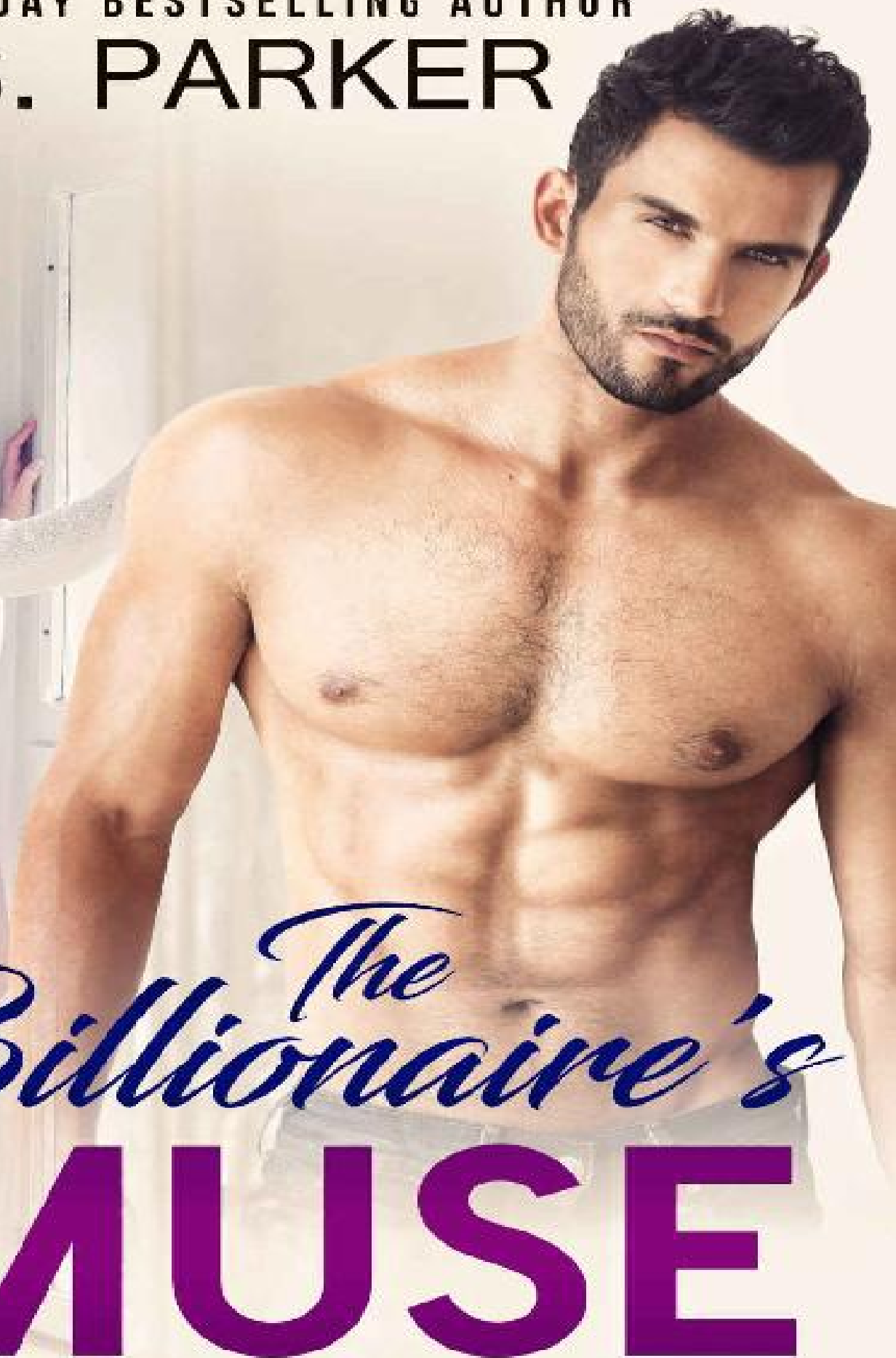


USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
**M.S. PARKER**



*The*  
*Billionaire's*  
**MUSE**

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# **THE BILLIONAIRE'S MUSE**

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**M. S. PARKER**

**Belmonte Publishing, LLC**

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## Acknowledgments



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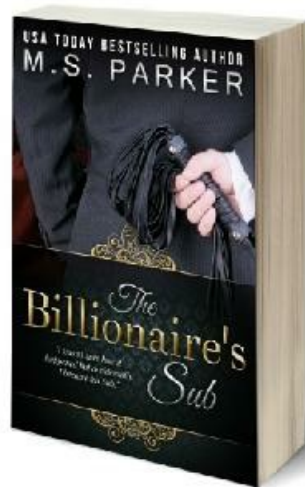
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# *Chapter One*

---

## TANYA

---

The blare of the taxi horn jerked me back to reality...and made me realize that I was standing in the middle of the crosswalk like a total idiot, lost in my thoughts. Heat flooded my face as I scurried away.

