humble as hell.”

“Remarkably humble.”

I laughed again. Though I wouldn’t be at ease until I patched things up with Aria, the edge of my anger had dulled, and my head was clearer.

“Thanks for hearing me out,” I said. “And for the advice and the kick in the balls.”

“You can count on me,” Jake said. “Holler if you need anything.”

“Will do,” I promised, ending the call.

I needed to find Aria and figure out the best place to meet, but taking a chill pill first wouldn't hurt either of us.

Picking up the newspaper that came with the meal, I smirked, realizing Aria must've requested it. My smirk vanished as soon as I caught sight of the headline.

Memorial tonight for murdered Gig Harbor resident.

The timing was like a double-edged sword. Aria would be there for sure, giving me a chance to grovel. But emotions would run high, and I didn't want to hijack the night with our soap opera.

Still, I couldn't pass up the opportunity. I'd attend the service, pay my respects, and try to patch things up with Aria. I just hoped she'd give me a shot at making it right.

And if it took some humility on my part, so be it. I was ready to swallow my pride for the woman who'd unexpectedly snatched my heart.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Aria

I HATED BEING BACK at Sarah's, and it only fueled my anger at Ethan. But hey, I didn't let it get to me. Instead, I channeled all that energy into finishing up my profile. Once I hit save, though, all I could do was wait... and brood.

Ethan had been so far out of line he couldn't even see the line anymore. I got he didn't like my plan, but just because he wanted us to "see where things went" didn't mean he had a say in what I did.

He'd acted like the age difference didn't matter, but when push came to shove, he treated me like a kid. Then again, maybe that's how he treated all women. We barely knew each other, after all. Better to find out now that he'd never consider us equal partners than to discover it a year from now when he had me wrapped around his finger.

The door to my shitty little room flew open, and Sarah barged in like a frigging tornado. I jumped, almost dropping my laptop, and shot her the deadliest glare I could muster. "What the hell, Sarah? Ever heard of knocking?"

She rolled her eyes so hard, I thought they might pop out of her skull. "Oh, give me a break. We're practically family. Besides, I have something crucial to discuss." She flopped down on my bed as if she owned the place, which technically she did. Just fantastic. Mental note: lock the door next time.

I slammed my laptop shut, forcing a tight smile. "Alright, what's up?"

"I need to run the plans for the memorial service by you," she said, all casual-like.

I frowned, my stomach churning. "What memorial service?"

"The one I planned for tonight," Sarah said, batting her eyelashes like she was some kind of saint. "Did I forget to mention it?"

"You sure did," I growled, turning to face her. "Why are you having it tonight?"

Sarah gave me a look that screamed I should've been able to read her mind or some crap. "Because if we have the memorial this evening, then the funeral can be Friday morning, leaving all of Saturday free for me to get ready for my reunion that night."

As I stared at her, I wished I could say I was gob smacked by her behavior, but I'd known for ages how self-centered Sarah could be. I wasn't surprised that her daughter's death hadn't changed a damn thing. Not surprised, but still disappointed. This was why I had to stay in Gig Harbor until Rachel's killer was brought to justice, why I had to do whatever I could to find the truth. If I didn't do it, no one else would. No one else gave enough of a shit about Rachel to make sure justice was served.

I was all Rachel had, and I wouldn't let her down. Not again.

"Fine," I sighed, feeling like I'd swallowed a load of bricks. "I'll come to the memorial service."

Sarah beamed at me, as if I'd just agreed to attend the Oscars or some shit. "Great! It starts at 7:00 p.m. sharp. Oh, and it's a potluck, so I hope you're hungry."

"A potluck?" I sputtered, my jaw dropping. "You're turning your daughter's memorial service into a goddamn potluck?"

She rolled her eyes again, clearly getting her cardio in for the day. "Aria, it's just a way for people to come together and share memories of Rachel. Besides, I'm swamped with the funeral arrangements, and there's no time to cater the whole thing."

I bit back a sarcastic retort, reminding myself that the important thing was to be there for Rachel, not to argue with Sarah over her lack of common curtesy. Instead, I nodded curtly and muttered, "I'll be there."

With that, Sarah flounced out of the room like she'd just solved world hunger, leaving me to stew in my anger and frustration.

As I sat on the edge of my bed, I thought about the days ahead—the memorial service, the funeral, and the continued search for Rachel's killer. I knew I had to keep my cool and focus on what really mattered.

“Damn it, Ethan,” I muttered under my breath, wishing that for once, he could be the supportive partner I needed. But I knew better than to count on him for anything.

And so, with a heavy heart and a fiery determination, I set out to face the challenges ahead, knowing that I was the only one who could truly honor Rachel’s memory and bring her justice. I’d get to the bottom of this even if it killed me. Rachel deserved at least that much.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Ethan

MEMORIAL SERVICES and I mix like oil and water, you know? The last one I had the joy of attending was for my grandma when I was twenty, and I spent the whole day doing my best to keep my dad sober enough to be sociable. That gathering was a small affair at a funeral home with, maybe, fifty people tops. And it was just a warm-up for the real event.

But this shindig Sarah put together for tonight? Oh, it's an entirely different story. According to the town's rumor mill, this one's open to everyone and their grandma. The actual funeral tomorrow, though, is reserved for family and friends, since apparently, Sarah wanted a more "intimate" send-off for her dear daughter.

Yeah, right. I had my suspicions about that.

A part of me wanted to swerve right past Sarah and head straight for Aria, but as ticked off as I was at Sarah, she was still a grieving mother. So, I grabbed two small bouquets of flowers before heading to the auditorium. White lilies for Sarah, and a mix of white anemones and pale pink roses for Aria. The florist claimed the latter were perfect for apologies, which was exactly what I needed.

I stepped into the auditorium and made a beeline for the... well, whatever you'd call a receiving line in this kind of scenario. People murmured softly around me, some faces familiar, but I wasn't in the mood for chitchat. Still, I couldn't help overhearing snippets of conversations, and man, it was tough keeping my trap shut.

"...can't do an open casket..."

"...arrested Lee Cohen. Knew he was a bad seed."

"...what the hell is Kris doing over there?"

By the time I got to Sarah, my jaw was aching from clenching it so damn tight, and I remembered why I couldn't stand this freaking town. I don't know if it's just a small-town thing, but I chose Seattle over some Gig Harbor

wannabe to avoid the constant nosiness and gossip. The relentless judgments and whining when things didn't go as planned.

And then, when they finally reached Sarah, it was all sad smiles, condolences, and crocodile tears. Pretending to grieve for a girl they never really liked or even knew.

Sarah turned from an old-timer who might've been our former bio teacher and flashed me a grin. "Ethan, darling. Wasn't sure you'd show up."

She moved in for a hug, but I backed off and held up the lilies. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"You've got a lot of nerve." Richard stepped forward, an arm around Sarah's waist. "Coming here after you broke into our house."

"Richard, please," Sarah said, flashing a coy smile. "He's just come to pay his respects."

"Fine," he grumbled. "You've paid them. Now move on."

I ignored him. I had come to pay my respects, but not to Sarah, and I'd just spotted who I'd really come here for. Without even excusing myself, I walked away, heading straight for where Aria stood by the stage, trying her best to blend in with the potted plants.

"You're gonna need a better hiding spot if you don't want anyone to see you," I said.

Aria turned, clearly annoyed. "Didn't expect to see you here."

I held out the flowers I'd brought for her. "I'm sorry. I overreacted and acted like an idiot."

Skepticism crossed her face, but she took the flowers.

"I didn't come here for a chat," I clarified. "I just wanted to apologize and let you know I'm here for you while you remember and grieve your sister."

Surprise flickered across her face, and her expression softened. "Thank you."

I fought the urge to touch her. "I'm gonna go sign the book and look around. If you want some company, come find me."

“I will,” she promised. “And thank you. Not just for the flowers, but for being here. I know it can’t be easy for you.”

She was right, but I wasn’t here to deal with my crap. She was the one who’d lost someone. I’d figure out my part of things later.

“Whatever you need,” I said, giving her a soft smile.

The memorial book was next to a pair of tables covered with pictures and memorabilia, and after signing my name, I took it all in.

Sarah, pregnant and grinning, hand on her belly. Her in a hospital bed holding a squished red-faced bald bundle, a man standing next to them both.

Derek.

I scowled, then thought better of it and smoothed my expression. The last thing I needed was people making assumptions and starting rumors about why I was angry when I looked at Rachel’s pictures. They had no idea that my sudden fury was because Derek was a no-show. The man who thought he was her dad didn’t even bother with his own daughter’s memorial, and I had a feeling he wouldn’t be here for the funeral either.

Son of a bitch.

I was here. Hell, I didn’t even know if she was my daughter, but I was here. Sure, I’d told Aria I’d come for her, and that was true, but part of me was here for Rachel too. Just like I would’ve been if Sarah had told me I was her father all those years ago.

Swallowing down my emotions, I moved on to the other pictures, trying to focus on all the parts of her life I hadn’t known.

As my attention went from one picture to another, a pattern emerged. Almost every picture had Sarah in it. Hardly any of Rachel by herself and only a couple with a dark-haired girl I recognized as Aria. Even most of those had Sarah in them.

Then there was Aria’s high school graduation, the most recent picture of her. She didn’t look much different now. Rachel looked happy too, though I could see the sort of shadows in her eyes that said she was struggling. Took me a

moment to realize it was the photo from the news, cropped to only show Rachel.

“Hard to believe that was only three years ago.” A young man about ten years younger than me gestured toward the graduation picture. “Crazy, how much can change in such a short time.”

“Crazy. Yeah.”

He turned and held out his hand. “I’m Andy Connors.”

It took a second for the name to click, and by then I was already shaking his hand.

“Richard’s son.”

Andy looked mildly surprised. “I am. How do you know Aria?” When I gave him a surprised look, he said, “I saw you give her those flowers.”

I stuck my hands in my pockets, keeping my expression even. “I met her last week when I arrived in town for my high school reunion.”

“That means you know Sarah.”

“I do,” I admitted.

“And that’s how you know who my dad is.” Andy folded his arms, giving me a close look. “Wait a minute. Are you the guy who broke into Sarah’s house with Aria?”

Shit. I should’ve known that was going to bite me in the ass.

“Aria needed to get a few things, and Sarah wasn’t letting her back in the house.” I paused and shook my head. “You know what? That’s between Aria and Sarah. I’m not gonna stand around here gossiping like one of those small-town busybodies.”

“Awfully protective of her for someone who just met her.” Andy’s suspicion and disapproval were clear in his voice.

I wasn’t sure which one annoyed me more, but either way, I was done being on the receiving end of things.

“Haven’t you just met her?” I asked. “I don’t think you’re in any position to say one word about my actions.”

Andy opened his mouth to argue, but I cut him off.

“I’m more interested in knowing about Rachel.” I stepped closer to him. “You must’ve spent a decent amount of time with her.”

Andy stepped back and glared up at me. “None of your damn business.”

That seemed like an intense response to a harmless statement. “When was the last time you saw Rachel?”

Just because most of the men on that website were older, that didn’t mean there couldn’t be younger rich men who used it.

“Did you see her the night she disappeared?”

“Fuck you,” Andy spat before storming away.

Well, that went swimmingly.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Aria

BRINGING the flowers to my face, I breathed in, as the sweet scent of roses made me smile like a maniac. Pink roses, my absolute favorite, but how the hell did Ethan figure that one out? Maybe he didn't. Perhaps it was one of those sappy romantic coincidences. Kismet or destiny? Pfft, whatever. All I knew was I was stoked he'd given them to me.

I was still majorly pissed at him. But his apology and the flowers were a decent first step to patching things up. Him not demanding we hash it out right then and there. Bonus points for him.

My phone dinged, and I nearly leaped out of my damn skin. I forgot to silence the stupid thing. As I dug it out of my purse, my sole focus was on not ruining the memorial. Once I'd turned the ringer off, I checked the screen and saw the notification.

"Holy shit!" I slapped a hand over my mouth, eyes darting around to see if anyone caught my victory screech. Thankfully, no one was gawking at me.

Not even, I realized, Ethan. He was yapping away with Andy, which was probably a terrible idea, but I couldn't do anything about it now. Not when my application had just been approved by Give Me Some Sugar...and I had a date in two freaking hours.

Crap.

Sarah had a whole circus act planned for tonight. Songs, speeches, the whole "grieving mom" shtick. I dodged that bullet by promising to read a poem at the funeral tomorrow. So, if I bailed right now, she'd likely not even notice. But a part of me didn't want to leave. This memorial might be about Sarah's attention-seeking, but deep down, it was really for Rachel. I had to pay my respects.

But I owed her justice even more.

Which meant I had to get the hell out of here.

I glanced toward Ethan. I'd let Sarah know I was bouncing so she wouldn't

go looking, but there was no way in hell I was telling Ethan. Sure, he'd apologized for his previous asshattery, but I knew he wouldn't approve of my next move.

"Sorry, Ethan," I whispered. "I care about you, like, a lot. But I've gotta do this. No matter what it costs me."

NAUTILUS NIRVANA, some pretentious-as-fuck restaurant in Gig Harbor, was serving up dishes for a cool hundred and fifty clams each. So, obviously, I'd never set foot in there before. Until now, that is. Standing outside, I wondered if I'd maybe bitten off more than I could chew. Not just the whole danger aspect, but also the fact that flirting wasn't exactly my forte. Rachel would go full throttle with guys while I hung back. Sure, things got better once I moved to Seattle, but flirting with someone who didn't get my motor running? Yeah, never my cup of tea. But fuck comfort, I just needed to get it done.

Squaring my shoulders, I smoothed my dress and strutted to the front door like I owned the goddamn place.

I flashed a smile at the hostess. "Got someone waiting for me."

"Your name?" She scanned me from head to toe like I was some freaking exhibit.

I'm pretty sure she was supposed to ask for the name of my party, but whatever. I gave her the fake name I'd used for my account. "Andrea Wright."

"There you are. Follow me."

We wove between tables to a secluded back booth where Matthew, a guy in his late fifties or early sixties, was waiting. His suit probably cost a fortune, and I bet his haircut set him back more than my rent. Not ugly, but not exactly a looker either. The kind of guy you'd forget in a hot second.

Except I'd seen him around Gig Harbor. One of those loaded jerks with a vacation home there.

“Hello there,” he said, grinning like an idiot as he stood. He pulled out my chair. “You look lovely, Andrea.”

“Thanks,” I said, taking a seat and letting him push in my chair.

“I’m Matthew.”

I wondered if that was his real name, but I wasn’t about to ask. Subtlety was the key to not getting busted.

“Nice to meet you.” I smiled, hoping I nailed the sexy-mysterious vibe.

“Did I mention lilac is my favorite color?” he asked, his gaze gliding over me in a way that made me want to hit the showers.

Then he took my hand, and my urge for a scrub-down intensified. I let him hold it, though, reminding myself he was my ticket into the Sugar group. If I could get him spilling the beans about the other men, maybe I could leave with the list of names I needed.

“Glad you like my outfit,” I said. “I wasn’t sure what was appropriate for this place. First time here.”

“Well, you’re in for a treat,” he said, smirking like a condescending prick. “Let’s check out the menu.”

He moved his chair around so we could both look at the menu together, like I needed help with the big words.

“Do a lot of men bring their dates here?” I asked, fighting the urge to pull away from him.

“Excuse me?” He raised an eyebrow.

I flashed what I hoped was an innocent smile. “Other men from the website. Do they bring their dates here, too?”

He brushed it off. “What do you think about us sharing something? I enjoy sharing a meal with a pretty young thing.”

I hid my irritation at being called a ‘thing’ and giggled instead. “I don’t eat much, so that works for me.”

“Food can be very sensual,” Matthew informed me, his fingers trailing along my forearm.

“Oh, really? I mean, I just eat it.” I laughed again, hoping it sounded flirty. “Is that the sort of philosophy your friends share?”

Matthew smirked. “I don’t really discuss sensuality with my friends.”

“What do you talk about with them?” I asked. “Do you guys chat about your dates? Maybe compare what we ladies like?”

“Are you asking if I kiss and tell?” He leaned close, putting his mouth near my ear. “Don’t you worry, sweetheart. You have nothing to be ashamed of.”

The rest of the meal was a fucking disaster. I tried to get him to spill about the other men on the site, and he kept deflecting into something sexual. I couldn’t tell if he was clueless or just playing dumb, but either way, by the time our server asked if we wanted dessert, the urge to scream was almost unbearable.

“So, what do you think?”

I blinked and looked over at Matthew. Shit. He’d asked a question, and like a dumbass, I had no clue what he was talking about. I flashed him my most charming smile, hoping he was the type of guy who lied when he said he wanted an intelligent woman for conversation.

“I’m sorry. I spaced out for a sec there. What was the question?”

“Don’t worry about it, sweetheart. We all have those moments.” He gave me that patronizing smile that made me itch to throw wine in his face.

I held back.

“I wanted to know if you’d like to get dessert to go. I know a way comfier place where we can enjoy sharing it. I keep it just for the special women I meet.”

Translation: a love shack where he could fool around and not get busted.

I didn’t even have to think about my answer. Despite what Ethan might’ve thought, I wasn’t a total moron. I knew the difference between an acceptable

risk and needlessly putting myself in danger.

Giving Matthew the sweetest smile I could muster, I said, “Um, no thanks. Not really feeling dessert tonight.”

“Even better.” He leered at me, totally shameless. “We can skip the food entirely and get straight to the real dessert.”

“Actually,” I said. “I think I’m just gonna head home.”

The shock on his face told me he wasn’t used to being turned down. I bet most of the guys on the Sugar website were cut from the same cloth. That raised the question. Had one of them been so pissed at Rachel that he’d done something to her?

“Perhaps you misunderstood me,” Matthew said, his fake smile back but with less certainty in his eyes. “I have a nearby apartment where we can spend some time getting to know each other over...dessert.”

“I got it,” I said as politely as I could. “But I’m still gonna pass and head out.”

Now he looked seriously pissed. “I’ll give you one last chance to reconsider, and before you give me your answer, you should know that this is your ‘interview’. I volunteered to evaluate your application. You understand we must check everybody who wants to join our little club to see if they are truly serious. So far, you have failed.”

Shit. I screwed up. I had no other choice but to go with his plan and hope for the best. Unless there was some other way to get out of this.

“Silly me. Now I understand. I’m so sorry. I’m a little slow today. Of course, I’d love dessert. Your place is close by, you say?”

His smile returned. “Very close. I’ll tell the valet to bring my Porsche. We’ll get there in no time. I’ll even bring you back here afterward. How does that sound?”

“Great.”

I racked my brain for an escape plan, something, anything to avoid ending up at this creep’s lair. Then it hit me, a solid excuse — one that just might work.

Earlier, when Matthew had received a message, I'd sneaked a peek at his phone's pin code. When he later stepped away to the bathroom and left his phone on the table, I added his number to my contacts.

As we approached the car, I put my plan into action.

"Hey, uh, Matthew? Do you mind if we make a quick pit stop at a gas station? I'm just dying for a smoke, and I'm fresh out of cigarettes," I said, feigning nonchalance.

Matthew's expression soured for a moment, but he quickly masked it with a half-hearted smile. "Sure, why not? There's one just a couple of blocks away. We can stop there before heading to my place."

"Awesome, thanks!" I replied, struggling to contain my relief.

As we pulled into the gas station, I hopped out of the Porsche and beelined for the convenience store. Once inside, I whipped out my phone and frantically dialed Madison's number.

"Madison, I need your help. Like, right now," I hissed into the phone as soon as my friend picked up. "I need you to call Matthew's phone, pretend you're a cop, and tell him he's gotta come in for an interview at the station ASAP. Can you do that?"

"What? Are you serious?" Madison said, taken aback by the bizarre request. "Who the hell is Matthew? What the fuck is going on?"

I quickly filled her in on the situation, and Madison groaned in exasperation. "Aria, seriously? I told you to be careful when going undercover. You know better than to get in too deep with these creeps."