“Sorry, sorry,” I called out to the annoyed driver as he sped past.

Reaching the sidewalk, I realized I had an audience in the form of a couple dozen bystanders who seemed to be quite amused by what just happened, and any hope I'd had of my blush vanishing disappeared as a new wave of embarrassment washed over me.

Dammit. I was going to show up to my first day of work looking like a tomato. Some blondes had a nice golden tan tone to their skin. Not me. I was so pale that the slightest touch of sun or embarrassment showed up like a glowing beacon.

I ducked my head and let a sheet of silvery-blond hair hide my face as I hurried down the sidewalk. I was pretty sure the people behind me thought I must be some newbie or tourist who'd gotten so overwhelmed with her first look at Times Square that she'd lost track of where she was.

Except I'd been here for four years.

I had been caught daydreaming though. When I'd first moved here from Albany so I could attend NYU, all I'd ever wanted to do was be an editor for a major publishing house. Actually, that'd been my dream since I was a kid. Immersing myself in other worlds, making decisions about the stories that people would get to read, helping guide authors in shaping their words. When I'd been walking across the street, I'd started thinking about that iconic scene

in the sitcom from the seventies where the lead character threw her hat up in the air to celebrate arriving in the city – and I'd lost track of my surroundings. Not a smart thing to do in the middle of Manhattan, I knew.

I reached the building with time to spare, so before I headed up to floor twelve, I ducked into the lobby bathroom, hoping my flush had faded, but one look in the mirror told me it hadn't. I took a few minutes to cool down and do some of the deep breathing that was the only way I'd found to help in similar situations.

I didn't need to be freaked out. I could do this.

I had a degree in creative writing, with a minor in business. I'd spent most of my life reading. I knew books. I knew them in their paper form, and I'd grown to know them in their electronic formats as well. I worked at the NYU library all four years, only putting in my two-week notice when I'd gotten hired at Branch Publishing.

I smoothed my hair back and twisted it up on the back of my head, then touched up my make-up. I rarely wore much, but today, I'd wanted to make the best possible impression, so I'd taken extra care. I didn't have the money to dress in the latest fashions, but I generally chose classics and took good care of them, so my plain black pencil skirt and simple white blouse probably wouldn't be the best outfit in the place, but I wouldn't be an eyesore either.

I belonged here.

I took another slow breath and then headed for the elevator. I was the only one who got off on the first of the two floors Branch Publishing occupied, but when I stepped out into the company lobby, other people were getting out of the other elevators that also stopped here.

I gave a small smile to a middle-aged woman in a smart business suit but didn't make eye contact. I liked books better than people half the time. Okay, most of the time. Still, I could handle the business side of things because I didn't have to worry about things like small talk or what the other person thought of me. I knew what to say and do in those sorts of situations. Plus, this sort of work meant the topics of conversation could be safely kept to books without anyone thinking I was odd.

“Tanya Lacey?”

I looked toward the voice and saw a smiling redhead standing a couple feet away. She was a couple inches shorter than me, with the sort of slender body I couldn't hope to get no matter how much I exercised or dieted. That was okay though. My self-esteem had gone through a rough patch in junior

high, but I'd grown into myself and was comfortable with my curves. Even if it meant I didn't get the luxury of going braless every now and then.

“Hi, I'm Yvonne Barela.” Her sky-blue eyes were shining as she held out a hand. “I'm the assistant to the senior editor here at Branch, and I'll be showing you around.”

“Hi.” I returned the smile. “Glad to be here.”

As I followed Yvonne, she kept up a steady stream of chatter, the information ranging from whose office was whose and where supplies were kept, to names and personal anecdotes about various employees.

“That's Mr. Flinkman's office. He's an editor here. He and his partner have been together for thirty-four years. Ms. Kranz is his secretary – sorry, administrative assistant – and she's had a crush on her boss forever, even though everyone knows he's gay.”

I stared at Yvonne as she breezed past the woman in question without a single look, as if the things I was being told were such common knowledge that it didn't matter.

Yvonne continued, gesturing toward a sandy-haired man who looked about ten years older than me. “That's Jude Hollister. He's a junior editor, but everyone knows it's only because his uncle's the owner and had to do something to get the guy out of his mom's basement. I mean, playing video games all day isn't really an occupation unless you get paid for it, right?”

I had no idea if I was supposed to answer that or not, but thankfully, Yvonne didn't seem to expect a response.

“Now, since you're an editor's assistant, you're probably not going to spend much time sitting around, especially since you're working for Jai Foxxe.”

Nerves tightened in my stomach. That didn't sound good.

Oblivious to my discomfort – though I wasn't sure she'd stop talking even if she knew – Yvonne continued, “Miss Foxxe is known for running her assistants ragged, which is probably why they never last more than a few months. Don't get me wrong, she's not abusive or anything, but if you took this job thinking you'd be learning the ropes before getting thrown into the deep end, you're mistaken.”

That part of my brain that always seemed to be analyzing language chirped up with something about mixing metaphors, but I ignored it, focusing instead on the fact that I might have made a huge mistake coming here. I wasn't afraid of hard work, but this sounded like it would be more than just

keeping busy. I had no problem putting in overtime, but I had a sinking feeling that a person like Miss Foxe would intentionally work me until I broke.

I set my jaw. I wouldn't let that happen.

"I'm here to work," I said, giving Yvonne a grim smile.

The redhead gave me a skeptical look. "Well, I hope you don't mind not having a personal life. I'm pretty sure Ms. Foxe makes her assistants sign away their souls."

I was about to say that it was probably a good thing that I didn't have a personal life then, but we'd stopped in front of a door. Unlike some of the other offices, this one wasn't glass, but rather wood, and I wondered if that was because Miss Foxe liked her privacy, or because the higher ups didn't want her hovering over everyone else.

"So, this is her office. She'll tell you where to go and what to do from here on out." Yvonne gestured back toward the elevators. "I'm one floor up with the senior editor, but feel free to find me if you need anything. HR is up there too, when – *if* – you need them."

Again, ominous.

Yvonne knocked on the door, then opened it after a sharp "come in" rang through. "Miss Foxe, your assistant is here."

And then Yvonne was gone, leaving me with a boss that was sounding a lot like Meryl Streep in that one movie. I took a good look at Jai Foxe. Early thirties, I guessed, with short, jet-black hair and brown eyes almost as dark as my own. Exotic was probably the best way to describe her, but I was pretty sure doing that would've been a one-way ticket out of here. Miss Foxe was clearly no-nonsense, from her simple haircut to her classic business attire.

"Hello," I said, putting on my best professional smile. "I'm—"

"I don't particularly care," she said in a clipped tone as she glanced up at me. "Your desk is right outside my office. You come when I call and do what I say, no questions or complaints. I expect you to leave a number where you can be reached while on your company-required breaks and lunch. Once I tell you something, I will not repeat myself."

Even her faint British accent couldn't make her any less obnoxious.

"Your job is whatever I tell you it is." She raised her head again and met my eyes this time. "Are we clear?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good." She gestured toward a stack of papers at least eighteen inches

thick. “When you're not running errands for me, your job at the moment is to go through each of these manuscripts, page by page. I refuse to waste my time reading something that's ultimately worthless. There are post-it notes in your desk. You're to mark each manuscript as follows...”

So much for a learning curve or getting a few minutes to settle in.

“Good. Fair. Poor. Only one of those three words, got it? Nothing is great. I don't want commentary or your opinion on the author's intent or how ground-breaking you think it'll be. You base your rating on the market alone. Each week, you'll do the research to see what's trending, and if any changes need to be made to the ratings, you'll do so before you give them to me every Friday.”

I picked up the stack and tried not to let the size overwhelm me.

“When you bring me my coffee each morning, I'll let you know if I have additional manuscripts for you to add to your pile.”

I nodded even though she wasn't looking at me.

“Cream, two sugars.”

The tone made it clear that announcing her coffee preference was also a dismissal.

I turned and headed back out, struggling to close the door behind me. I could feel eyes on me as I made my way over to the empty desk a few feet from Miss Foxxe's door. I wondered what everyone thought as I set down the stack of manuscripts and then put my purse next to it. Did anyone wonder about me as a person, or were they all just making guesses about how long I'd last?

I didn't blame them if it was the latter. I was sort of wondering that too.



## *Chapter Two*

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## ERIK

---

The club music had been at a pulse-pounding level when I first came into Gilded Cage, but the rooms in the back were sound-proofed, so we couldn't hear anything other than the music I'd selected playing softly in the background.

Vivaldi.

I'd always liked classical music, particularly during sex. For me, it set the mood.