"Yeah, I know, I know," I admitted, feeling sheepish. "But I really need your help here, Madison. Can you bail me out again?"

With a deep breath, Madison agreed to help. "Of course, I'll do it. You're lucky I know how to re-route the call, so it looks like it comes from the police station. Just give me a minute to set it up and channel my inner cop. And for the love of God, Aria, be more careful next time."

I gave her Matthew's number, and I hung up. I pretended to browse the store

for a long minute with my heart pounding in my chest. As I walked back to the car, I saw Matthew's face contort with confusion and concern as he answered his phone. I strained to hear his side of the conversation.

"What? This is completely unexpected... Yes, I understand... I'll be there as soon as possible."

Matthew hung up, his face a mix of frustration and anger, as I got into my seat. "Change of plans," he grumbled. "I have to go to the damn police station for some urgent interview. We'll have to reschedule our little rendezvous."

I feigned disappointment. "Oh, that's a bummer. But, hey, duty calls, right? Thanks for understanding about the cigarette stop, though."

With that, I narrowly dodged a bullet and bought myself some time to figure out my next move in this twisted game.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Ethan

I'D TOLD Aria I hadn't expected anything from her, but when she bailed on the memorial service without a peep, I found myself pacing in my hotel room like a caged animal. I figured she'd just had enough of Sarah's drama-queen act and needed to make her exit. Or maybe she hadn't left at all and was just avoiding me like the plague.

No matter how many reasons I came up with for Aria's vanishing act, I kept circling back to that word. Vanished. Just like Rachel. Who's to say Aria hadn't gotten too close, either through Madison's involvement or our nosy questions?

If I'd put Aria in danger because I hadn't pushed the issue of involving the cops, I'd never forgive myself.

I checked my phone again, but my text remained unanswered, and not a single incoming call.

I considered sending another message but decided against it. If I wanted her to come to me, I had to strike that balance between letting her know I was around and not forcing my presence down her throat.

I debated calling Kris, but then I'd have to fill him in on all the juicy details, and that meant sharing the investigation Aria and I had done. He wouldn't be thrilled about it, especially when he heard about her plans of going undercover. And if Aria was fine, she'd be pissed for involving Kris. I couldn't see Kris letting us continue with our little operation.

"Dammit, Aria. Where the hell are you?"

I'd just decided to call Kris and screw the consequences when someone knocked on my door.

When I saw Aria on the other side, I didn't think. I just yanked her into my room and slammed the door. I almost kissed her, and only after I finally released her, did I realize I'd crossed a line.

"Sorry," I said, meaning it. "I was worried about you."

That was putting it mildly, but I didn't want to freak her out by telling her just how freaked out I'd been.

"I didn't mean to worry you," she said.

Her flushed cheeks and bright eyes made me think my affection hadn't been completely unwanted, but I wasn't going to screw this up by pushing too hard. That didn't mean I was going to forget why I'd been so stressed in the first place.

"Where'd you go? Everything okay?"

"I'm fine," she quickly assured me.

She didn't meet my eyes, which did nothing to ease my worry. I had a sinking feeling I knew what she'd done.

"I went on a date with someone from the Sugar site."

I couldn't decide which I hated more, the jealousy that came with the thought that she'd gone on a date, or the fear-driven anger that she'd gone ahead with her insane plan and hadn't told me.

"Alright." I wasn't happy, but I kept my voice even.

She gave me a weird look, like it surprised her I wasn't yelling. After how I'd acted this morning, I couldn't blame her.

"Can we sit?"

She went to the couch and sat down. I was trying not to touch her without her express permission—despite my impulsive almost-kiss at the door—but I needed to be closer, so I sat next to her.

"When I talked to Madison," she began. "She said she got hold of some sort of number ID that has to connect to a hard copy of a master list somewhere."

"That's good."

"Yeah, that was my reaction, too," Aria said. "It's like some mafia shit. But that's why, when I got a notification at the memorial that my profile had been accepted and I already had a date, I had to go. The only way we're ever going to find out who Rachel went on that date with is to get into the organization

and find that master list.”

No matter how much I hated it, I had to say it. “You’re right.”

Pleased surprise lit up her face, but I could see caution there too.

“I don’t like the idea of you being involved with them, and I really wish you would’ve told me before you went tonight, so I could’ve had your back, but I don’t see any other way to find what we need.”

She reached over and took my hand. “Thank you.”

I threaded my fingers between hers. “I’ll do better listening to you and having open discussions.”

She squeezed my hand. “And I’ll be as safe as I can.”

That was far from the promise I wanted from her, but I knew asking her to stay locked in my penthouse in Seattle while I infiltrated the organization by myself wouldn’t fly.

“Along those lines,” she said, “the only reason I agreed to the date tonight was because it was at a restaurant, and I drove myself.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” I tried to stay focused on that truth. “What did you learn?”

Hesitantly at first but growing more confident the longer I kept my mouth shut, she told me all about her meeting with Matthew, the rich bastard with the vacation home in Gig Harbor. She’d just reached the point where she’d told him no when her phone dinged.

“I bet that’s them.”

She dug her phone out of her purse, and I waited while she read the message. A few seconds later and her face fell.

“What’s wrong?”

“They didn’t approve me.” Her shoulders slumped. “They said I didn’t follow through with my date.”

“Meaning you didn’t sleep with the fucker.” I let the anger seep into my

words.

“But it was his fault, sort of,” she said, still staring at her phone. “He was called to the police station.”

She then told me the rest of her story and I didn’t bother pointing out he might have found it weird when there was no interview when he got there.

She tossed her phone down on the table and covered her face with her hands. “I fucked up. I should’ve gone with him instead of pulling a scam.”

I put my arms around her and pulled her onto my lap. “No, you did not fuck up. You took things as far as you could under the circumstances. It’s not your fault. You couldn’t have done anything different. And definitely, don’t sleep with him.”

“I failed her,” she sobbed, pressing her face against my chest. “I promised I’d get Rachel justice, and I let her down. Again.”

“You didn’t let anyone down.” I ran my hand up and down her back. “Not then, and not now. It’s just a setback is all. Nothing’s done. We’re going to figure this out. Together. I promise.”

She raised her head, eyelashes glittering with tears. “Really?”

I brushed my lips against her cheek, tasting the saltwater on my lips. “Really.”

Our gaze held for a minute before I decided. I stood, taking her with me. For a moment, I thought she’d protest, but instead, she wrapped her arms around my neck and leaned her head on my shoulder.

“Let’s get you to bed.”

Her fingers played with the hair at the base of my skull and her breath was hot on my neck, making those few feet between the couch and the bedroom some of the hardest I’d ever had to take. She was soft and warm in my arms, her natural scent blending with the vanilla perfume she’d put on since the last time I’d seen her. Realizing she’d worn it for her ‘date’ should’ve made me angry or envious, but I couldn’t feel anything other than muted desire and a fierce sense of protectiveness. I didn’t care about what was out there.

Everything that mattered was right here in my arms.

I lowered her to the bed and then moved to take off her shoes. By the time I put them on the floor and turned back around, she'd removed the rest of her clothes. My breath caught in my throat as I stared down at her. She was like a work of art, all porcelain skin and long, slender limbs. Thin curls covering the cleft between her legs and tight little nipples atop firm breasts. I'd seen her nude before, but I couldn't comprehend ever seeing her like this and not being amazed.

"You're wearing too many clothes." Aria smiled.

"Are you sure?"

Her tongue traced her bottom lip as her fingers trailed between her breasts and down to those curls. When her fingers dipped lower, I groaned.

"I know my mind, Ethan," she whispered. "And I want you."

"I believe you," I said, before pulling my shirt over my head.

Her gaze crawled over me hungrily, leaving licks of flame across my skin. My cock pressed against the front of my underwear, and I palmed it for a moment, fighting for control. When she licked her lips, I cursed and stripped off the last of my clothes.

As I climbed on the bed, she spread her legs, giving me an unbelievably erotic view of her fingers slipping between her folds, parting them to give me glimpses of soft, pink flesh. Almost involuntarily, my hand wrapped around my cock, stroking it as my eyes fixed on the sight of her pleasuring herself. When she moaned, my control snapped, and I grabbed for her wrist.

With deliberate slowness, I raised her hand and slid her fingers into my mouth. As I licked them clean, she writhed on the bed, her free hand squeezing her breast. A flush spread across her skin and I could almost feel the heat from it.

After I released her hand, I leaned down and pulled her legs over my shoulders. Crouching on my knees, I lowered my head until my mouth covered her core. With her eyes on me, I licked her from ass to clit and then stabbed my tongue into her pussy. My grip on her hips tightened to hold her

in place as I made love to her with my mouth. The flat of my tongue moving over her sensitive flesh and then the tip tracing circles around her clit. Dipping into her core, I savored the taste of her, the salty tang that had quickly become addictive.

I could've eaten her out for hours, taking her to climax until her voice was hoarse from screaming and her body was a limp, sated mess. My cock was rock hard, begging for me to take her, but I ignored it. I couldn't change any of the horrible things that had happened to Aria, but I could help her forget them for a while.

"Ethan!" Aria cried out as her orgasm rolled over her. She twisted her entire body, her hands grabbing at me, nails scratching the backs of my hands, her face contorted with pleasure.

I eased her through her climax with gentle kisses and licks, stopping only when she started pushing me away.

"Too much," she gasped. "Need a minute."

I took advantage of her need for respite and grabbed a condom from the bedside table. By the time I got it on, the haze had left Aria's eyes and she reached for me again.

Still kneeling, I pulled her up so that she was straddling my thighs. My hands palmed her ass, squeezed the firm muscles as I tugged her over my cock, rubbing it against the wet flesh between her legs. She clung to my shoulders, her head falling forward as she rocked against me. The heat of her, even through the latex, was nearly enough to undo me.

"You ready for my cock?" My voice was rough as I ran my hands up her sides and brushed my thumbs along the gentle swells of her breasts.

In response, Aria leaned forward and took my bottom lip between her teeth, the sting sending a jolt of pleasure through me. I growled, grabbing her waist and lifting her. With a little maneuvering, I got her into place, and we let out mingled sighs of relief as she slid down my cock.

Her pussy was like a vise, squeezing me as I filled her. By the time she settled on my lap, we were both panting, our muscles tense, every cell buzzing with electricity. We rested our foreheads against each other, eyes

closed, bodies joined as tightly as two people could be. Her nipples were hard points against my chest and her nails made small circles on my shoulders, just adding to the myriad of sensations coursing through me.

When she began to move, I took that as a signal and moved with her. Shallow thrusts combined with circular motions, I felt like I was touching every place inside her. The heat between us built quickly into an inferno, burning through us and around us until I was ready to explode.

“I need you to come for me,” I said, my voice breathless. “Come on my cock, Aria.”

She whimpered, her body jerking at my words.

“Do you like it when I talk like that?” I nipped her earlobe. “Does it turn you on?”

She nodded, her eyes still shut tight.

“Then I need you to do what I say, baby.” I bit her jaw hard enough to make her gasp. “Take what you need and come. Tighten that sweet cunt around my dick until I blow inside you.”

“Ethan.” Her voice was ragged, telling me just how close she was.

Without stopping to think whether it was a good idea, I sank my teeth into the place where her shoulder met her neck. Aria cried out, her entire body going stiff. I cursed as her pussy clamped down on me, squeezing almost to the point of pain, but that fine line between it and pleasure blurred the moment I came.

We clung tightly, sweat-slicked skin pressed together, muscles quivering from the intensity. The lingering taste of explosive sex played on our lips and tongues. We’d experienced mind-blowing passion before, but this time had a unique spark. I couldn’t quite pinpoint the difference, but I reassured myself it didn’t matter. We had all the time in the world to delve into every facet of this fiery connection. There was no way I’d let her slip away again.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Aria

ETHAN JUST HAD to leave a hickey on my neck, didn't he? I mean, the bite itself was pretty damn fantastic, but now I had to slap on extra powder to cover it up. At least it kept my mind off the reason I was borrowing a black dress from Rachel's closet.

I'd thought about making Ethan drive separately to the funeral, but as I gave myself a final once-over in the mirror, I decided I wanted him with me the whole time, including the drive. If not for falling asleep in his arms last night, I probably would've tossed and turned for hours. Surprisingly, I woke up feeling more rested than I thought possible.

Ethan was waiting for me in the bedroom, his face somber. He took my hand, asking, "Ready?"

I breathed in deep. "As I'll ever be."

When my mom died, time went all wonky on me. Some moments blurred together; others were painfully clear. Sometimes, minutes felt like hours, other times everything sped up or jumped around. So, it made sense that one moment I was at the hotel, and the next, Pastor Brown was asking me to say a few words.

Ethan's hand squeeze was a comforting reminder I wasn't alone. I could've called Madison or Lily, but why subject them to Sarah's drama? Ethan knew the drill. He greeted her politely, then ignored her, letting her get attention somewhere else.

Drawing strength from Ethan, I stepped up to the podium, where the pastor waited. The paper Sarah had given me was wrinkled from folding and unfolding it a gazillion times. I smoothed it out, then began.

"Rachel's mom, Sarah, wrote a poem she asked me to read." I cleared my throat. "'Forever my baby / Sent from heaven...'"

Somehow, I managed not to cry or gag as I read the poem that was less about Rachel and more about Sarah's so-called parenting skills. I paused and

inflected as needed. There was a smattering of polite applause when I finished, but I barely noticed. My focus was on Ethan, and I didn't relax until I was back in my seat next to him.

He pulled me close, his arm wrapped around me. Kissing the top of my head, he murmured, "You did a good job." I wasn't sure I agreed—I hadn't really honored my friend—but I knew what he meant and appreciated the sentiment.

The rest of the service turned into one big, mushy memory. Ethan's presence was the only thing keeping me grounded. When the minister finished, I shook my head, trying to snap out of it and figure out my next move.

Before Ethan and I could discuss it, Sarah stomped over, determination etched on her face. "You're riding with the family to the graveside."

I tensed, and Ethan squeezed my hand. I could tell he was letting me take the lead. "I wasn't planning on going to the cemetery," I said coolly.

"What?" Sarah looked shocked, though I suspected it was mostly an act. "Aria, she was your sister. You must see her laid to rest."

I glanced at Ethan. "Whatever you want," he said softly, his gaze never leaving mine.

"Ethan's not invited," Sarah snapped.

I blinked. "What?"

"The graveside is for family only." She crossed her arms and glared. "He's not family."

I wanted to make a snarky remark about paternity tests, but now was not the time or place, even if it was my business. Which it wasn't.

Instead, I said, "He's with me."

"Been there," Sarah retorted. "But he's still not family."

"It's okay," Ethan said, kissing my temple. "If you want to go, go. I'll talk to Kris, see if he has any updates. Just call me when you're ready, and I'll pick you up, alright?"

I felt torn. Part of me wanted to go with Ethan and avoid more Rachel drama, but another part of me wanted to be there when she was buried. We hadn't gone to the cemetery when my mom died. Sarah claimed it wouldn't be healthy for me, but I suspected she just didn't want to deal with anything that didn't feed her need for attention.

"You need closure," Ethan said. "If going will give it to you, you should go."

I nodded. "Alright. I'll call when I'm ready."

He gave me a quick kiss and left. As soon as he was gone, I missed him, but I knew he was right.

"Good." Sarah's smug satisfaction was obvious. "Now, you'll ride with Richard and me—"

"Actually, I thought she should ride with me," a male voice interrupted.

I glanced over to see Andy grinning at me before turning his attention to Sarah.

"Don't you think it'll give a whole family look at things?" he asked. "You know, the soon-to-be stepson and the wayward foster daughter joining the grieving parents?"

"I think that's a good idea," I chimed in. I didn't know Andy well, but I figured he wouldn't spend the ride trying to manipulate or guilt-trip me.

Sarah's eyes flicked between me and Andy before she relented. "Fine. Richard and I will meet you there."

With that, she stalked off, leaving Andy and me alone.

"Come on," he said. "I want to be right behind Dad and Sarah in line. Some people can be real dicks with funeral processions."

"Tell me about it," I said, walking alongside him. "I get it if there's an emergency, but most jerks are just impatient."

"Right? They think the world revolves around them," he added.

We reached a sleek black sedan, and he opened the passenger door for me. As I slid in, I noticed the car still had that new car smell. Everything was

spotless.

“Nice car,” I said, grinning as he got in. “How long have you had it?”

“Just picked it up yesterday,” he replied. “And thank you.”

He pulled out behind the limo carrying Sarah and Richard. We rode in silence for a bit before he spoke up.

“I hope I didn’t catch you too off-guard, suggesting you’d ride with me. Most women would love a limo, but I sensed some tension between you and Sarah.”

“I appreciate it,” I said. “I really didn’t want to be stuck with her en route to the cemetery. Our relationship is... complicated.”

“It seems like there’s something going on with her and your... date.” Andy glanced at me. “Ethan, right? I met him at the memorial last night.”

“Ethan Cole,” I confirmed.

“He mentioned he was in town for the reunion. So, he’s Sarah’s age?”

I reminded myself that the question wasn’t strange. If Ethan and I were going to be a thing, we’d probably deal with ruder comments about our age difference.

“He is,” I admitted. “But we didn’t focus on ages when we first met.”

“You seem close for not knowing each other for long,” Andy observed. “Are you two planning on trying a long-distance thing?”

“We won’t have to,” I said. “He lives in Seattle too.”

“Really?” Andy looked surprised. “Both of you grew up here and ended up in Seattle?”

“It’s not that odd,” I said. “It’s a great place for small-town kids wanting a big city, but not wanting to stray too far from their roots.”

“Is that why you went there?”

I shook my head. “It was the closest place I could think of where I could find

work, and I fell in love with it.”

“So, you two never ran into each other there?”

“It’s not surprising,” I said. “It’s a big city, and our paths didn’t cross.”

“What does that mean?” Andy checked for cross traffic.

“It means I work as a web designer, and Ethan owns a software company,” I explained.

“So, he has money.”

I shrugged. “I assume so, but I haven’t asked. Money isn’t important to me.”

I doubted Andy believed me—most people who say that don’t mean it—but I did. I’d grown up with money and spent the last three years living paycheck to paycheck. Even if I didn’t have a trust fund waiting for me at twenty-five, Ethan’s wealth didn’t matter to me.

We reached the cemetery, and I was glad to end the conversation. Sarah’s influence growing up had made me despise talking about finances.

I pushed those thoughts aside as I got out of the car. We followed Sarah and Richard to Rachel’s grave, and I wound up standing between Andy and his dad, the last place I wanted to be.

“I’m glad you came with us,” Richard whispered in my ear. “Sarah has missed you.”

I tried to step away, but Andy was too close. A half-step would cause a domino effect.

I nodded to acknowledge Richard’s words, hoping that was the last. But as they lowered the coffin into the ground, his arm brushed against mine as he leaned in to speak again.

“This must be so difficult for you. I’m sure you miss Rachel a lot.” His breath reeked of cigarettes and something gross. “If there’s anything I can do to help, just let me know.”

“Richard.” Sarah yanked his arm, and he straightened.

I exhaled, relieved, and wondered how fast I could get away and call Ethan. Richard had done nothing wrong, but something about him made my skin crawl. If he was like this with Rachel, I understood why she'd chosen Lee over her mom's house.

Hell, much more time with the power couple, and I might be willing to live in a drug den just to escape them, too.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Ethan

KRIS'S APARTMENT SCREAMED "BACHELOR PAD"—TWO bedrooms, a cramped kitchen, and a living room dominated by a big-ass TV and gaming console. A baseball game droned on in the background, but neither of us gave a shit.

"Marty's combing through the guest list from the memorial and the funeral," Kris said, chugging his beer. "He might still think you're a suspect since you were at both."

I groaned and took a swig of my beer. "Do you really think the psycho who killed Rachel showed up at the memorial?"

Kris shrugged. "Happens more than you'd think. Some sick fucks insert themselves into investigations, join search parties for missing people, that sort of shit."

"Just like I did," I muttered, shaking my head. "Guess I can't blame Marty for thinking I'm a prime candidate for Creepy Murderer of the Month."

Kris snorted. "He was all up in your grill, but he'll follow the facts."

"Speaking of leads," I said, "has he checked out that Give Me Some Sugar group?"

"I scoped out the site," Kris admitted. "Couldn't get far without a warrant or opening an account."

"Let me guess, not enough for a warrant?"

"Sadly, no," Kris sighed. "And I don't have the dough they want from their male customers. I'd suggest making a fake profile, but they dig deep. Like, bank account details, 401K, investment portfolios, the whole shebang."

I almost spilled the beans about Aria going undercover but held my tongue. Instead, an idea popped into my head.

"I've got money."

Kris raised an eyebrow. "You're gonna give me a shitload of cash to set up a

sting?”

I shot him a look, and he shook his head.

“Fuck no. That’s a terrible idea.”

I shrugged. “Seems legit to me. Fill out some info, get you the access you need.”

I mentally kicked myself for not thinking of it sooner. I could’ve kept Aria away from the site entirely. At least joining an escort site wasn’t my first instinct, but if Aria’s “date” had gone sideways? Disaster.

“Ethan, I know you want to figure out what happened to Rachel, but this ain’t the way.”

“Kris, if she was my…” I cleared my throat. “It’s the right thing to do.”

He opened his mouth to list all the reasons why I couldn’t, but my phone buzzed with a text.

“It’s Aria,” I said. “She needs a ride.”

I thanked Kris for the beer and bolted before he could warn me off or tell me not to do it. I didn’t want to leave Aria with Sarah and the Connors goons any longer.

As I drove to the cemetery, I mulled over Kris’s words about setting up an account. It wasn’t the same as Aria’s situation—the men weren’t in danger. With the restrictions Kris mentioned, they’d be less likely to suspect infiltration.

I parked outside the cemetery and texted Aria, letting her know I was there. Unless she asked, I didn’t want to risk bumping into Sarah and her fiancé. Aria didn’t need my presence stirring up shit.

While I waited, I pulled up the website and started setting up an account. Aria and Kris were right—these guys were thorough.

An email alert popped up—I submitted my application. Now I just had to wait for someone to review it, aka “find out if I’m as loaded as I claim.” Approval or rejection would come within 24-48 hours.

Aria slipped into the car, her face tight with tension. I resisted asking if she was okay and just took her hand.

“Back to my hotel?”

She nodded, lips pressed together.

“I’m thinking room service and mindless TV,” I suggested, glancing at her as I pulled away. “Just veg out and not think.”

“That sounds perfect,” she said, her voice weary. “It’s been a long day.”

My heart clenched at the strain on her face. I realized I wanted to take care of her—not just help her find justice for Rachel and protect her from the obvious dangers of dealing with criminals. I wanted to make sure she ate when she didn’t feel like it, slept when she wanted to push herself. I wanted to be there for her, no matter what she needed. And that was new to me.

And I had no fucking clue how to handle it.

ARIA DOZED off in the middle of *Legally Blonde 2*, and as much as I loved holding her, finishing the movie without her wasn’t high on my to-do list, especially after she had rolled away. I wrapped a blanket around her and retreated to my room to indulge in the hotel’s *pièce de résistance*.

A groan escaped my lips as I sank into the steaming water. Between the stress, the wild sex, and traipsing around Gig Harbor, my muscles screamed for mercy. I settled on the bench, closed my eyes, and rested my head on the tub’s edge. The jets’ soothing hum filled my head with white noise, and my thoughts drifted.

I didn’t notice I had company until a hand grazed my knee. I opened my eyes to find Aria in front of me, her dark hair floating like a halo in the water. Her bare skin shimmered in the dim light, and her tantalizing nipples appeared and disappeared with her movements, making my cock throb with need.

“Did you have a nice nap?” I asked, my voice rough.

“I did.” Her lips curved into a wicked smile. “Now I want to have some fun. What do you think, Ethan? Sleep or fuck?”

I gripped her hips, my thumbs gliding over her slick skin. “Do you really have to ask?”

She shrugged. “It’s been a long couple of days for you, too.”

I pulled her toward me until her ass rested on my knees; her legs spread wide. I could see a hint of shadow through the water, but I didn’t need to see the details. I could picture every curve and dip, imagine the exact shade of that sensitive skin. Hell, I knew her body as intimately as I knew my own. Maybe even more.

I caught her chin in my hand and ran my thumb along her bottom lip. When her tongue darted out, I moaned and my dick twitched, remembering what it was like to have her mouth on me.

“Stand up.”

She gave me a puzzled look.

“Stand up here.” I helped her to her feet and then took her hands, holding her steady as she put a foot on either side of my legs.

As I’d hoped, this put her pussy right where I wanted it. I palmed her ass, and a hand came down to my head, her fingers tangling in my hair. Leaning forward, I buried my face between her legs. She cried out, her body swaying. My fingers dug into firm muscles, keeping her from falling, and my mouth went to work.

Licking and sucking, I explored all those familiar bits of hers, savoring the taste, the feel of her. She whimpered my name, and I worshipped her, pouring everything I felt and couldn’t find the words to say into my hands and lips and tongue.

Her first orgasm hit hard and fast. I felt her muscles quiver under my palms and tightened my hold on her even as I took her clit between my lips. Sucking on that bundle of nerves, I pushed her from one climax into the next with no respite. As she gasped and rocked her hips against my mouth, I slid a finger between her ass cheeks. When the tip of it rubbed over the little ring of

muscle there, Aria cursed, her fingers painfully twisting in my hair. She didn't tell me to stop, so I pushed my finger forward, sinking just the tip into her ass.

"Oh, fuck." Aria's knees buckled as she came again, and she fell.

Catching her, I cradled her on my lap and ignored my erection pressing against her ass. When her eyes finally fluttered open, she looked up at me and smiled.

"Better?" I asked.

"Not yet." She sat up, her hand moving under the water to grip my cock. "I don't think I can hold my breath long enough to repay the favor."

"I don't mind." I brushed some hair back from her face and was shocked to realize that I'd be just as happy to sit here with her like this as I would be to get off.

"How about this?" She shifted so that her knees were on the outsides of my thighs. "I'm clean and on the pill."

It took me a moment to process what she was saying, and it was all I could do not to bury myself in her right then.

"I do regular health checks," I said. "I'm good, if you're sure."

She squeezed my cock and leaned forward to nip at my bottom lip. "I'd like nothing more than to feel you slide into me with nothing between us."

"Fuck," I groaned.

"That's the idea." The tip of my dick brushed back and forth across her entrance. "I've been dreaming about this since the night we met."

Her declaration was a surprise, but I barely registered it because at that moment, she sank down on me, taking half of me at once.

"Oh, damn," she breathed the words. A shudder went through her, and she dropped another inch.

I caught her waist, unsure if I wanted to stop her or fill her completely. She was wet, but still an insanely tight fit. Putting her hands on my shoulders, she

wriggled her hips, and I nearly choked at the combination of friction and pressure. Without the latex between us, every nerve felt like it was on fire.

Aria let out a litany of curses, her muscles trembling as she finally took all of me.

“I don’t know how long I’m going to last,” I admitted in a strained voice. “You feel too damn good.”

“It will not take much for me.” Her words were muffled as she pressed her face to my shoulder.

She rolled her hips, and my head thudded against the wall. I didn’t know if the stars I saw came from hitting my head or the ecstasy of being inside her, but I didn’t care. A concussion would be a fine trade for this bliss.

Her mouth worked over my skin, biting and sucking even as she rode me. I cupped her breast, her nipple pebbling against my palm. I plucked and twisted the sensitive flesh, groaning every time she tightened around me and hoping that she was getting as near to the edge as I was.

Then, between the space of one breath and the next, she came. Her teeth clamped down on my shoulder and the burst of pain was all I needed to follow. As the two of us floated together on that hazy cloud of pleasure, all I could think about was how perfect she was for me.

And how I wasn’t ever going to let her go.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Aria

THE MOMENT my phone blasted its obnoxious ringtone, waking me from my slumber, I knew I was despising early morning calls. I picked up, grumbling some semblance of a greeting, when I quickly realized my problems extended further than a lousy wake-up call.

“Aria, what the hell’s going on?” David’s voice was so loud I winced. Glancing at Ethan, I was relieved to see him still asleep.

“Give me a sec,” I whispered, carefully sliding out of bed.

“Excuse me? ‘Give me a sec’?” David spat.

Fucking hell, this was going to be a shitstorm. I closed the bedroom door, isolating myself in the main area.

“Sorry, David. Had to move away before taking the call.”

“It’s seven in the morning on a Saturday, Aria. What’re you doing that you had to ‘move away’?”

David’s insinuations pissed me off, but I couldn’t say he was entirely wrong. Not that I was going to spill my personal life or justify my choices to him. That was none of his fucking business.

“My sister’s funeral was yesterday. I was sleeping.” Pinching the bridge of my nose, I asked, “What do you want, David?”

“Do your damn job,” he snapped.

I clenched my jaw. “I sent in a report of what I finished this week. Didn’t it go through?”

“Yeah, I got it,” he grumbled. “But that was only half of what you were supposed to do.”

“Sorry.” I didn’t mean it, but he was my boss, and they were just words. “My sister’s memorial was Thursday, and the funeral was yesterday. Short week, you know.”

“Were they all day?”

I reminded myself that I’d just snagged a promotion before skipping town without warning. David could’ve denied me the time off. But, for fuck’s sake, we designed websites! We weren’t saving lives or guarding the public. If a client couldn’t grasp that life happens, they were just assholes.

“She was murdered,” I said through gritted teeth. “I’ve been trying to keep up with the investigation, too.”

“Leave that to the cops. Let them do their job, and you do yours.”

Swearing at him was tempting, but unwise. “She was my sister. I need to know justice will be served.”

“Lay off it, will you?” David scoffed. “She wasn’t your real sister.”

I froze, icy fury replacing the heat of my anger.

“HR says to get funeral leave, they gotta be related,” he continued. “Not just someone you lived with for a bit.”

I hung up before I could unleash a tirade of expletives. My actions might’ve sealed my fate, but I couldn’t find it in me to regret it. David had never been my favorite person, and I knew plenty of folks didn’t consider foster families as ‘proper family.’ But spewing that crap after a young woman was murdered? That was just too much. If he fired me, maybe I’d feel some remorse, but he’d crossed the line.

“Bastard,” I muttered.

Running a hand through my hair, I exhaled slowly. I had to get my shit together before Ethan woke up and noticed my absence. If he found out about my conversation with David, he’d be livid. He’d already shown his dislike for my boss and a penchant for being protective.

Crossing to the phone on the desk, I dialed down for breakfast and then headed for the shower. By the time I emerged, my emotions were in check, and I was ready to discuss our next move with Ethan. I also had a dozen voicemails from David, which I deleted without a second thought.

“You’re up early,” Ethan said as I grabbed some clothes from the dresser.

“Everything okay?”

“You know how it is when you wake up and can’t fall back asleep.” I kept my face turned away, sure he’d see right through my lie. “Breakfast will be here in about ten.”

“Great, I’ll be quick,” Ethan said, strolling naked toward the bathroom.

I didn’t feel guilty for ogling his magnificent ass.

Debating the wisdom of joining Ethan in the shower, my phone dinged with an email alert. Half-expecting a pink slip from David, I checked it out. To my surprise, it was from my Sugar account, announcing a party that night. The time and place were right there. A gathering of all the men who used Give Me Some Sugar, the people running the site, and the girls caught in their web.

I had to be there.

I needed to call the cops.

The two conflicting desires ran through my head in minutes, and I knew I needed to decide before Ethan finished his shower. If I told him about the email, he’d want me to take it to Kris, or at least tell me to stay away from the party, citing the danger.

I could argue I’d be careful. Only the site owners and Matthew knew my face, and only the owners knew I’d been fired. I could change my appearance, stick to the shadows, talk to the girls, snap pics of the men, and take that to the police.

Even as I thought it, I knew Ethan wouldn’t go for it. Too risky.

He wouldn’t be wrong.

“She’s my sister,” I whispered.

David’s comment about her not being my “real” family echoed in my head, and the anger it sparked pushed me to decide.

I was going.

Ethan had his reunion, and I’d already decided to decline if he invited me along. I didn’t want to run into Sarah. I’d tell him I wanted a quiet night in,

and he should go.

But I wouldn't be a complete idiot about it. While I didn't want to tell Ethan, I'd let someone know, just in case.

Before Ethan emerged from the bathroom, I texted Madison, giving her a quick summary and asking her to be my safety net. I knew she'd agree. She'd had my back since the day we met.

"Is breakfast here yet?" Ethan asked, stepping out of the bathroom, rubbing his head with a towel.

I opened my mouth to answer but stopped when I saw him. The towel hung low on his hips, revealing those v-grooves that made women swoon. Water droplets trailed down his chest, disappearing under the towel. The bulge at the front hinted at the glorious erection I'd soon have in my mouth.

"We have time," I finally said.

"Time?"

I sauntered toward him, my body thrumming with arousal. Without a word, I yanked his towel off and dropped to my knees. The moment my lips touched his soft cock, he cursed, and all thoughts of food vanished. I had a different hunger to satisfy.

Chapter Forty

Ethan

GRINNING LIKE A DAMN FOOL, I caught my reflection before leaving the hotel. I was about to waltz into my high school reunion with the look of a love-struck teen plastered on my face. But, to hell with it, I didn't care one bit.

Part of me wished I had Aria on my arm. She was the whole package—stunning, brilliant, and tough as nails. She was the kind of woman I'd be proud to flaunt in public. Sure, people would talk, especially with Sarah around to spill the beans on who Aria was. But if Aria didn't give a damn about our age difference, why should I?

I got why Aria wasn't keen on coming tonight. I wasn't exactly stoked about seeing Sarah, either. The woman scheduled her own kid's funeral around a high school reunion for crying out loud, so there was no way she'd miss it.

I'd thought about ditching the whole thing, but Aria insisted. She wanted a quiet night in and didn't want Marty doubting my reason for being in Gig Harbor. She had a point, but it still felt wrong leaving her alone in that hotel room.

My phone buzzed with a text from Jake.

Did you get your girl a corsage for tonight? Take lots of pictures. Abigail and I want to see you both all dressed up.

Chuckling, I snapped a selfie of me flipping off the camera and sent it to him.

Jake shot back a laughing emoji and a message.

Abigail wants to know if you know when you'll be back. She wants to have you and Aria over for dinner.

A warm feeling spread through me at the thought of going back to Seattle with Aria as part of my life. We hadn't discussed it, but we hadn't talked about leaving things behind either. We were heading back to the same city, after all. Why end things?

Then again, what if Aria only felt close to me because of the wild

circumstances of the past week? Our first night together wasn't your typical bar hook-up. We were both worried about Rachel's disappearance and sought an escape. What if our connection was just a result of the chaos?

Did I say something wrong? Jake's message flashed on my screen. Abigail says no pressure. We just want you to be happy.

I know, I typed. We haven't really talked about what'll happen when we leave here.

Jake's three dots appeared, then disappeared. After a minute, they popped up again, followed by his text.

Don't screw this up. Talk to her. If she's not interested, that's one thing, but if you lose her because you're being a pussy, you'll never forgive yourself.

I sent back a middle-finger emoji, then added two words.

You're right.

His response was lightning fast. And don't you forget it.

I hopped out of the car and headed for the doors. Aria could have her alone time, but I wouldn't stay out too late. There wasn't anyone at this reunion I wanted to hang out with more than Aria. Hell, if Kris wasn't there, I couldn't think of anyone I even wanted to talk to.

I was about to call Kris and ask when he planned on showing up tonight when an email alert chimed. My heart raced as I saw it was from Give Me Some Sugar.

"Boom!" I shouted in triumph, seeing my application had been accepted. "I'm in!"

I skimmed the email, searching for any clue about who I was dealing with. Mostly, it laid out more rules and legal consequences if I spilled the beans.

Given the organization, the threat of arrest or lawsuits was the last thing on my mind. I'm no legal expert, but I figured spilling the tea to the cops would likely land them in hot water, not me.

Then another email arrived, wiping away my attempts to glean info from the

form letter. This one was an invitation to a party happening tonight—a real-life shindig where people couldn't hide behind fake names or strategically cropped photos.

Crap.

I could go, snap some pics, gather names, and present the intel to Kris. Sure, he told me not to join the site, but if I had something that could help uncover what happened to Rachel, he'd probably let it slide. Besides, I had done nothing illegal. Just signed up to meet some lovely ladies.

Those vague descriptions and contracts didn't solely shield the organization. Until I chose a woman to date and expected her to sleep with me, I hadn't crossed any lines. And since I had no intention of doing either, I wasn't sweating the law.

But I'd made Aria promise to play it smart, so I owed her the same. Plus, it would seriously tick Kris off if I went rogue without even giving him a heads up.

I was about to pull up Kris's contact info when my phone rang. The number was unfamiliar, but it had a Seattle area code. Usually, I'd let unknown calls go to voicemail, but something told me to pick up.

"Hello?"

"Ethan Cole?" A woman's voice, but not one I recognized.

"Yes. Who's this?"

"Madison James."

It took a second for the name to click. "Aria's roommate?" Panic kicked in. "Is she okay?"

"I don't know," Madison sighed. "That's why I'm calling you."

"She's not with me." I spun around and headed back to my car.

"I know that." She sounded irritated. "Will you just shut up and let me talk?"

Under normal circumstances, I'd be annoyed at a stranger talking to me like that, but my mind was on Aria.

“She got an invite to some party for that dumb website and went.”

I froze. “She did what?”

“I guess they sent her an invitation by mistake, and she thought going undercover was a brilliant idea.”

“Shit,” I muttered. “What the hell was she thinking?”

“She wants to get justice for Rachel,” Madison said. “At least this time she took your warning about being smarter. She knew you’d never let her go alone.”

“Damn right I wouldn’t,” I grumbled, getting into the car.

“She said she needed someone to know where she was, in case...” Her voice faded.

Neither of us wanted to finish that thought.

“I got an invitation too,” I said. “I’m going after her.”

“She’s gonna be so pissed when she sees you,” Madison warned.

“Won’t she be pissed at you for calling me?” I asked.

“Probably,” Madison admitted, “but I’m in Seattle, and she’s not. Sucks to be the one in her line of fire.”

“Thanks for that.” I paused, then added, “And thank you for calling me. I’d never forgive myself if something happened to her.”

“Go get her,” Madison said. “Keep her safe.”

“I will.”

“And tell her to call me when you guys are out of there,” Madison added. “I don’t want to come down there and kick your ass.”

I promised her that and peeled out of the parking lot. It may have been twenty years since I lived in Gig Harbor, but I still knew my way around. I could make it in fifteen minutes.

Fifteen more minutes that Aria would be alone with a bunch of dangerous

men who'd probably killed her sister.

I floored the gas.

I could make it there in ten if I hit the lights right.

Chapter Forty-One

Aria

WHEN I HEARD this escort agency was throwing a shindig for a bunch of loaded geezers, I pictured it going down at some swanky country club, not some office building lookalike.

The big dude blocking the glass doors, though, screamed bouncer rather than office security guard. A shit-scary bouncer, mind you. But I strutted straight toward him, slapping on a smile while I fished out my phone to display the email invite.

“Building’s closed,” he grunted, hand held up like a stop sign.

“I have an invitation, pal.” I flashed the screen at him. “Give Me Some Sugar.”

He raised a brow and stepped aside. “Party’s at the end of the hall.”

As I breezed by, I half-expected a cheeky ass-smack, but the dude kept his mitts to himself. I sauntered down the hall like I owned the place, praying my outfit choice wouldn’t blow my cover. Not like I had a ton of options. Hell, I was rocking the same dress I wore to the funeral. My one and only ‘little black dress.’ It was this or the getup from my faux ‘date’ with Matthew, but if he laid eyes on me, he’d be more likely to recognize me in that than anything else.

I spotted the sign before I even made it halfway down the hall.

Private Party.

A burst of giggles to my right caught my attention, and I glimpsed three ladies spilling out of a restroom. Around my age, they were dolled up from their skyscraper heels to their flawless hair. Nothing too over-the-top or revealing. Could’ve been a pack of gal pals hitting the town.

“Hi there.” A bubbly blonde beamed at me. “I’m Tara. Don’t think I’ve seen you around.”

“First-timer.” I extended a hand. “Andrea.”

“These are Amber and Mitsy.” She gestured to a blue-eyed brunette and then a petite, mahogany-skinned girl. “We’re all seasoned vets, so any questions, just holler.”

“Kinda nervous,” I admitted. “First party and all.”

“Don’t sweat it,” Amber chimed in, looping her arm through mine. “Everyone’s on their best behavior. We just sip bubbly and chitchat with the gents. See if there’s any spark.”

“Does it matter?” I asked, as she ushered me into the room. “Aren’t they the ones calling the shots?”

Tara shot Amber a pointed look before jumping in. “You really are green, Andrea. We don’t talk like that.”

“Right.” Amber’s voice quivered a bit. “We chat about dates and quality time. And of course, we always get to pick.”

I patted her arm. “My bad. I’ll get with the program.”

“You better,” Tara warned. “If they hear you talking like that...”

She didn’t finish her sentence, but I couldn’t help wondering if breaking the rules had cost my sister her life.

Once inside, Amber paused, while the other two ladies dove straight into the crowd.

“When in doubt, smile and nod,” she murmured. “Don’t talk back. Don’t give ‘em any reason to bitch about you. Play your cards right, and you’ll snag someone who just wants a pretty gal on his arm and a few compliments on his skills between the sheets.”

With that sage advice, she released my arm, snagged a glass of pale-yellow booze from a tray, and sashayed off.

Right away, I slinked behind a pillar, giving myself a hot sec to scope out the joint. Even though the building had been around since I was a rugrat, I had no clue what businesses they housed here. Could’ve been a conference room or some other random space. It was a decent-sized room, easily fitting the horde gathered. Eyeballing it, I reckoned there were at least two dozen dudes and

maybe a smidge more dames than that.

While scanning the crowd, I clocked Matthew yapping with a silver-haired gent, his back to me. Noting my ex-‘date’s’ location, I zoomed in on a big guy who looked even more out of his element than yours truly and sidled up to him.

“Hey.” I flashed a smile. “I’m Andrea.”

“Hi there.” He offered a meaty paw. “I’m Jim.”

“Nice to meet ya.” His palms were a swamp, but I kept my poker face. “Your first party?”

“That obvious?” He bellowed a laugh, drawing some stares.

I silently cursed, angling so he shielded me from most of the room. “Mine too,” I admitted. “Kinda freaked out.”

“No need,” he reassured me. “You’re a knockout.”

“Aw, thanks.” I let out a giggle I’d heard from the other gals. “You’re sweet.”

“Local girl?” Jim inquired.

I racked my brain for my fake profile details before it hit me. “Nah, Portland. Been saving up to move to LA. I wanna act.”

“You’ve got the looks for it.” Jim’s eyes smoldered as they raked over me, and my goodwill toward him fizzled.

“What about you?” I probed. “What’s your gig?”

“Real estate.” He waved vaguely. “I actually sold this place to Richard.”

I froze. Richard’s a dime a dozen name, I told myself. “Oh yeah? Richard?”

“Richard Connors.” Jim gestured to where I saw Sarah’s fiancé chatting up Matthew. “He’s the one who invited me to Give Me Some Sugar. I’m not exactly a chick magnet.”

I was dying to tell him maybe he should quit seeing women as toys with price

tags, but that wouldn't help. Neither would storm over to Richard and grilling him about his presence.

"So, he's letting Give Me Some Sugar borrow the space?" I prodded. "Real nice of him. They got offices here too?"

"Third floor," Jim revealed, "but no room for a shindig up there. This is the only spot big enough."

"Well, it's fab." I cranked up the charm in my grin. "You must be a pro."

"I got an eye for this stuff." He preened at the praise. "I got a killer pad in Seattle and vacay homes in Vermont and NorCal. Bet you'd dig 'em."

"Maybe you can give me a tour sometime."

"I'd be down." He licked his lips, eyes dipping to my cleavage. "Got a lot I wanna show you."

I fake-laughed like he'd cracked a joke and grazed his hand. "Gotta hit the ladies' room."

"I'll hold down the fort."

Crap. "Sorry, I gotta make the rounds. But I swear we'll catch up before the night's over."

"I'm gonna lock down a date for us," Jim declared.

My smile stretched wider. "Can't wait."

I retraced my steps, praying my facade held up and didn't betray my true feelings about this godforsaken place. Once out of the room, a quick scan confirmed I was solo. With only one other spot in mind, I bee-lined for the ladies' room to regroup.

Originally, I figured I'd just have to dodge Matthew or spin a yarn about my presence, but with Richard in the mix, things got trickier. Lucky for me, I had an inkling where to find the intel I needed. I just prayed the bathroom had the goods.

In no time, I found the jackpot.

A map.

To be specific, an evacuation map. It didn't show which businesses were where, but it did pinpoint elevators and stairs. With the floor and route locked down, I chose the stairs over the riskier elevator, kicked off my heels, and tiptoed from the bathroom toward the stairwell door.

My heart hammered as I eased the door open, sighing with relief that no alarm blared. Cold tile nipped at my bare feet as I climbed the stairs, and even though it seemed clean, I tried not to dwell on whatever grime might lurk below.

Reaching the third floor, I found only emergency lights on, casting an eerie red glow in the hall. The irony of how much Rachel would've loved this struck me. She always treated horror flicks like comedies. A twinge of pain shot through me, but it spurred me on, reminding me who I was doing this for.

I slipped into the hall and tried the first door. Locked.

Annoying, but not unexpected.

The second office was locked too, and too dark to see inside.

It was door number three where I struck gold. Wide open—though it freaked me out—I left it that way, figuring it'd be smarter to hide if I heard someone than risk them spotting a door out of place. Still, I couldn't shake the nerves as I tore my gaze from the doorway and approached the desk.

Using my phone as a flashlight, I rifled through the items on the desk and dove into the drawers. I knew finding anything this way was like hunting a needle in a haystack, but I had to give it a shot. No computer or tablet in sight, so hacking was off the table—both a relief and a pain.

In the second drawer on the left, I hit pay dirt.

A metal lockbox. Hauling it out, I plunked it on the desk and fished a paperclip from the middle drawer. The lock was basic, and I picked—or maybe broke—it in under a minute. Inside was a black, leather-bound journal. Flipping it open, a quick once-over of the numbers and names told me all I needed to know. While I couldn't be 100% sure this was what

Madison had mentioned, my gut screamed I hadn't just stumbled on some random info locked away by an innocent party.

A sound outside the office made me kill my phone light and carefully sidle back to the door. The journal was too bulky for my puny purse, so I gripped it tight as I stepped into the hall. Eyes strained and ears perked for any noise, I crept toward the staircase.

A faint footstep behind me was all the warning I got before a hand smothered my mouth and I was yanked off my feet.

Chapter Forty-Two

Ethan

THIS PART of town used to be a little shopping center plaza, like two decades ago. Couldn't tell you when the switch flipped, but now it was a bunch of office buildings, six to ten feet tall, all huddled together. Finding the right one was a piece of cake since it was the only one with a swarm of cars in the lot, but the sight of all those people took the wind right out of my sails.

I flashed my invite at the doorman and followed his directions to that room at the end of the hall, the whole time waiting for someone to shout "Imposter!" and toss me out on my ass. When that didn't happen, I took a deep breath and waltzed into the room.

It sure as hell wasn't what I expected - all these fancy caterers dolled up to the nines, weaving between rich dudes in posh suits and their much younger arm candy in sexy, elegant dresses. I felt like a damn hobo in comparison.

Telling myself I had just as much right to be there as anyone, I swiped a glass of bubbly from a passing server and sipped it as I scoped out the crowd, hunting for Aria. I'd barely been at it for ten minutes when a grinning blonde sauntered over, giving me the old bedroom eyes.

"Hey there," she said, holding out her hand, palm down. "I'm Tara."

Part of me wanted to tell her to take a hike, but pissing off someone who might have the intel I needed wasn't exactly a genius move.

"Ethan," I replied, taking her fingers lightly and pressing my lips to her knuckles.

"First time at one of these shindigs?" she asked, giving my outfit the stink-eye.

"Just got invited," I admitted. "Only applied yesterday, actually."

"Well, aren't you the lucky bastard," she practically purred, invading my personal bubble. "Barely a day in and you get to rub elbows with all of us."

I plastered on a smile. "Sounds like you're an expert."

“Sweetie, I’ve got experience for days,” she said, dragging her finger down my chest. “And acting chops good enough to pretend I don’t.” She laughed.

I grabbed her hand and tried to keep my voice gentle. “I’m sure you’re great, but you ain’t my type.”

“Let me guess.” Her face went stiff, and she aged ten years in a heartbeat. “You like ‘em young. Fresh outta pigtails, maybe?”

“I don’t fuck little girls,” I snapped. I let go of her hand and stepped back, not bothering to hide my disgust. “I was thinking more like a brunette. Tall, slender. Green eyes.”

Tara’s eyes narrowed like she knew someone who fit that bill to a T. All she said, though, was that she’d see what she could do. As she walked off, I wondered if I’d screwed up big time. Just because she thought I was some creep didn’t mean she was a bad person. And I couldn’t exactly blame her for thinking that. Not everyone in the sex business was a victim, but plenty were, especially in a joint like this that preyed on young, desperate women.

Still, it seemed smarter to trust the girl than just stand there, praying I spotted Aria and got her out of here before someone realized she’d lied to get her way in. I’d used my real name and info, so I was safe until I broke their precious rules. They had no reason to suspect someone who didn’t hide who they were.

At least that was what I kept telling myself every time one of the other men gave me a sideways look. I reminded myself that even though my attire wasn’t as formal as theirs, my bank account was every bit as big as theirs, if not bigger.

“Mr. Cole.” Richard Connors popped up out of nowhere. “Surprised to see you here.”

Richard’s voice and face were all pleasant-like, the kind of mask a guy wore when he didn’t want to make a scene but was low-key fuming...or freaked out. Didn’t know him well enough to tell which, but either way, it worked for me. For all he knew, I could whip out my phone and rat him out to Sarah about his two-timing ass.

“Richard.” I extended a hand. “Same goes for you. Shouldn’t you be by your

gorgeous fiancée mingling with her old flames at the reunion right now?”

“Mind your own damn business,” he snapped, leaving my hand hanging. “I thought you came back to Gig Harbor just for the reunion tonight.”

I shrugged. “Decided it’s more fun looking ahead than back.”

“Is that so?” He snatched my nearly empty glass and passed it off to a server. “Why don’t we have a little chat about how you found out about our private soiree?”

Aw, shit. Richard wasn’t talking like a guy who was scared his fiancée would find out he was hiring escorts. No, he was in deep. My gut told me it was more than that. Everything I’d picked up about him said he wasn’t the kind of guy to play second fiddle.

I’d bet my last buck he was running the whole damn show.

“Well, I figured it’s pretty obvious,” I said, keeping it casual. “Been in town for a week, got bored. So, I went online lookin’ for some local company and stumbled onto Give Me Some Sugar. Seemed like the best bet.”

He smiled, but his eyes were ice-cold. “Cut the crap, Mr. Cole.”

“Got no idea what you’re talking about.”

Movement behind Richard caught my eye. It was Tara, that blonde, and the smug look on her face told me everything. She’d ratted me out to Richard, said I was here looking for a very specific kind of woman.

Hell hath no fury, am I right?

“Don’t play dumb,” Richard spat before he caught himself. With a Herculean effort, he was all smooth professionalism again. “Now, let’s go somewhere private and continue our little chat.”

“Think I’ll pass,” I said.

I turned but found myself boxed in by a couple of dudes who were at least three inches taller and a whole lot wider. Their suits and stone-faced expressions screamed security.

I was so screwed.

“My guys here will make sure you don’t get lost,” Richard said, gesturing towards the exit.

The last thing I wanted was to go with Richard and his two goons, but I had a feeling that things would go south quickly if I made a scene. And I still hadn’t found Aria. If I could keep Richard away from her, it’d be worth whatever he had in store for me.

As I followed Richard to the elevator, I reminded myself he couldn’t do anything too messed up. I was too well known to just vanish, especially when everyone knew I’d come to Gig Harbor. The death of a young woman from a wealthy family had already put this place in the spotlight. If I went poof too, some heavy hitters would come looking. Jake would make damn sure of it.

Besides, all Richard knew was that I’d joined an escort service. Tara’s words might have made him suspicious that I wasn’t flying solo, but I hadn’t mentioned Aria’s name. As far as he knew, she’d gone back to Seattle after the funeral, grieving her sister and trying to move on.

We got off on the third floor, and the lack of proper lighting sent a shiver down my spine. He didn’t want anyone to know we were here, which didn’t bode well for me, no matter what I’d been thinking.

“You know,” he said, breaking the silence, “when I saw your application, I thought we might be two peas in a pod.” He glanced back at me. “I mean, we have the same taste in women.”

I bit back a nasty retort. I was nothing like this prick, and I didn’t want him thinking otherwise.

“Then I found out about another recent application and put two and two together.” He stopped in front of an open doorway. “I don’t believe in coincidences, Mr. Cole. You two should never have messed with my business.”

First thing I registered when I got shoved into the office was that the lights were on, but the blinds were drawn. Second thing was Aria, standing next to a desk with her arm held tight by Andy-freaking-Conners.

Chapter Forty-Three

Aria

ANDY'S GRIP on my arm tightened at the sound of voices in the hall, but he didn't seem nervous. Actually, he looked eager, and that just made my stomach do gymnastics.

"Please, Andy," I whispered. The tears in my eyes were from his arm-wrestling trick a minute ago, but I let him think they were from fear.

"Shut it, bitch." His voice was harsh, nothing like the sweet tones he'd used when comforting me about Rachel.

"What are you gonna do with me?" I was pretty sure I knew the answer, but that's what a timid, terrified girl would ask, right? And that's exactly who I wanted Andy to think I was.

The terrified part was true, but Andy didn't know that when I got scared, I got pissed. I'm all about fight, not flight or freeze. I'd stopped struggling when he'd pulled out a knife, but it wasn't because I'd given up. Andy didn't seem to think much of female intelligence, even when playing nice, but I guaranteed he'd regret that by night's end.

I was planning my great escape when four dudes entered the office. Two I didn't recognize, but their job was obvious. One I'd expected since realizing Andy grabbed me. And the other made my blood run cold.

"Ethan." My voice cracked on his name. "What are you doing here?"

"Don't even try it," Andy said, shaking me hard. "We're not idiots."

"Could've fooled me," I snapped back.

Andy raised a hand, but Richard barked at him to stand down.

"We need them to tell us what they know," Richard said. "If you slap her every time she sasses, we won't have much to work with. Sarah always said she was a disrespectful little bitch."

"Let her go, Richard," Ethan said. "She's just a kid thinking she can play

with the big boys.”

I knew what Ethan was doing but didn't appreciate it. The men laughed as I flipped him off.

“Who are you two working with?” Richard asked. “None of my sources heard anything about the cops looking into us. This is off the books, right?”

Sources? What the hell?

I closed my eyes and mentally facepalmed. I'd only thought that the cops wouldn't investigate Rachel's death because of her drug use. It never occurred to me that anyone here was dirty.

“It's Kris McPherson, right?” Richard asked. “You two go way back. He's the only one who'd do something like this just on your word.”

“You've got Marty Pickman in your pocket, don't you?” Ethan asked through gritted teeth. “That's why he never wanted to look into the website.”

Richard shook his head. “Actually, no. Good old Detective Pickman just sees what he wants to see.”

“A junkie killed by her jealous dealer ex-boyfriend,” I spat the words out. “You didn't have to pay him off to get him to focus on Lee Cohen.”

“Not a dime,” Richard said, gloating. “All Pickman needed was an anonymous tip telling him where Lee was hiding, and he did the rest for me.”

“Forget Pickman. What about McPherson?” Andy asked. “He could be listening right now.”

“Nah,” Richard said, eyeing Ethan. “If he was, he'd be coming in to rescue his pal. If these two are wearing wires, they're just recording this to give to him later.”

“Want us to search 'em?” One of the big guys next to Ethan leered at me. “Strip search seems like a good idea.”

“In your dreams, asshole,” I snapped. “Touch me, and I'll break your fingers.”

“Who are you working with?” Richard asked, standing in front of me. “And

remember, if you don't tell me, I'll let Benji here give you a real thorough check for wires."

I glared at him, letting my anger keep the fear at bay. "We're not working with anyone."

Richard shook his head and tutted. "I thought you'd be honest with me."

Benji took a step toward me, his intentions clear, but Ethan grabbed his arm.

"Keep your hands off her."

Benji's buddy didn't hesitate. He drove his fist into Ethan's gut. Ethan grunted in pain, bent forward, but didn't let go of Benji's arm.

"Ethan!" I struggled against Andy's hold, wincing as he tightened his grip.

"Keep. Your. Damn. Hands. Off. Her."

"Hold on a sec." Richard's voice was calm, almost conversational. "Seems like there's an easier way of getting info than beating it out of them."

"You sure?" Andy asked. "I don't think either of them is gonna tell us anything out of the kindness of their hearts."

"No," Richard agreed, facing me again. "But I bet they'll talk to keep each other safe."

Shit.

"What do you say, Aria? Will you tell me what I wanna know, or do I need to have those two work over your boyfriend a bit more?"

"I already told you we're not working with anyone," I said, trying to keep desperation out of my voice. "We weren't even here together tonight."

"She's right," Ethan said, hurt flashing in his eyes. "She didn't tell me she was coming here tonight. I had to...figure it out myself."

Dammit, Madison. I sighed. No way had Ethan guessed where I was. Last he knew, I'd gotten the boot. Madison and I were gonna have a chat when I made it back to Seattle, or if I did.

“Look, I don’t know what you think is going on here,” I said. “I signed up for the website in good faith. I just wanted to meet a nice guy who’s well-off and—”

I didn’t even see Andy’s backhand coming. Pain exploded across my face, and stars danced in my vision. I was vaguely aware of Ethan cursing, but I was more concerned with blinking back the tears filling my eyes.

“I thought you were gonna tell the truth,” Richard said, his beady eyes cold. “We both know you’re not the type of girl who does stuff like this. Not like Rachel. She’s a natural at this kind of work. Willing to do whatever it takes to get what she wants.”

“You son of a bitch,” Ethan growled.

Richard glanced at him. “We both know she gets it from her mother.”

“You’re a real bastard, you know that?” I snapped at him. “Sarah’s your fucking fiancée!”

He shrugged. “I’m well aware. Doesn’t mean she’s not a whore.”

It was the matter-of-fact way he said it that made me realize just how screwed Ethan and I were. If Richard wasn’t a fucking sociopath, he was damn close.

“But you’re not,” Richard continued, as if this was a totally normal conversation. “Which is how I knew when your picture popped up that you were up to something, especially when lover boy here showed up next.”

“Why did you approve our accounts, then?” I asked, my mind racing as I tried to figure out how Ethan and I were going to get out of here. “I mean, wouldn’t it make more sense to keep us away?”

“I needed to know what you knew,” Richard said. “Which I’m beginning to think is nothing.”

“So, you’re gonna escort us out of here and tell us to go back to Seattle?” Ethan asked. “Let Marty and Kris do their jobs and figure out what happened to Rachel?”

“The three of us don’t know each other,” Richard said, “but I’d hoped you’d realized by now that I’m not an idiot. Even if you’re not working with Kris,

you're not gonna walk away without answers.”

“You could just tell us what happened to Rachel,” I suggested. Something was nagging at the back of my mind, and I couldn't quite put it together, but my gut said to keep pushing him. “If your organization had nothing to do with her death, then you shouldn't care about telling us who her last date was.”

“We don't have to tell you shit,” Andy said.

Richard stepped close enough for me to smell his aftershave. “I'm only gonna say this once. Neither I nor my company had anything to do with Rachel's death.”

I had no doubt he was a skilled liar. The type of guy who ran an escort service wasn't going to be Mr. Truthful. The problem was, for some insane reason, I believed him.

“You're not seriously gonna let them go?” Andy asked, his expression livid. “They're gonna go straight to Ethan's police captain friend, and we're all gonna end up in jail.”

“Don't be an idiot,” Richard sighed, straightening his jacket cuffs. “I wish I could believe you'd just go back to Seattle and leave this alone, but I can't.”

His words were ominous, but only part of my mind registered them or the danger they represented. Something was off, and my brain wouldn't let it go, demanding I focus on it.

“Get their hands bound,” Richard continued. “Then, Andy, I want you to get rid of them.”

“Alone?” Benji asked.

“I can handle it,” Andy snapped. “Give me your gun.”

While the two men bickered, I went back over the recent conversation.

When it hit me, my head jerked up, and I stared at Richard with wide eyes.

“What did you do?” I asked, struggling to break free of Andy's hold and launch myself at Richard. “What the fuck did you do?!”

Richard's blow sent my head snapping backward. I heard Ethan roar in fury, but my ringing ears muffled everything else. I hardly registered something being put on my wrists, binding them in front of me. Time seemed to jump, and then I was half-walking, half being dragged down a dark corridor. Ethan was next to me, I realized suddenly, and it was his arms keeping me on my feet.

"Aria, love, we gotta make a run for it," Ethan's voice was low and urgent. "I need to know that you can do it."

I nodded, grimacing at the pain in my head.

"Stupid bastard," Andy muttered. "Wasting a prime piece of ass like this. If I was in charge..."

"Keep acting dazed," Ethan instructed. "We gotta catch Andy off-guard."

I pretended to stumble, and Andy cursed, yanking on my other arm.

"Keep walking, you stupid cunt, or I'll kill you both slowly."

I mumbled something incoherent.

"Perfect," Ethan whispered, holding a note of pride. "There's an exit door a few yards ahead of us. Count to ten, then pretend to fall. Stay down, and I'll take care of Andy."

My head had cleared enough by now that I remembered Andy asking for a gun. I wanted to argue with Ethan, but we didn't have the time. I could do more than playing opossum.

Ten seconds and then I dropped, forcing Andy to take all my weight. I rolled as I went down, hitting Andy directly in his legs. As he started to fall, I turned, jamming my elbow into his torso. Luck or something like it was with me, and I caught him in his diaphragm, making him lose all his air.

Ethan grabbed Andy before the latter could crush me, and as I struggled to my feet, Ethan used his bound hands to deliver a punch that knocked Andy out. As Andy crumpled to the floor, Ethan grabbed the gun Andy had dropped and motioned with it toward the door.

"Let's go."

We ran toward the door, bracing ourselves. I didn't allow myself even a moment of relief. Not with my new suspicion rattling about in my head.

Ethan's car was closest, and he managed to get his keys out of his pocket. Once in the car, I dug around in his glove compartment and found a knife. As soon as I sliced through the zip-tie of both of us, Ethan backed the car out of the parking spot and headed toward the road.

"Kris is gonna be pissed at what we did," Ethan said, "but at least he'll be able to use it to get a warrant."

"We can't go to the police yet."

Ethan shot me a confused glance. "What are you talking about? Do you need a hospital?"

"No, I'm fine." At his eyebrow going up, I clarified, "I mean, I'm not hurt enough for a doctor."

"Then we're going to the cops. I'll make sure Kris knows Richard has some cops on his payroll. We'll just have to keep the circle small—"

"I don't think Rachel's dead," I blurted out.

The car jerked as Ethan slammed on his brakes. As we sat there in the middle of an empty road, he turned toward me. "Say that again."

"When he said he didn't kill Rachel, I got the impression he was telling the truth," I quickly explained. "Which made me think about the rest of our conversation, and I realized he talked about Rachel in the present tense."

Ethan's jaw dropped as he stared at me. I could see him thinking and didn't say anything else, trusting he'd get to the same conclusion momentarily.

"Son of a bitch," he breathed. "You're right."

"And I don't think it was just one of those times where someone might forget that a loved one is dead," I said. "I think he's got her stashed somewhere."

"That's all the more reason for us to go to Kris," Ethan said.

I shook my head. "Once Richard figures out we escaped, he's gonna run. And I think he'll want to take Rachel with him."

“Shit.” Ethan ran his hand through his hair, a slightly wild look in his eyes.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “We need to get to her before he can.”

“But we don’t have any idea where to look.” He frowned. “I mean, the police searched everywhere in Gig Harbor they thought she could be hiding.”

“Did they search the cabin?”

Ethan’s eyes narrowed. “What cabin?”

Chapter Forty-Four

Ethan

KRIS WAS GOING to lose his shit when he found out Aria and I had dashed off to some godforsaken cabin in the boonies without waiting for the cops. I'd made Aria call him and spill the beans about everything that happened and where we were headed, then told her to power down her phone. That way, I could say with a straight face we never got any replies. Kris wouldn't buy it for a second, but hey, a guy's got to try for some plausible deniability, right?

"You really think this is where Dickhead Richard stashed her?" I asked, maneuvering the car along a twisty road surrounded by pines. "I mean, does Sarah even own it still? You'd think the cops would've stumbled onto it while digging through the Blackwell's dirty laundry."

"Actually, it's not in Sarah's name," Aria chimed in. "Turns out her folks had money up the wazoo but didn't trust her to save a dime for Rachel. So, they socked away some dough and property for her until she turns twenty-five. The cabin's part of the deal, and nobody can sell it. Hell, I think it's still technically under her grandparents' names."

"But Sarah knows about the cabin," I pointed out. "Why wouldn't she have clued in Marty?"

"Probably because it's so far out in the sticks, Rachel couldn't have made it here without wheels," Aria said. "Or, you know, Sarah just spaced it. She's got a knack for forgetting anything that doesn't concern her directly."

She had me there.

"Pull over here," she instructed. "If Richard's got goons monitoring the place, we don't want 'em to see us coming."

"You think that's a thing?" I asked.

"Hard to say," she replied. "I don't know him, but from what I gathered, he's not big on sharing. And I bet that goes for Rachel, too."

"You don't think he was gonna pimp Rachel out?" I'd been trying my damndest not to ponder why Richard had hidden Rachel away, but as I

parked the car, those thoughts came rushing back.

Aria shook her head. “My gut says he wants her all to himself.”

“I’m gonna kill that fucker.”

“Let’s get her back first,” Aria suggested. “Then we can plot the perfect murder.”

I reached over and cupped her cheek, my rage intensifying as I took in the damage she’d suffered. One side of her face was puffed up and turning black and blue. A tiny cut at the corner of her mouth had stopped bleeding, but still looked sore as hell.

“I’m gonna kill Andy and Richard both for this shit.”

She turned her head and kissed my palm. “We gotta move.”

I trailed her off-road, hating that if anyone was watching, she’d be the first one they’d spot. I felt like I was throwing her to the wolves instead of shielding her, but that kind of thinking had already landed us in hot water tonight. If she hadn’t thought I’d try to stop her from hitting the Sugar party, she would’ve let me in on her plan, and we could’ve tackled it together.

Much as it irked me, I’d learned from my screw-ups. Sure, I’d throw myself between her and danger, but we needed to face stuff as equal partners, or we’d never make it. Discovering Andy’s twisted scheme had really put things into perspective.

I’d do whatever it took to keep her.

We’d only been hoofing it for about fifteen minutes when Aria froze and reached back for me. I grabbed her hand, giving it a little squeeze, and followed her gaze.

The moon was showing off tonight, lighting our way through the trees and now casting its glow on a modest, single-story cabin. From our vantage point, we could see a faint light coming from somewhere deeper in the cabin than the front let on.

“No cars,” I observed. “That’s a plus.”

“If memory serves,” Aria whispered, “that light is from the back bedroom. There ain’t any windows, but it has a bathroom. Makes sense for Rachel to be in there.”

I whipped out Andy’s gun from my waistband. “Lead the way, but the second shit hits the fan, you’re getting behind me.”

She looked ready to argue, but bit her tongue and nodded instead.

Adrenaline pumped through me as we tiptoed around the cabin’s backside. My ears were on high alert for any sound of approaching vehicles, but all I heard was nature and our footsteps. Aria crouched down and fumbled around on the ground for something. Moments later, she stood up, a smug grin on her face, holding a key.

I rarely get all antsy, but as Aria slowly, carefully, turned the key in the lock to avoid making a peep, I felt like I was going to burst. My nerves were wound tight when she pushed the door open, and the sudden screech of hinges made my heart race and my finger twitch on the trigger. We froze, holding our breath, waiting to see if anyone would come check out the noise.

When nobody did after a minute, I prodded Aria. “We gotta pick up the pace. I doubt anyone’s here, but if you’re right, Richard could be en route. Best if we’re all long gone before he shows.”

She nodded in agreement and ventured into the house. I braced for the floor to groan underfoot, but it stayed quiet. She crept further in, and I followed, grateful for the window to our right that let in enough moonlight to dodge the table and chairs in the tiny kitchen.

If Aria was scared, she hid it well. Hell, she didn’t even seem nervous. This wasn’t exactly the time or place to think about this, but she was the most amazing woman I’d ever met. I couldn’t wait to introduce her to Jake and Abigail.

Instead of heading through the open doorway I assumed led to a living room, Aria veered down a hallway to our left. There were no windows here, but the visibility improved thanks to light pouring from an open door to our left.

I caught Aria’s shoulder, stopping her in her tracks, and put a finger to my lips to shush questions. I edged past her and raised the gun. Common sense

said a captive wouldn't be behind an open door, and I wasn't about to let Aria be the guinea pig to find out if someone was lying in wait.

Reaching the doorframe, I sucked in a breath and peeked around the corner. The light wasn't strong enough to blind me, and I scanned the room as fast as I could, expecting someone to start shooting or grab me. But nothing happened.

Pushing the door flat against the wall, I stepped in and swept the gun along my line of sight, surveying the room. It was a small bedroom without many hiding spots. Maybe someone could be under the bed, but that would be a lousy place for an ambush.

All these thoughts zipped through my head in seconds, then screeched to a halt when I realized the room wasn't empty. On the bed, a pale, skinny blonde lay bound, her body battered and grimy. Her eyes were shut, and for a moment, I feared we were too late.

"Rachel!" Aria cried out and dashed around me to the bed.

I let Aria go to her sister and took an extra minute to double-check we were the only ones in the room before shutting the door. It wasn't much, but it'd give us a head start if someone tried to barge in.

"Wake up, Rach." Aria gently patted her sister's shoulder in one of the few uninjured spots. "Come on, I need you to wake up."

"Let's get her untied," I suggested, setting the gun down on the end of the bed, still within arm's reach.

Aria tackled the ropes around Rachel's wrists while I started on the one binding her right ankle. The sight of her bound and in that skimpy dress sent my mind to dark places I didn't want to go. Aria's hunch about Richard keeping Rachel for himself had been spot-on, and this only confirmed it.

My hands shook with fury, and I had to force myself to take a few deep breaths to focus on the task at hand. Right now, our priority was getting her out of here and to a hospital. After that, I'd deal with getting her justice, one way or another.

"No!"

Rachel began struggling against the ropes, trying to kick at me. I wasn't worried she'd hurt me, but I sat back, raising my hands to show I wasn't a threat. At the head of the bed, Aria halted, tears welling up in her eyes. The younger girl's expression was wild, her gaze unfocused as she fought to get free.

"No! No!" she screamed, thrashing about even as the ropes chafed her raw wrists and ankles.

"Rachel," Aria spoke calmly, despite the turmoil etched on her face. Her voice was firm, attempting to give her sister something solid to latch onto. "Rachel, it's me. It's Aria. You're okay. It's me, Aria."

I got up and went to the door, cracking it open to check that we were still alone.

"Aria?"

When I turned back, Rachel stared up at Aria, bewildered.

"Yeah, it's me." Aria gave a sad smile and smoothed the other woman's tangled hair. "How about Ethan and I get these ropes off you, and you tell us what happened?"

"What are you doing here?" Rachel's voice was hoarse, and I glanced around for something for her to drink.

"Well, you were missing." Aria focused on the rope around Rachel's wrist. "And then you were dead."

"Dead?" Rachel's eyes widened. "What do you mean, I was dead?"

I found a water bottle on the tiny dresser and handed it to Rachel.

"Who are you?"

"It's okay," Aria reassured her. "You can trust him. He's been helping me look for you."

"It's good to see you." I held the bottle, carefully controlling how much she drank to avoid choking.

"I don't understand," Rachel said after downing half the bottle.

“While we’re untying you, why don’t you tell us what happened?” Aria suggested. “Start with how you ended up involved in that Sugar website.”

“Right.” Rachel turned her head as if she couldn’t bear to look at Aria while she talked. “Have you met Mom’s new guy?”

“Yeah, he’s an asshole,” Aria said dryly. “And we know he’s in charge of Give Me Some Sugar.”

“A couple months ago, I snuck into the house looking for some cash and he caught me. I was sure he’d call the cops and have me arrested, especially after what he did.”

“I found your journal.” Aria’s voice was soft. “I only read it because I hoped it’d help me find you.”

“So, you know he convinced Mom to have me committed after you left.”

“I’m so sorry, Rachel.” Aria wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. “If I would’ve known—”

“You couldn’t have known,” Rachel cut in. “And it wasn’t your fault. It was theirs.”

I breathed a sigh of relief as I finally untied the knot, but my anger flared again at the sight of the bleeding abrasions on her ankle.

“Thanks,” Rachel said, moving her leg. “Anyway, when he caught me at the house, Richard said he had a proposal. I thought he’d tell me to screw him or at least blow him. He’d always been ogling me.”

“I’m going to cut that fucker’s balls off,” I growled, clenching my fists. Rachel’s eyes widened, and I felt a pang of guilt. “Sorry.”

She shook her head. “I suggest using a rusty serrated knife.”

The comment surprised a laugh out of both Aria and me. That was when I knew, no matter how long it took Rachel to heal, she would eventually be okay.

“He used the break-in to blackmail you into working on the site,” Aria guessed.

Rachel nodded. “That last night, I had a ‘date’ with a judge. Me and another girl, actually. She said her name was Neve, but I don’t know if that was real or not. She also said she was eighteen, but I had my doubts about that, too.”

Rachel winced as her arm was finally freed. She grimaced as she moved it, blood dripping from the places where the rope had cut into her skin.

“She’d run away from an abusive home a couple of years before she ended up working for Richard, but she could still pull off that innocent act, you know? It’s really popular with certain guys.”

My stomach churned, and I fought the urge to curse or throw up. Now, both seemed equally likely.

“This judge always enjoyed having two girls at once, and when he saw Neve and me together, he decided we looked enough alike to fulfill some twisted sister fantasy he had,” Rachel sneered. “Fucking bastard couldn’t get it up at first and blamed us.”

The judge made my shit list right under Richard and Andy. I’d use every cent of my considerable resources, if I had to, but I’d see them all behind bars... or in the ground. Right now, I was leaning toward the latter.

“He started getting rough with Neve,” Rachel winced as I freed her other ankle. “Had his hands around her neck while he was... I don’t think he meant to do it, but when he finished, she was dead.”

“Shit,” Aria breathed.

“Yeah,” Rachel’s gaze was distant. “The judge called Richard, who sent Andy to fix things.”

“I can’t believe I ever thought he was a nice guy,” Aria said angrily.

“I did too,” Rachel admitted. “That was then I realized how deep he was into it. He told the judge he’d take care of it and sent him on his way.”

“I want that bastard’s name,” I said.

Rachel gave me a curious look. “Judge Morrison.”

“Motherfucker. I know him.”

Aria gave me a surprised look.

“Not well,” I clarified, “but he’s from Seattle and goes to a lot of the same fundraisers and charity events I do.”

“Who are you again?” Rachel asked.

“It’s a long story,” Aria said. “What happened after the judge left?”

“Obviously, I was a witness and Richard didn’t trust me to keep my mouth shut about what I’d seen.” Rachel turned her attention back to her sister. “But he told Andy not to kill me because he wanted me for himself.”

“Please tell me Sarah didn’t know about that, at least,” Aria said.

“I don’t think so.” Rachel shook her head. “Anyway, because Neve didn’t have any family, Andy said he was just going to dump her somewhere. Then he bashed her head a few times and told me that’s what he’d do to me if I gave him any problems. Then he brought me here because there wasn’t anyone around. He liked to leave the light on, and the door open just to make me feel helpless. Asshole.”

“Fuck.” The pieces all clicked together. “That’s whose body they found in the harbor.”

“But Kris said the ME positively identified her as Rachel through dental records.” Aria pulled the last bit of the knot free.

Rachel held her wounded hands against her body. “Dr. Bunson is a member of the site. Richard always told us he had someone who could make us disappear if we got out of line.”

“Kris was at the autopsy,” I remembered suddenly. “I’ll bet the good doctor was going to rule the death an accidental drowning or something, but because Kris was there, Bunson couldn’t mess with the cause of death.”

“And he went with the dental records because it wouldn’t involve sending DNA to another lab,” Aria said. “Richard said he had sources. Looks like it’s not just in the Gig Harbor police department.”

“My turn for a question,” Rachel said as she struggled to swing her legs over the edge of the bed. “If everyone thinks I’m dead, how did you guys figure

out I was here and alive?”

Aria and I exchanged glances. I shrugged, happy to let her decide how much to tell her friend.

“Let’s just say we need to get out of here before Richard and Andy show up,” Aria said. “Once we get you to a hospital, I promise I’ll explain everything.”

Rachel had just agreed when we heard a familiar and unwelcome sound.

Cars.

“Shit,” I muttered.

“You think it’s Richard and Andy?” Aria asked. “We need to get out of here.”

“No, no, no!” Rachel shook her head. She tried to stand and stumbled, catching herself on the edge of the mattress. “You can’t be here! They’ll hurt you, Aria! You need to go!”

“Not without you.” Aria put her arm around Rachel’s waist and helped the other woman stand.

“Please, Aria, you don’t understand,” Rachel pleaded. “Richard can do whatever he wants.”

“Like hell he can,” I said as I opened the door. “You two stay here while I check it out. If you hear me yell, you two get out without me.”

“We’re all getting out of here together,” Aria said sharply.

I ignored her and looked at Rachel. “You get her out of here. Understand?”

Her eyes locked with mine, and I was surprised to see them clear and lucid. She nodded, and despite everything, I believed that she’d really do it. If she had to drag Aria out of here herself, she’d find a way to do it.

Steeling myself, I slipped into the hall and walked back the way Aria and I had come. The gun was a comfortable weight in my hand, and I knew enough about shooting to know that the best place to aim if you weren’t a crack shot was the torso, but I wasn’t an idiot. I’d never actually shot a gun, and I didn’t want my first time to be with the lives of two women on the line.

As I went, I tried not to think about just how important these two women were to me. The last thing I needed was a distraction.

Then I reached the end of the hall and saw the blue and red lights flashing against the walls. The wave of relief that hit me was almost enough to take out my legs, but I reminded myself that Richard had cops on his payroll. I couldn't just go rushing out there, assuming they were friends.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and my first impulse was to ignore it, but something in my gut said I should check it. The message on the screen was simple.

"It's Kris. I'm coming in."

Chapter Forty-Five

Aria

MY CHEEK THROBBED LIKE HELL, and I tried not to touch it, knowing that it'd only make things worse. I'd taken some over-the-counter painkillers when I arrived, but man, they were taking their sweet time to kick in.

"All right, Miss Reed." Detective Pickman plopped down into the chair opposite me. "Why don't you start at the beginning?"

"You mean when I discovered that Rachel Blackwell wasn't actually six feet under?" I asked. "Or way back when I found out that Rachel had a hot date with a dude from an escort service on the night she vanished, and you idiots didn't bother looking into it?"

The detective's eyes narrowed. "You know, Sarah told me about you. Said you had a shit attitude."

"I'm sure she did," I said, leaning back in my chair. "Maybe that's where we should start. Well, not with Sarah, exactly, but Richard."

"Richard Connors."

I nodded. "He's a grade-A douchebag."

"Is that so?"

I could practically see the gears turning in his head as he tried to figure out how I'd pin everything on a wealthy and prominent businessman.

"Just so you know, he confessed to Ethan and me he's got cops on his payroll," I said.

Marty's cheeks turned beet red. "Are you accusing me of being dirty?"

My shoulders ached from Andy's manhandling. "Actually, no. Richard specifically told me you weren't a police source. However, you were happy to act on the information that Richard provided you about Lee."

Marty's hands clenched for a moment before he let out a long breath. "Why don't you start with that?"

As I told him everything and got to the part about Andy taking Ethan and me down that hall, my hands shook. I'd been running on so much adrenaline that I hadn't really processed everything, including how much danger we'd really been in. Now, as I recounted the way Ethan and I had gotten free, it hit me full force, and I started gasping for air.

"Are you all right?" The concern in Marty's voice was half-assed, as if he thought I was being dramatic or making shit up.

"Need a minute." I put my head down and closed my eyes, focusing on my breathing.

I wanted Ethan. I needed the grounding his touch gave me, the reassurance from his voice.

But he was down the hall with another detective, giving his part of the story, and if I wanted to see him again soon, I needed to get through this.

The panic faded, and I straightened, steeling my resolve. "I'm okay. I want to keep going."

I shared how we'd made it to Ethan's car, where I'd explained my revelation about Rachel not being dead. I talked about the cabin I remembered being in Rachel's name and how Ethan and I went to check it out, and how we found Rachel there.

"You said that she told you what happened to her," Marty said. "What, exactly, did she say?"

For the next few minutes, I relayed everything Rachel had told us, trying to get as close to verbatim as I could.

Once I finished, I signed a paper saying that everything I'd said was the truth to the best of my knowledge. Marty told me I could go. But not before he warned me not to leave town for a while.

I refrained from rolling my eyes and walked out of the interrogation room. Still trying to decide if I was going to wait for Ethan, I heard a woman shout my name. I barely had time to register Sarah running toward me before she grabbed my arms and shook me.

“Where is she?! Where is my daughter?!”

I took a step back, pushing her hands off me. “Why don’t you ask your fiancé?” I snapped.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Sarah glared at me.

“It means your obsession with finding a rich man nearly killed your daughter.” All my anger over the years came bubbling over. “If you’d put her first even once, if you made her feel loved for who she was, none of this would’ve happened. You need to just stay the fuck away from her.”

The last word had barely left my mouth before she punched me on the already abused side of my face.

I cried out; the pain surprised me with its intensity.

“You little bitch. How dare you talk to me like that! After all I’ve done for you!”

I looked up to see her raising her hand to hit me again, but before she could bring it down, fingers closed around her wrist. Ethan yanked Sarah back, fury written on his face.

“Don’t ever touch her again,” he shoved her away from him.

For a moment, I thought she’d go after him, but suddenly Kris was there, pulling her arms behind her back.

She called me every name under the sun as Kris led her away, but then Sarah turned her ire onto Ethan.

“I knew you were fucking her. You always would do anything for some pussy.” She snarled at him. “I never should’ve fucked you back then. If I hadn’t been so desperate to get pregnant, I never would’ve touched you.”

Ethan’s face went white as Sarah confirmed any suspicions he’d had about the probability of him being Rachel’s father, but he didn’t say a word to her as Kris dragged her off.

I reached out and took Ethan’s hand, the need to reassure him nearly overwhelming. I wanted to ask him if he was okay, but I knew that was a

crazy question. Both of us had been through so much over the last several hours—hell, over the last week—that I doubted either of us knew what we felt at all.

He pulled me close and wrapped me in a tight hug, his touch saying everything he didn't have the words for. We stood there for a moment, and then he kissed the top of my head.

“Let's get you to the hospital,” he said quietly. “Have someone look at you and then get you to see Rachel.”

Chapter Forty-Six

Ethan

THE SILENCE in the car was so thick, you could cut it with a knife as we drove to the hospital. I wondered what Aria was thinking about. Was it the young woman we were going to see, or the bitch who'd just slapped her silly? Was she dreaming about our future together, or did she just want to put this whole shitshow behind her?

I didn't ask, of course. But playing the "What's Aria Thinking?" game was a damn sight better than focusing on Sarah's parting shot—that I really was Rachel's father and the nuclear bomb that could drop in my life any second. So, I kept up my mental guessing game until we pulled up to the hospital, trying to avoid dwelling on the ticking time bomb that was my newfound paternity.

At the hospital, Aria and I went our separate ways while doctors poked, prodded, and annoyed the crap out of both of us. I didn't think I needed the medical once-over, but it was the price of admission for Aria, so I gritted my teeth and bore it. When we finally got back together, Aria looked like she'd been through the wringer, same as me—despite that, she was hell-bent on seeing Rachel.

"Think they'll let us see her?" Aria asked as we approached the front desk to find Rachel's room.

"Leave it to me."

Moments later, after we promised not to upset Rachel or bother any other patients, we found ourselves outside Rachel's private room.

"I'll be out here," I told Aria. "Take your time, and I'll drive you back to the hotel."

"You're not coming in?" She looked surprised.

I shook my head. "She's been through enough. She needs a friend right now, not a stranger."

"You might not be a stranger," Aria said cautiously, studying my face for a

reaction.

“I am to her,” I reminded Aria. “She doesn’t need that drama right now.”

Aria took my hand, intertwining our fingers. “Then come in for me. It’s been three years since we last had a real conversation, and we didn’t exactly leave things on a great note.”

“Pretty sure rescuing her is gonna smooth things over,” I said, giving her hand a reassuring squeeze. “But if you really want me there…”

“I do.” She lifted our hands and pressed a kiss to my knuckles. “I don’t think I can do it alone.”

I stared at her. “Really? After everything you’ve pulled off this week. You’ve already proven you’re the strongest woman I know.”

Her cheeks colored. “Please, just come.”

“Alright,” I relented. “I’ll be by your side for as long as you want me.”

As the words left my mouth, I realized I meant them for more than just the next few hours. A glimmer in Aria’s eyes hinted she suspected as much, but neither of us verbalized it. That conversation could wait.

The door was ajar, and the bedside lamp cast a dim light on Rachel’s face, which was turned toward the wall. We couldn’t tell if she was awake or asleep until she heard us and turned our way.

Her puzzled gaze landed on me, but her face lit up when she saw Aria. Fumbling with the bed controls, she raised the back to sit up.

“Aria, I’m so glad to see you.” She reached out her hands, and that’s when I saw it.

I froze, yanking Aria to a halt. Both women stared at me, but all I could do was gawk at Rachel’s upper arm. It had been hidden under blood and dirt the last time I’d seen her.

“Is something wrong?” Aria asked. “Ethan?”

“That mark,” I finally croaked.

“This?” Rachel furrowed her brow, touching the crescent-shaped mark on her skin. “It’s a birthmark.”

“It is,” I agreed hoarsely, closing the gap between us and the bed. “Matches mine.”

I rolled up my sleeve and showed them my arm.

“Ethan?” Aria asked.

“My mom has one too,” I said, feeling light-headed. “Same spot, shape, and color.”

“Aria,” Rachel grabbed her sister’s hand, “who is he?”

I shook my head to clear it. “Sorry, I’m Ethan Cole, and for now, just know that I’m a friend of Aria’s. The rest can wait.”

“I don’t think so,” Rachel said with a bitter laugh. “I want to know what’s happening.”

“Tell her,” Aria said softly. “She has a right to know.”

“I don’t even know where to start,” I admitted.

“How about you start with who you are to my sister,” Rachel said, a steely glint in her eyes.

Aria flushed. “Probably not the best place to begin.”

Wanting to spare her any more embarrassment, I figured diving in headfirst was the way to go.

“I’m originally from Gig Harbor,” I said. “Left twenty years ago, right after high school.”

Rachel’s frown deepened, her eyes flicking to where Aria and I still held hands.

“And the last few months I lived here, I was dating your mom.”

Rachel’s head snapped up. “My parents were together in high school.”

“I know.”

Aria's hand squeezed mine, lending me strength and comfort.

"From what I've pieced together recently, Sarah wanted to marry Derek and thought getting knocked up was the ticket," I said.

"Yeah, it ain't exactly a secret Dad married her because he had to," Rachel replied, crossing her arms. "Trust me, I've heard it all. I was an accident. They never should've gotten hitched. It's all my fault."

I couldn't stop myself from reaching out and placing my hand on her shoulder. "None of that shit was your fault, and your parents were assholes for dumping it on you."

She sniffled and shrugged.

Taking the hint, I removed my hand, but continued the story. "Your mom wasn't getting pregnant. Seems like Derek was always careful."

"Yeah, he loved throwing that in her face," Rachel said. "He'd accuse her of poking holes in the condoms. Not something a kid needs to hear."

Biting back my anger, I went on. "Sarah decided if Derek wouldn't get her pregnant, she'd sleep with guys dumb enough not to question why she didn't want protection."

Rachel closed her eyes, tears glistening on her lashes.

"Long story short, I was one of those dumb guys. I thought she loved me. Right before graduation, she dumped me, feeding me some crap about her dad not approving, even though nobody knew we were together. By the time my dad and I moved to Seattle, I'd heard Sarah was engaged to Derek, and they were expecting."

"But you think you're my father," Rachel said bluntly. "Because of a birthmark?"

"That's part of it," I admitted. "But things Sarah's said lately made me think she'd always known Derek wasn't your biological father."

"But you are."

"The timing's right," I said. "And there's the birthmark."

“A birthmark is not proof, and it still doesn’t explain why you’re here. And how did you get hooked up with my sister?” Rachel’s tone was sharp and defensive.

“I was in Seattle when I saw a news story about a missing girl from Gig Harbor,” I explained. “I recognized the last name and called an old friend who confirmed you were Sarah’s daughter.”

“I saw the same news report,” Aria added. “We both came back to Gig Harbor to help find you, but we didn’t know that when we met on our first night here.”

“And you don’t think it’s weird?” Rachel asked Aria. “That you’re hooking up with someone who might be my dad?”

“When have our lives ever not been weird?” Aria countered. “Besides, it’s not a hookup.” She glanced at me, blushing. “We haven’t talked about what this is yet, but it’s something more.”

“Yes, it is.” I squeezed her hand before focusing on Rachel. “I don’t expect anything from you,” I said. “You set the pace. Tell me what you want and when, and we’ll go from there.”

“I want to know,” Rachel said. “I’ve lived my whole life with my parents’ voices in my head telling me what a mistake I was.”

“Rachel,” Aria began.

“No, Aria.” Rachel shook her head. “It’s okay,” Rachel said, looking at me. “I’d like to have a paternity test done right away if you’re okay with it.”

I nodded, unable to trust my voice. The emotions churning inside me threatened to choke me. No matter the test’s outcome, I knew my life would never be the same. The man who’d come home to show the naysayers he’d made something of himself and show the girl who got away what she’d missed wasn’t the same man standing in this hospital room.

“I know you have a life in Seattle,” Rachel said to Aria. “And I have a shit-ton of baggage here, but I’d really like to have a relationship with you again.”

“Of course.” Aria took both of Rachel’s hands, tears shimmering on their

cheeks. “We’ll sort out the details later. The important thing is you’re safe and clean. That’s all I’ve ever wanted for you.”

Rachel looked at me. “You sweet-talked your way in here. Think you can work more magic and get a nurse to take some cheek swabs so we can get started?”

Shit. When she said, “right away,” I assumed it’d be before she left the hospital, not past midnight. Not that I was complaining. I was as eager as she was to know the truth. A week with this hanging over my head was bad enough. I couldn’t imagine what she’d gone through, dealing with all the crap Sarah and Derek had piled on her.

“I can do that,” I said, then hesitated. “One thing first. No matter what this test says, you need to know I’m here for you.”

Rachel pressed her lips together, fresh tears spilling over. She nodded, and that was enough. As I walked away, I heard Aria speak.

“Oh, about your mom. She’s kinda in jail right now...”

Chapter Forty-Seven

Aria

NEITHER ETHAN nor I spoke during the drive back to his hotel, which I appreciated because my head was spinning. I felt like I'd been running on pure adrenaline since I'd left for the Sugars party, and I'd reached the point where my body just couldn't take it anymore. I'd kept my shit together at the hospital because both Rachel and Ethan needed me to be their rock. But now? Now, I could feel my strength slipping away, and I was struggling just to keep my eyes open.

At some point, though, I must've lost the fight, because one second, I was staring at the moonlight on the harbor, and the next, I was in Ethan's arms as he carried me toward the hotel doors. I thought about protesting, maybe saying I could walk, but before the words could even form, the rocking motion dragged me back under.

I didn't know shit until I opened my eyes and saw the red numbers on some hotel clock blaring ten eighteen am. Even then, it took a sec for my brain to cut through the sleep fog and register that it was late morning, and my lazy ass was still in bed.

Then the memories of the last twenty-four hours came crashing down, and it tempted me to just close my eyes again and pretend I hadn't opened them in the first place. Behind me, I felt the mattress dip, and then an arm snaked over my waist, pulling me back against a hard, familiar body.

"Morning," Ethan's voice was heavy with sleep, but I could feel one part of his body was wide the fuck awake.

"Good morning." I traced my fingers along his arm, enjoying the feel of his coarse hair against my fingertips. "I don't remember getting into bed last night."

"You were out cold by the time we reached the room." He planted a kiss on the back of my neck. "You have any idea how hard it is to undress dead weight?"

I snorted. "Is that why I'm only in my underwear?"

“I figured if it was that hard to undress you, I wasn’t even gonna try dressing you,” he said. “Especially since I didn’t wanna mess with your injuries.”

I laughed again, then rolled over, wincing when my cheek hit the pillow and seeing a shadow cross Ethan’s eyes.

“I’m fine. My injuries are nothing.” I touched his jaw and ran my thumb over the corner of his mouth. “I’m not gonna be doing any Olympic shit anytime soon, but I heal fast.”

“And here I was hoping for an athletic morning.” Ethan winked.

I rolled my eyes, but before I could shoot back a snarky response, my stomach growled like a fucking bear.

“How ‘bout this?” I suggested. “I’ll shower while you order some breakfast. Then, after we’re clean and fed, we can sit down and talk about what’s next for both of us.”

The laughter vanished from his face, and I hated my words had done it, but we needed to talk. We’d both known that once we settled things with Rachel, we’d have to have a conversation. Sure, there were still a few loose ends, like the paternity test and the authorities dealing with charges, but it was time for us to face our own shit.

Ethan kissed my nose. “Pancakes, bacon, and fruit?”

“Sounds perfect.” I rolled over before I could change my mind. Staying in bed with him all day was way too tempting.

I groaned as I climbed out of bed, and trust me, it wasn’t a sound of pleasure. I wasn’t lying about being okay, because my injuries weren’t that bad, but I was definitely sore. But compared to Rachel? Hell, I was in peak fucking condition.

The bathroom mirror almost made me doubt my earlier claim. Sure, my hair was a tangled mess, but it was the battered side of my face that really stole the show. I knew it felt swollen, but damn, now I could see how bad it was. From my cheekbone down to my jaw was all puffy and discolored. Even my eye was a bit squinty, which I hadn’t noticed until now. The corner of my mouth had been split, and a fuckin’ inch-long cut sliced across my cheek.

“This’ll be a blast,” I muttered as I stepped into the shower.

The hot water was heaven on my back, but I tensed up when I turned into the spray, knowing it was going to hurt like a bitch. The pain jolted the last of the sleep from my system, and by the time I got out, I felt ready for whatever came next.

Fifteen minutes later, I joined Ethan at the table where he’d set up our breakfast spread. As we chowed down, we chatted about how long the paternity test might take and how many people from Give Me Some Sugar were going to be arrested when the investigation wrapped up. The ledger connecting the member ID with real names, should be enough evidence to get search warrants for the members' personal computers, which should provide able evidence.

Neither of us mentioned Seattle or heading home until we’d polished off our food, and there was nothing left to do but face the music.

I kicked things off with something I’d been meaning to say since last night. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about going to the Sugar party.”

Ethan reached across the table and took my hand, his thumb stroking my knuckles. “I’m glad you called Madison, at least.”

“Right, she’s gonna kick my ass,” I said with a smile. “I texted her while we were on our way to see Rachel last night, but I’m not looking forward to what she’ll do when I get home.”

“I should’ve made it easier for you to talk to me,” he said. “If I hadn’t treated you like a child, you might’ve said something to me, and we could’ve gone together.”

“I’m pretty sure we would’ve ended up in the same shitstorm,” I said. “Neither of us guessed that Richard and Andy were the masterminds behind all of it.”

“Still,” he said, “we should’ve been more open, both in talking and listening.”

I flipped my hand and squeezed his fingers. “Then let’s promise to do that from here on out.”

His gaze locked onto mine, and the hope I saw shining there made my heart skip a beat. Without a word, he stood and led me over to the couch. Only after we were both nestled into the comfier seats did he finally speak up.

“I don’t see any point in dancing around this.” His expression was dead serious, his eyes intense as they met mine. “I don’t want this to end. I know it’s fast, but I’ve fallen in love with you, and I wanna be with you.”

His words left me breathless. I hadn’t expected him to just lay it all out there, straight up confessing that he was in love with me.

“If you don’t feel the same way,” he continued, “or you’re just not there yet, that’s okay.”

“I am!” I blurted out. My face flamed, but I pressed on. “I mean, I do. I feel the same way.”

Relief washed over his features, showing how worried he’d been that his feelings were one-sided.

“Some people might think it’s too fast, but I don’t give a fuck,” I said, reaching out to touch his knee. “I know what I feel, and it’s like nothing I’ve ever felt before.”

“I know things could be difficult because of Sarah and Rachel,” he began. “And if the paternity test comes back positive, it could make things really weird—”

“I don’t care,” I said firmly. “What’s in the past is in the past. Hopefully, Rachel and I can fix our friendship, but no matter what, you’re my future. You and me. That’s what matters.” A thought suddenly hit me. “Unless it’s too much for you.”

Ethan gripped me behind my neck and yanked me to him, his mouth hot and demanding on mine. The kiss was brief, but still left me gasping for air.

He rested his forehead against mine. “Let me make this perfectly clear. Nothing in this life or the next could be too much. The only thing that could ever make me walk away from you is if you tell me, you don’t want me.”

I shook my head, lifting my hands to his cheeks. The scruff was rough

against my palms, and the sensation sent tingles of arousal through me.

“For as long as you want me, I’ll be here. I don’t give a damn what anyone else says. I’ll fight everyone and everything that tries to come between us.”

“Fuck, Aria,” he groaned, his fingers flexing on the back of my neck.

I brushed my lips against his. “No matter what happens, no matter what we have to figure out or what obstacles we have to overcome, we do it together. Got it?”

“Together,” he echoed. “Now and always.”

“I like the sound of that.” I grinned and then pushed Ethan back.

He gave me a puzzled look that quickly morphed into a heated understanding when I moved to straddle his lap.

“I want you,” I said, running my hands down his chest to grab the bottom of his t-shirt. After I pulled the shirt off and tossed it aside, I continued my exploration of his muscular torso and kept talking at the same time. “I need to feel you inside me. Nothing between us, just skin on skin.”

He groaned, his hands going to my knees and sliding up under the hem of my sundress. I shivered at the heat of his palms traveling up my thighs to my hips, unable to stop myself from rocking against him, the bulge between us thickening.

Dropping my hands, I kept my eyes locked on his as I worked his jeans open. He let out a curse as I cupped him through his underwear, and I couldn’t help smiling. I loved the feel of him swelling in my hand.

“Any objections to me taking this inside me bare?” I asked, dipping my hand into his boxer briefs and curling my hand around his shaft. Suddenly, I froze, a memory hitting me. “Shit, Ethan. I didn’t even think about Sarah—”

“Hey, past is past,” he reminded me. “I trust you.”

I stroked him from base to tip, enjoying the way he shuddered when I swiped my thumb across the top. “And I trust you.”

One of his hands moved to the juncture of my legs, his fingers moving over

the soft cotton of my panties to press the heel of his hand against my mound. I shifted my hips, increasing the pressure until I moaned.

“I can feel how hot you are,” he murmured. “Are you wet?”

I made an affirmative sound, my eyes fluttering closed as he worked a finger beneath the elastic of my panties. When he stroked the sensitive skin, I took in a shuddering breath that turned into a curse the moment he slid a finger inside me.

“Fuck, baby, you’re soaked.”

I nodded, raising up on my knees to give him more room to maneuver. While he eased a second finger into my pussy, I pulled his cock free, fisting it with the tight, almost rough jerks I knew he liked. When he started to thrust into my hand, I moved, needing him inside me before either of us came.

I took him an inch at a time, torturing both of us as he stretched me and I squeezed him, our bodies adjusting to that perfect fit that only came with the right partner. The feel of him with nothing between us was more intense than I’d ever imagined possible, as if that idea of two becoming one had become a reality.

When I came to rest on his lap, I could barely breathe, and Ethan’s muscles were impossibly tense beneath me. I felt like the slightest movement would set us both off, and I fought my desire to move until I had myself back under control.

“I don’t know how long I can last,” Ethan admitted. “You feel too damn good.”

“It’s okay.” I leaned forward and kissed the side of his neck. “We have all day, every day.”

He stared up at me, eyes blazing with blue fire. “I love you.”

Cupping his face between my hands, I gave him a lingering kiss before saying, “I love you, too.”

The two of us moved together in the oldest of rhythms, one that we didn’t need to talk about or discuss. It was just something that we knew, an instinct

that the two of us shared in the same way we'd had that immediate connection.

His hands came up to pull down the front of my dress, freeing my breasts. Cupping each of them, he moved his mouth back and forth between the two, flicking his tongue against my nipples before finally taking one between his lips. I cried out, arching my back to push my breast closer, and he responded with a nip of his teeth.

“Ethan!” I dug my fingers into his hair, scraping my nails against his scalp and then running them down the back of his neck to his shoulders.

“Come for me,” he demanded before moving to my other breast.

As he suckled the sensitive flesh, the pressure inside me built until I couldn't hold back any longer. I shattered with a scream I couldn't suppress. My entire body stiffened and the moment my pussy clamped down, his hips jerked up once, twice. He let out a long groan as his cock pulsed, emptying inside me with a burst of wet heat.

I leaned into him, and his arms circled me, holding me close. We might've been in a hotel room forty-five minutes from where we lived, but like this, we were home.

Chapter Forty-Eight

Ethan

ARIA and I plopped our asses down next to Rachel's bed, during actual visiting hours for once, and waited for her to rejoin the land of the living. She'd nodded off shortly before we got there but had informed the nurse to let her know if we swung by during her snooze fest. It'd only been about fifteen minutes, but I was already bouncing my leg like a jackrabbit on Red Bull.

"Want something to drink?" I asked, springing to my feet. "Vending machine or cafeteria?"

"A bottle of water would be great," Aria replied. "You okay?"

"Just feeling antsy about loose ends, that's all." I bent down and pecked the top of her head. "I'll relax once Kris rounds up his posse and makes all those arrests."

I conveniently left out the bit about the paternity test results. Aria was well aware I was wound up tighter than a Swiss watch about that.

"Back in a sec!" I declared.

I'd spotted a vending machine loitering near the elevator and made a beeline for it. Truth be told, we didn't have too many loose ends left. Yesterday, post-couch-love-fest, Aria and I had launched into a chat about how long we planned to stay in Gig Harbor.

That led to a rant about Aria's asshat boss who'd been bombarding her with rude emails since she gave him the old dial tone on Saturday morning. At least that was a problem I could tackle.

One call to Jake, and he spent the morning conspiring with legal to whip up a freelance contract, allowing Aria to work for our company without the employee-employer relationship drama.

Abigail was so stoked I'd found someone to dote on that she sent chocolate-covered strawberries and champagne to our hotel with a card that read, "Don't fuck this up."

Aria laughed so hard she nearly cried when she saw that.

I couldn't wait for her to meet my friends.

Except our other decision meant that little meet and greet would be delayed.

With work squared away, Aria declared she wanted to stick around until Rachel was out of the hospital. Even if I wasn't Rachel's dad, I wanted that for her, too. Rachel had never gotten the support she deserved from the deadbeats she called parents. Aria and I were on the same page: Rachel needed to be as far away from Sarah as humanly possible.

Naturally, my thoughts drifted to Sarah. Kris had asked if Aria wanted to press charges against Sarah for assault, but she'd declined, despite the pain still lingering from the blow. But Sarah was still Rachel's mom, after all. For once, someone was putting Rachel first.

Pride for Aria made me grin like an idiot. It had taken me a hot minute to want a serious relationship, but now it all made sense. I'd been waiting for her all along.

After snagging two bottles of water, I whirled around to head back to Rachel's room. The elevator doors across from me slid open with a ding, and who should appear but the last person I ever expected to see?

"Marty?"

"Ethan." He sighed, suddenly looking tired. "I had a feeling you'd be here."

"I'm here with Aria visiting Rachel," I said. "And as far as I know, that's completely legal."

Marty rubbed his balding dome. "Look, can we just call it quits? I was an asswipe when we were kids, and I might've let that cloud my judgment when it came to you."

"Might?" I arched an eyebrow. "You've had a bullseye on my back since I set foot in Gig Harbor again."

"That's not—" Marty clammed up when he caught my glare. "All right. I saw you and thought..." He shook his head.

“Thought you could push me around again,” I completed. “But I’m not that scrawny little kid you used to bulldoze. And your posse’s long gone. In fact, right now, it’s just you and me.”

Marty threw up both hands and backpedaled, his face ghostly white.

“Don’t sweat it,” I said. “I’m not on some vengeance crusade. The past is the past.”

“Thanks, Ethan.”

I mirrored his earlier gesture. “I’m not looking to be pals, Marty. I just wanna get on with my life. ‘Cause it’s pretty damn sweet. And it keeps getting better.” I strode away without waiting for his response.

I couldn’t care less what he thought. Hell, I didn’t care what any of those jerks from my school days thought anymore. I didn’t need to strut into the reunion, boasting about my fat bank account and success.

I just needed to savor my life.

Grinning like a Cheshire cat, I sauntered back into Rachel’s room.

“Did you get lost?” Aria ribbed. “Or did you have to trek all the way home for water?”

Rachel snickered, and for the first time since I’d met her, there wasn’t a trace of bitterness in it.

“You’re looking better,” I told her, passing a bottle to Aria. “How was your nap? I’ve always despised trying to sleep in hospitals. There’s always someone barging in to jab you with something pointy.”

She laughed again. “Trust me, I barely register needles.”

I cringed at my gaffe. “Sorry.”

She waved it off. “If the past week taught me anything, it’s grabbing every chance to laugh, even if it’s at yourself.” She paused, pondered, then added, “Especially if it’s at yourself.”

“I think we all take ourselves too seriously sometimes,” Aria chimed in, eyeing me. “For real, though. Everything kosher? You were MIA for a hot

minute.”

“Marty swung by,” I said.

“Marty?” Rachel chimed in, looking puzzled.

“Detective Pickman,” Aria clarified. “He’s heading up your case, and he and Ethan are about as compatible as oil and water.”

“Ah, I think I chatted with him yesterday,” Rachel recalled. “He seemed like he had a stick up his ass.”

“Probably ‘cause of us,” I admitted. “He was dead set on pinning your disappearance on your ex, Lee.”

“Lee wouldn’t hurt a fly,” Rachel protested. “I know his rep ain’t stellar, but he always treated me right.”

“They dropped all the charges about you vanishing,” I reassured her. “Kris mentioned he’s working with the public defender to get Lee into rehab rather than jail for the drug possession charges.”

“I hope he cleans up his act,” Rachel murmured.

“You know you can’t see him, right?” Aria said gently. “Even if he gets clean, it’d be too risky for both of you.”

“I know.” Rachel sighed. “And it’s okay. I mean, when I was with him, I thought I loved him, and that might’ve been true for a while, but in the end, it was all about the drugs.”

“Do you think he’s gonna reach out to you?” Aria asked. “Maybe try to get back together?”

Before Rachel could respond, a knock sounded at the door. A stocky, middle-aged woman in purple scrubs beamed at us as she entered the room.

“Good morning,” she greeted brightly. “I believe I have something you’ve all been waiting for.”

She held out a plain white envelope, and it suddenly felt like the air had been vacuumed out of the room.

“Is that...” Aria’s question hung in the air.

“Paternity results.” Rachel gingerly took the envelope, eyeing it like it might detonate. “I wanna know, but I don’t think I can open it.” She handed it to me. “You do it.”

I accepted it but gave it the same wary gaze as Rachel. If I wasn’t her dad, she’d always wonder if Derek was, or if Sarah had been sleeping with someone else. Either way, she’d never trust her mom again. Whatever love had lingered after Sarah’s antics these last few years, I had a feeling lying about Rachel’s parentage had snuffed it out.

Aria rested her hand on my arm. “Want me to do the honors?”

I shook my head. This was on me. And if the results were positive, my life would change in ways I could only imagine.

I opened the envelope, trying to pretend my heart wasn’t lodged in my throat and that I wasn’t struggling to breathe. They riddled the papers with scientific mumbo-jumbo, but there was only one line that mattered.

“Probability of Paternity: 99.9998%,” I read aloud, as if that would make it more tangible for all of us.

To all of us.

I couldn’t stop staring at it as a single word echoed in my head.

Daughter...Daughter...Daughter.

“Wow,” Rachel breathed, shattering the silence. “I, um... wow.”

“That’s one way to put it,” Aria murmured.

I snapped out of my daze, concern for both women overriding the whirlwind of my own emotions. “You two okay?”

“Are we okay?” Aria gawked at me like I was nuts.

“My head’s spinning,” Rachel confessed. “Even though I believed you when you said it was a possibility, I guess I never really thought it might actually be true.”

“I don’t expect anything from you,” I leaned forward but didn’t touch her. “Get that straight. I’m not asking for anything, and I’m not gonna pretend we’re gonna morph into a picture-perfect family.”

That coaxed a smile from her. “So, where do we go from here?”

I chuckled. “That’s the million-dollar question, isn’t it?”

Aria intertwined her fingers with mine and squeezed, then grasped her sister’s hand. “I might have an inkling.”

Epilogue

Aria

"ALRIGHT, explain this to me one more time." Madison flopped onto the couch, rolling her eyes. "Why'd you think moving during a freaking blizzard was a genius plan? I mean, I get that you and Ethan can't wait to play house, but seriously, have you even looked outside? We're talking full-on white-out here."

I sauntered over to the window and yanked the curtain aside. No, Madison didn't have one foot stuck in exaggeration-land. The snow was piling up with such enthusiasm that I couldn't spot a damn thing, including my half-crammed car chilling in the parking lot.

"Snow's nice," Lily declared, waltzing out of my bedroom with a box labeled 'comfy clothes.'

"That's because you just gotta stroll down a single floor to get home," I shot back.

"True that." Lily grinned, giving me a nod. "Good call convincing me to take that empty apartment back in August."

"The snow's freaking nuts." A female voice chimed in from the doorway.

The three of us swiveled our heads to find Rachel standing there, grinning and shaking her head, sending snowflakes flying every which way. She hoisted up a couple of plastic bags.

"Can one of you grab this chow while I wrestle these godforsaken boots off?"

I darted over to help. Even after half a year, it still floored me how much Rachel had changed – how much healthier and happier she'd become. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen her this damn good.

Once we'd pieced together that Ethan was Rachel's biological dad, we hashed things out and made some choices. Rachel went to rehab, and let me tell you, it wasn't all fun and games. But with Ethan and me in her corner, she fought like hell to turn her life around. And she nailed it.

As for her mom... well, Sarah said she was sorry to both Rachel and me, but we weren't about to roll out the red carpet for her anytime soon. We'd promised each other not to let our bitterness toward her screw up our lives, but we weren't exactly lining up to hug it out either.

Fast forward to the present, and a grand total of nine assholes, including Richard and Andy, got arrested and charged. Some for sex trafficking and worse shit, but Richard and Andy were slapped with trafficking and kidnapping charges, among other nasty stuff, and will be facing the music in court next year. Both of them got their bail denied and are rotting away in county jail until their trials. The prosecutor's pretty damn sure they'll both be locked up for a good chunk of their lives.

As for the judge who killed poor Neve, that bastard's also being held without bond. Fingers crossed he'll have a never-ending nightmare in prison, especially with all the criminals he helped lock away over the years breathing down his neck.

Now here we are, back in Seattle. Rachel was moving in with Madison in my old room, while I was taking the next step in my relationship with Ethan. I'd been working my ass off, building my own freelance web design company, and things were looking up.

"Alright, ladies," Rachel said, clapping her hands together. "We've got boxes to unpack, and I'm starving. Let's get this show on the road."

"Damn, that's a crap-ton of food," I remarked, lugging the bags over to the table. "You are prepping for the apocalypse or what?"

"Maybe." Rachel snorted, hanging up her coat and joining me.

"I hope you know what you're getting into with your new roomie," I warned. "Madison can be a colossal pain in the ass sometimes."

"You're no walk in the park either," Madison joked as she strolled over to the refrigerator and grabbed a beer.

Just as we were making some headway on unpacking, the door swung open, and in walked Ethan, his arms loaded with even more boxes.

"Hey, did someone order a hunky moving guy?" he asked, grinning that grin

that always made my heart do that stupid little flip.

"About damn time you showed up!" Madison huffed, but her eyes twinkled with amusement. "We're practically finished here."

Ethan set the boxes down and wrapped his arms around me, planting a sweet, lingering kiss on my lips. "Well, I'm here now. Ready to help with whatever's left."

I looked around the room, taking in the chaos of our lives merging and changing. Rachel's laughter filled the air as she and Lily attempted to assemble some furniture, while Madison rolled her eyes when Ethan kissed me again.

"Ugh, you two are disgusting. Get a room," she teased, smirking.

I shot back with a grin, "Well, we can't now, can we? It's Rachel's room!"

We all laughed, and I felt this overwhelming sense of gratitude wash over me. Life had thrown us some serious curveballs, but we'd come out the other side stronger, happier, and more connected than ever. These incredible people, my favorite humans on the planet, now embraced my life with open arms. And as the snow continued to fall outside, I knew that no matter what challenges came our way, we'd face them together. And that was more than enough.

THE END

Turn the page for a free preview of *DARKER*, another steamy mystery romance by M. S. Parker.

DARKER: Preview

Prologue

PRESENT DAY

HE WHIMPERED around the ball gag and I gave him a sharp look, reminding him without words that I'd told him to be quiet. He fell silent, though the look in his dark eyes said that it wasn't easy.

I fully intended to take it slow. This was a first time for me, and I'd chosen my partner with that in mind.

I dimmed the lights a little more and then nodded, satisfied with the result. The low lighting I'd chosen softened things, casting a purple glow on everything. This was my favorite room at Club Privé, and the wide array of color schemes to choose from was only one reason.

The other was that this was the only room at the club that had an X-frame cross that could be raised several feet off the floor and moved around while a person was strapped to it, as well as a plethora of attachment and toy options.

For example, at the moment, the X was a little wider than normal and the dark-haired man stretched on it didn't have ankle restraints keeping his legs in place. On a normal St. Andrew's cross, that might not have mattered that much, but how I had things set up today, it definitely mattered. His toes rested on two small pieces of wood, and they were the only things assisting his arms in keeping his body in place.

And he wanted to stay where he was.

If he slipped or his legs gave out, the five-inch long butt plug on the post beneath him would slide right into his ass. Well, it'd 'slide' with a little...*assistance* anyway.

"How are you doing?" I asked as I crossed the room. I didn't expect an answer since he couldn't exactly talk with the ball gag in his mouth, but I wasn't looking for a response. It was a reminder for him that I was in charge.

I stopped within arm's reach, allowing myself the luxury of admiring the fine form in front of me. He was a few inches taller than my own five feet six inches, putting him just under six feet tall. Nice broad shoulders, but a little more muscular than I usually liked. His dark hair was cut short, his rugged features clean-shaven, though his chest had a little more hair than I usually liked. His cock, however, was nice and thick, just long enough to get the job done, especially with his jewelry.

Keeping my eyes on his face, I ran my finger down his chest. The muscles in his stomach tensed and jumped under my touch, so it was no surprise when his feet slipped. He sucked in a breath – or tried to, anyway – as an inch and a half of flesh-colored silicone disappeared between his cheeks.

"That's a good start." I patted his cheek before walking over to the chair I'd set up a couple feet from where the man hung.

That's who he was.

The man.

I didn't have a name and I didn't want one. I hadn't told him mine and didn't intend to, though he might have heard it before. With dark red hair, bright green eyes, and a name like Nyx, people often remembered me, and I wasn't a stranger to this place, but I didn't worry about him finding me or harassing me. The club screened its members extremely well and this man was a member, not a guest.

I settled in the chair and let the silence fill the room. I could have turned on the speakers that would allow the club music to be heard in here, but I didn't want the added distraction.

It was hard to believe I was actually doing this. My fucked-up past hadn't completely destroyed my life. As I prepared myself for the amazing things

about to happen, my mind drifted back to how this all began...

ONE

One Year Prior

FUCKING AUGUST WEATHER.

New York City was my home, and I loved it, but the weather extremes were a serious bitch.

Two feet of snow on Valentine's Day this past February and record-setting highs the last week of July. Now, three weeks into August, the heat wasn't *quite* that stifling, but it was far from cool outside, even if the sun had been down for a couple hours already.

Fortunately for me, it was time to swap with the indoor bouncer at Ladies' Choice, which meant I got to finish my shift in a nice and blissfully air-conditioned room, while Archie had to stand out here sweating until closing time.

"Damn!" Archie let out a low whistle. "Hotter than the devil's asshole out here."

I raised an eyebrow. "Such a charmer, Archie."

He grinned. "Would you prefer colder than a witch's tit? I mean, if that's the way you swing, Nyx Phoenix..."

"I've already told you that I don't date – or fuck – co-workers." That was the truth. Not all of it, but if I expounded on it, Archie would figure out some reason as to why I should go out with him, anyway. He wasn't a bad guy to work with, but he could be a little sleazy at times.

Okay, a lot sleazy, actually, but he was all talk and no action.

He couldn't figure out why I didn't want to go out with him. Me saying I was a lesbian would've just invited all sorts of innuendos and jokes. But telling him I didn't date co-workers, letting him know my job came first and implying that HR would get involved if any harassment took place, always did the trick. Since Archie loved his job, he wasn't going to let a date with one woman risk it.

"Have fun," he said as I moved to the door. "I don't think a single person in that bachelorette party is sober."

"Great." I grimaced as I went inside.

I'd been working as a bouncer at the male strip club for the past two years, and the worst customers by far were women with bachelorette parties. It didn't take a rocket scientist to know why. Even if the bride-to-be wasn't all about having her last big ogle before limiting her choices to one, the rest of her party usually saw this as either a break from their married lives or a reminder that they weren't yet on the way to the altar.

Which meant they sometimes got a little riled up when their night was coming to an end. They were the current bane of my existence, but they were also the reason why Archie's job was so important to him. Out of the dozen or so strippers employed by Ladies' Choice, half of them were gay, and the other half either married or in relationships. That meant Archie got to pick up the slack when it came to women who were sober enough to consent, but drunk enough to think it was a good idea to bang the bouncer.

Until they reached that point, however, it was my job to make sure they didn't get too handsy with the employees. Since I was a woman and was less likely to be accused of groping if I had to manhandle a horny kindergarten teacher or minister's wife, I generally ended up being scheduled on those nights.

Like tonight.

Ladies' Choice wasn't the classiest male strip club in the city, but it also wasn't the sleaziest, which meant it was perfect for me. I did best when I could blend in with the crowd, a skill set that the manager of the club both

valued and utilized. He also didn't give me shit on the rare occasions I had to call off.

I weaved my way through the crowd, sidestepping the servers carrying trays of drinks and the women who were on their feet, catcalling and throwing panties at the stage.

Mother fucker.

I was going to kick Archie's ass. He knew better than to let patrons start taking off their clothes. It always gave them ideas. We had a sign that said anything other than money that ended up on the stage would be thrown away, but that didn't stop hungover women from calling or coming in the day after they'd 'lost' their favorite bra or pair of underwear, demanding it be returned.

To my right, I spotted a skinny brunette swinging a pair of panties over her head, getting ready to launch them at 'Firehouse Hank,' aka Henry Fitzbottom, the act currently on the stage. He was down to his tear-away pants, which were the last item he'd remove, but his G-string was small enough to leave nothing to the imagination.

It wasn't a stretch to figure out where his nickname had come from.

"Excuse me." I pitched my voice loud enough to be heard over the music and screaming. When the woman didn't respond, I stepped in front of her. "Excuse me."

"Outta my way," she slurred, glaring at me. She tried to step around me and stumbled over her own feet. Before I could react, she vomited on the floor.

Wonderful. Whoever her server was tonight would be getting an earful about knowing when to cut someone off.

At least she'd dropped her underwear.

I grabbed a chair and set it over the puddle to keep anyone from stepping in it before hurrying away to get some fresher air by the bar.

"Clean up," I hollered at the bartender. When he turned to look at me, I pointed in the direction of the mess. "Who served them?"

Kingston – I didn't know if that was his last or his first name – scowled.

“Robby.”

I sighed. Robby Sprouse had been here for a month and already had two warnings for over serving and one for inappropriate conduct. Basically, he liked to ply women with alcohol and then fuck them in the supply closet.

I had my suspicions about whether or not all the women had actually been sober enough to consent, but the only woman he’d ever been caught with had insisted that she’d known what she was doing, so he’d just gotten in trouble for having sex while on the job.

“Where is he?” I asked, leaning on the bar. I was flashing Kingston a whole lot of boob, but he didn’t even glance that way. When he’d told me he was asexual, I hadn’t believed him. Some guys would say anything to get in a girl’s pants, but in the year-and-a-half we’d been working together, I hadn’t caught him checking out anyone, male or female.

“Went on break ten minutes ago.” Kingston brought a drink over for the woman standing next to me.

“Figures,” I said. Everyone knew that if Robby hadn’t been related to the boss, he would’ve been out after that first time.

I headed toward the back, pleased that Kingston hadn’t asked if I wanted Archie to help. Robby wasn’t a little guy, but I could still handle him. A part of me wanted him to act up, give me an excuse to take him down a peg or two. He liked to brag that he took some sort of karate and had been a boxer before he’d torn his rotator cuff or some shit like that. He was full of it, though.

I’d been around enough people who actually knew how to fight to know how they carried themselves. Robby didn’t know dick. I, however, knew more than dick.

On the off-chance Robby had learned his lesson, I checked the break room first, and then the area out back smokers used. He could’ve been taking a piss, but I figured that’d be the last place I’d check. I didn’t want him riding my ass about busting him using the bathroom. If he wasn’t doing something wrong and I acted like he was, it’d just make it harder to prove when it really did happen. Robby was the sort of childish asshat who’d throw a tantrum just

to make the noise.

Fortunately for me, the sounds coming from the supply closet weren't exactly subtle, giving me a reason to yank open the door and catch Robby with his pants down. Literally.

Except it wasn't just the fact that his cock was buried in a woman's mouth. A shadow on her face made me take another look, even though I didn't want to see anything of Robby's more closely. She had tears running down her cheeks, her makeup smeared, but what I'd thought was a shadow wasn't makeup either. It was a bruise, or the beginnings of one, anyway. When he pulled his cock out of her mouth, I saw her lip had been split too.

Motherfucking bastard.

"You're done, asshole." I started to move past him to reach for the girl, and he grabbed my arm. A flare of panic and anger mixed together in my gut. "Let. Go."

"Or what?" He grinned at me. His fingers dug in hard enough to bruise, but I didn't make a sound. "Why don't you join us?" Robby's gaze raked over me in a way that made me want a nine-hour shower in water hot enough to scald.

I didn't answer him, but instead pointed at the woman. "Go find whoever you came with or talk to the bartender if you need a car called."

"I'm not done," he snapped. "Unless you want to take her place."

Not even looking his way, I spoke to the woman. "Go."

She pushed past his legs and managed to get herself to her feet once in the hall. I waited until she was a safe distance away before twisting against Robby's grip and getting my arm free.

"You're done." I glared up at him. "Your uncle may put up with you fucking around on the job, but not roughing up the customers."

"She wanted it that way. Sluts like kinky shit like that."

I gritted my teeth. "Out. Now. Don't make me call security."

He grabbed me again, this time with both hands, and he shoved me against

the wall. “You should be nicer to me.” He leaned in close, his breath hot and stinking of alcohol. “But don’t worry. I know all about how to make cunts like you be nice to men the way you should.”

With the last word, I caught a whiff of cigarettes, and it was like my mind was suddenly back a dozen years. It was a different man, a different place. Adrenaline flooded me, and it felt like a switch flipped.

The self-defense classes I’d taken for the past few years kicked in, and I moved without even really thinking about it. A knee to the groin hit him in the thigh instead, but I was still able to get my foot hooked behind his and dropped him right on his ass. I went down too, driving my knee into his stomach, right in the solar plexus, hard enough to knock the wind out of him.

I leaned over him, letting him cough and gasp for a few seconds before I said a word. I wanted to make sure he heard and understood what I was about to say. “You’re done here. You’re going to leave and never come back. If you ever come near me again, I’ll rip your fucking balls off.”

“Bitch,” he wheezed as I stood, barely resisting the desire to kick him in the ribs.

I grabbed Robby’s arm and yanked him to his feet. “Get your pants up, or I’ll drag you out like this.”

“Bitch,” he muttered as he yanked at his pants.

“Yeah, yeah. I heard you the first time. Get some new insults. Let’s go.” I gestured toward the door, half-expecting him to argue, but instead, he stomped out of the closet and down the hallway.

I followed, a half-step behind him until we emerged into the main part of the club. He turned to the left, making for the bar. He’d only gotten a few steps before I grabbed his arm. He spun on me, and I reacted automatically, twisting his arm behind his back and using the leverage to put him on the floor. A few women let out startled yelps, but most of the patrons were thoroughly engrossed in the opening of Jojo’s show and didn’t really seem to notice the slight commotion.

Considering the impressive eight-pack Jojo had just unveiled, I couldn’t really blame them. I didn’t tend to notice the guys when they were on stage,

but that man's body was...just wow.

“Again? Seriously? Didn't you fucking learn the first time, *bitch*?” I leaned close enough for him to hear me over the blaring music.

“Let go!” Robby's voice was muffled against the carpet, and I took a moment to hope that he was getting a faceful of germs.

“I'm going to let you up. Then we're going outside, and you'll leave. If you can do that without any more trouble, I'll tell your uncle to give you your last paycheck. If not, I'll tell him the money should go to that redhead, so she doesn't sue his ass off.”

He said something into the carpet that didn't sound very complimentary, but since he nodded, I let his petty insult slide. I pulled back as he got to his feet, keeping a tight grip on his wrist. He didn't fight me as we walked the rest of the way like that, but he pulled away the moment we stepped outside.

“Nyx?” Eyes wide, Archie looked from me to Robby and back again.

“I caught him roughing up a guest. He's done.” I leaned on the door to keep it open. I wasn't about to step out into that heat again if I didn't have to. “Make sure he stays away.”

Robby was still cursing at me when the door shut behind me. I took a moment to smooth down my shirt from where it'd twisted up around my waist during the scuffle, then tucked a few strands of hair behind my ears, and headed back to the bar.

This was one of those times I wished I could drink on the clock. Some employees indulged, and as long as we didn't get drunk, no one cared, but I liked to have my head clear when I was working. I didn't do things half-assed...even if my job involved protecting mostly naked men from mostly drunk women.

“I wish I had recorded that,” Kingston said with a laugh. “I'd watch it every time I needed a pick-me-up.”

“I'm just glad things didn't escalate.” I squirted a thick glob of antibacterial gel into my hands. “Last thing I need is Archie thinking of himself like some white knight.”

“Well, if you need a black king instead, just say the word.” Kingston winked at me. “All I want in return is some of those cookies you brought in last month.”

I rolled my eyes. “Go back to pouring drinks. Leave the fighting to those of us who enjoy it.”

“Then you best go do your job.” He pointed behind me.

I turned as a tiny blonde bolted for the stage, a “bride” sash in hand.

“Shit.”

Time to get to work.

Chapter Two

"...AND that's why I don't feed the ducks in the park." Kingston's story ended with laughter from his audience and a little bow from him. "Now, who's ready for another drink?"

I watched the hands that went up and noted who already looked tipsy. Bachelorette parties didn't often happen during the week, and Monday nights were our slowest, which meant I could take things a little easier during the inside half of my shift. That didn't, however, mean slacking off on my job.

My first year working here, one of the other security guys decided that the handful of women who were in the audience weren't worth his time. Because of that, he'd missed how much one of the women had been drinking, and she'd gotten belligerent when one of the performers tried to walk past her without responding to her flashing him. She'd stabbed him with a nail file, deep enough to be serious, though he didn't have any permanent damage. He'd gotten a settlement, and the security guard had gotten the ax.

That was how ex-employee Carson Rhymes had become a cautionary tale at Ladies' Choice.

I walked the length of the bar and scanned the room, noting where each of the women were sitting. All but two were at the tables closest to the stage. The others were one row back, and judging by the way the women were shifting uncomfortably in their chairs, this was their first time here.

The risk for them was them getting embarrassed enough to leave without

paying for their drinks. It didn't happen often, but just because it wasn't common didn't mean it never happened. The women closest to the stage were behaving themselves, but I walked by anyway, just to make sure everyone was following the rules.

I returned to the bar a few minutes later and found Dieter Fell sitting there, a glass in front of him, and a distracted expression on his face. He'd just finished his set and wasn't scheduled to be part of the final act tonight, which usually meant he headed home. In the seven months I'd known him, he'd never hung around after he was done, and definitely never for a drink.

I didn't socialize with my co-workers outside of work, but I was on friendly terms with most of them, including the strippers. Out of all of them, Dieter was the one I talked to the most. We were about the same age, and like me, he wasn't a native New Yorker. He'd come to the city from a tiny town in Virginia after his dad kicked him out of the house for being gay.

Having some darkness behind those dimples was something I could understand. Between that and never having to worry about Dieter being sexually interested in me, he was the closest thing to a friend I had aside from Kaimi, and definitely the only man I was that close to.

"What's got you brooding in your beer?" I asked as I leaned against the bar next to him.

"Oh, hey, Nyx." He impatiently brushed at the sandy brown hair that had fallen into his eyes. With light gray eyes, a pretty face, and a tall, muscular frame, he wasn't the sort of man who'd be drinking alone if he didn't want to be.

"It's not like you to linger." I glanced at Kingston, who shrugged. He didn't know what was going on, either.

"I don't feel like going home just yet." He took a long drink of his beer and then sighed. "I think Dash is cheating on me."

"Shit. I'm sorry to hear that." I'd never met Dashiell Arnold, but Dieter talked about his boyfriend all the time. I wasn't naïve enough to think they had the sort of fairytale romance that Dieter always painted, but I also wasn't the sort of cruel person who had to make everyone else as cynical as me.

Honestly, I almost envied Dieter for his ability to see the good in things despite the stuff that'd happened in his past.

Almost.

I couldn't envy the hurt that I avoided by keeping a realistic view of how people really were. The only person who'd ever proven me wrong was Kaimi. Well, Rose too, but she was a kid. Maybe Dieter or some other people would surprise me too, but I didn't really think it was worth the effort.

"He might not be." Dieter turned his chair so that he was facing me now. "I mean, he hasn't admitted anything, and I haven't found anything specific."

"What makes you suspect he's seeing someone else?" I asked as I scanned the room. I didn't mind having the conversation, but I still needed to do my job.

"Calls he says are wrong numbers or sales calls when I've seen him ignore numbers he doesn't know." He ran his hand through his hair. "He goes places while I'm at work but doesn't tell me where."

I frowned. I ignored numbers all the time. "What does he say he's doing?"

"He says he doesn't go anywhere."

I glanced at Dieter. "So, you've never actually seen him leave or come back without you?"

"No." He finished his drink. "I just know that he's gone out. Like his shoes aren't in the same place they were when I left. That sort of thing."

My skepticism must've shown on my face because he cracked a self-deprecating smile.

"I know how I sound, Nyx. Why do you think I haven't come right out and accused him of it?" He motioned to Kingston to give him another beer. "It's been going on for weeks now, and I don't know how much longer I can put up with it."

"You need to find out what's going on, one way or the other." I took a long sip of water. "Look in his phone. Call the numbers back. Whatever you need to do to get the proof you need."

Dieter half-turned toward me again and raised an eyebrow. “I’m six-four and not exactly the type of person who can be stealthy.”

“You move pretty well up on the stage,” I said, gesturing toward the newest addition to the line-up, a lean blond guy gyrating on stage. “Some of these guys think they can just thrust their hips or hump the air, and it’ll get all these women hot and bothered. You’re not like that.”

He let out a loud, full laugh. “Dancing and taking off my clothes is not the same as sneaking around my boyfriend. Besides, I’m a dead awful liar. If he caught me, it’d be over.”

“I never understood how anyone could be a bad liar,” I said. “Everyone I’ve ever met could lie to a cop, a priest, and a lawyer, all at the same time.”

“I think I know that joke,” Kingston said as he came over with another bottle of water for me. “What’s the punch line again?”

“Your ass is the punch line, Kingston.” Dieter glared at him. “We’re talking about the man I love being a cheating bastard. It’s not a fucking joke.”

“Sorry, man. Bad time to try to lighten the mood.” Kingston held up his hands. “I’ll go back to serving drinks.”

“I’ll apologize to him tomorrow,” Dieter said as Kingston walked away. “I know he’s not trying to be an asshole.”

I let the silence sit between us for a minute. Well, not *true* silence since the never-ending music was far too loud for that. But neither of us said anything for nearly a minute, and it was Dieter who spoke next.

“You know what I’d do if I had the money? I’d hire a PI. That way, I’d know for sure, and if I have to confront Dash, it wouldn’t be like I’m just some jealous lover making baseless accusations. I’ll have proof. Pictures, maybe video.” Dieter rolled the bottle between his hands. “I looked into it last week. Wanted to see how much it’d cost.”

“And?” I surprised myself by actually being curious.

“Let’s just say, if I wanted one who wasn’t a complete fuck up or drunk, I’d need to do a hell of a lot more private dances before I could even *think* of

hiring someone.”

“Really? Just to follow someone around and take pictures without getting caught?” That hadn’t been what I’d expected. “Aren’t PI’s always late on their rent and eating shitty food because they’re low on cash?”

“That’s what I thought too, but I guess competent ones who charge a shit-ton of money wouldn’t make as good TV or movies, right?” Dieter shrugged. “And since you get what you pay for, I wouldn’t get a competent one.”

An idea popped into my head, and I was tempted to simply dismiss it as completely ludicrous, but for some reason, I just couldn’t let it go.

“Let me do it.”

Dieter’s eyebrows shot up. “What?”

I straightened, my mind whirring as I thought through my plan. “I can be sneaky, and I can take pictures. Let me look into Dash.”

Apparently, my interest in helping out was distracting enough to make Dieter put aside his half-empty bottle and focus all of his attention on me.

“That doesn’t really seem like the kind of thing you’d do.”

I made a sound that landed somewhere between a snort and a laugh. “Way to charm me into helping you for free.” He started to backpedal, but I waved it off. “No offense taken. I know I don’t look like a PI.” Another thought occurred to me. “In fact, that’s exactly why I’m perfect for this.”

He studied my face for several moments, clearly attempting to comprehend if I was truly serious or just fucking with him. “Okay, how do you see that?”

I gestured to my body. “Trust me, when you look like this, no one really thinks ‘suspicious.’”

He looked skeptical, so I waved Archie over as he walked toward the back.

“Help me out here,” I said. “If you saw me following you, what would you think?”

Archie dropped his hand to cover his crotch. “If I answer honestly, are you going to cut my balls off?”

I shook my head and held up three fingers. “Nope. Be honest.”

“I’d think ‘damn, can I get her to follow me to bed?’”

“Thanks.” I grinned at Dieter. “See?”

Archie’s mouth dropped open. “You’re seriously going to leave me hanging like that?”

I mimicked a pair of scissors with my hand. “We’re heading back to ball-cutting territory.”

“Talk to you later,” Archie said with a sigh as he walked away.

“Dash is gay,” Dieter pointed out.

“Then he just hoped I’d be his wingman.” I pressed the fresh bottle of cold water against my cheek. “You’ve thought about it, admit it.”

He laughed. “You know what, I think you might have a point. Tell me what you need from me.”

Before I could think of a list, a serious-looking Kingston came back over to us. “Boss wants to see you in his office. He looks pissed.”

I sighed. “Shit. You think this is about Robby?”

“Probably,” Kingston answered honestly.

“I heard you took him down the other night,” Dieter said.

“Twice.” I grinned at him. “It was pretty fun, actually.”

Kingston nodded toward the hallway. “Better go see the boss.”

I nodded and made my way through the club back to Mr. Sprouse’s office. When he hadn’t called me over the weekend to bitch about me throwing his nephew out, I’d hoped he’d realized I’d done the right thing. I should’ve guessed it was too good to be true.

I knocked on the wooden frame, and he yelled for me to come in. I did and closed the door behind me. I didn’t regret what I’d done, and I’d take a reaming if that’s what I had coming to me, but that didn’t mean I had to let

everyone else hear it.

“I heard what happened Friday night.” He leaned back in his chair, steeping his fingers under his chin. “And then I heard it from my brother.”

I hoped my expression looked apologetic, but I wasn’t feeling it. I’d told him more than once that Robby had been taking advantage of women at the club.

“I told him I couldn’t let Robby work here again,” Mr. Sprouse continued. “He’s lucky that woman didn’t press charges. Granted, my brother’s got some favors he could call in to make shit like that go away, but it would’ve been a pain in the ass.”

It didn’t surprise me that Robby’s daddy had been buying his way out of trouble, or whatever the ‘favor’ equivalent of cash was.

“And don’t think I’m not grateful that you didn’t have the cops called on him, but this is family, Nyx, and I gotta see my brother and nephew at holidays and shit.”

My hands curled into fists. He better not be leading to what I thought he was.

“I’m gonna have to let you go.”

Rage bloomed like a fire through my system, but I maintained total control of my voice. “You can’t fire me for doing my job.” Not that I thought it’d do any good. I knew better than most how fucking unfair the world was.

“But I can fire you for roughing up a fellow employee.”

My jaw dropped. “I didn’t rough—”

He held up a hand. “You’re a good employee, Nyx, but you’re not worth the headache I’ll get from my mom if I can’t tell my brother I fired you.”

Mother. Fucking. Asshole.

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