At the moment, however, I wasn't going to take the time to appreciate the quality of the musicians playing this particular piece. No, my attention was on the tall, leggy redhead kneeling in front of me. She had her head up, eyes down. Her hands were clasped behind her back, shoulders squared, small breasts jutting out. Her nipples were already pebbled and would've been clearly visible under her bra even if it hadn't been sheer. The skirt she wore was tiny, barely covering her ass. A hand between her legs a quarter of an hour earlier had told me that she wasn't wearing anything under it.

And that she had a ring in her clit that I assumed matched the ones in her nipples.

Rings that I intended to have some fun with tonight.

I unbuttoned the cuffs of my shirt and rolled up my sleeves. I'd been in meetings all day today – which was why I needed a release – and hadn't gone home to change, so I was still wearing my suit. Not that I was out of place at the club. One of the things my friends and I liked about Gilded Cage was that the dress code was more about quality than specific style. Sensual and sexy rather than sleazy.

“Pull up your skirt.”

The command was firm but not harsh. Some Doms got off on humiliation and verbal cruelty, but I wasn't one of them. A little dirty talk, but if a Sub wanted me to call her foul names or degrade her in any way, I always sent her in the direction of Nigel. His kinks might not have been mine, but he was a good guy. The things he said might not have sounded like it, but he respected his Subs and their safe words.

My Sub for the scene kept her head down as she pulled her skirt up around her waist and revealed a smoothly waxed pussy and the gleam of gold.

“Take off your bra.”

She did as she was told, and I walked closer, examining the tattoo on the side of her left breast. A rose. That's what she'd said her name was. Rose. I didn't know if it was her real name, but I didn't care. This wouldn't go beyond tonight. I had something to call her, and she would call me Master. We'd have amazing sex that gave us both what we needed, and then we'd go our separate ways. If I enjoyed it enough, I might allow for a few more encounters with her, as long as she didn't get attached.

I reached down, and she was tall enough that I didn't have to go far to take one of her nipple rings between my finger and thumb. Her breathing hitched as I tugged on the piercing, but she didn't whimper or speak. She'd given me her safe word, and I didn't plan on gagging her, so if I went too far, she'd say it.

Until then...

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the only toy I planned on using tonight.

One of the clips went to the ring I'd just been playing with, the second to the matching one on the other side. The third clip was on the end of a slightly longer chain, though not quite long enough for the links to be slack once everything was in place.

“Up.”

She stood, a flush spreading across her chest as she automatically spread her legs wider. I pulled the chain tight, and she gasped as her piercings moved. I attached the third clip into place before stepping back to admire my work. I had a similar toy with clamps on the end for Subs with no piercings. Clamps had their own restrictions, since they could only be left on for a certain amount of time before the blood restriction became a problem.

Piercings, however, didn't have a time issue, but they were a little more delicate. Pulling too hard could tear flesh. This sort of thing was more of a balancing act than most people realized.

“Hands behind your back and stay straight,” I warned her as I circled around. She had a small, tight ass that my hand itched to spank. “If I see you slouching, you'll be punished.”

She'd want to obey. Good Subs always did. Even if a part of them craved a punishment, they'd still want to please their Dom. Even if I was just a temporary one. But a good Dom could read their Sub and know just how much punishment they wanted and adapted their demands.

Like I knew Rose would attempt to stand straight, and she'd enjoy the initial pain that came with it, but at some point, she'd slouch. It might be a conscious movement, or maybe in response to something I did, but whatever it was, the result would be the same. My handprint on her ass, and her need for punishment being satisfied.

I stopped in front of her and reached down, sliding my finger beneath the piercing. She was already slick with arousal, and a shiver ran through her as I stroked her sensitive flesh.

“You can come whenever you choose,” I said, pitching my voice low. “But you will stay straight, or you will be punished.”

The sound she made told me everything I needed to know, and it went straight to my cock. She'd come, and she'd move, and I'd spank her. And I was fairly certain that she'd come again from that.

I was good at reading people, at understanding them, and I was rarely wrong. Especially when it came to the superficial sex stuff.

I moved my hand further back, letting the heel brush against her clit even as I slid a finger inside her. I couldn't see her face, but there was no mistaking the way her muscles stiffened. Half a dozen strokes later, I inserted a second one. Her hips started to move, and I used my free hand to adjust myself.

“Come, Rosie girl. Come for me like a good girl,” I coaxed.

I bent my fingers, slid the tips across the front wall, then smiled as her entire body jerked. A sharp cry came from her as the sudden movement pulled at her nipples and clit simultaneously, but there was pleasure in the sound. I rubbed her g-spot, watched as her hands fell to her sides, fists clenching and unclenching as the pressure inside her built.

Then she let out a wail, body shaking as she came. She bent forward, choking out a half-sob as she realized she'd failed to do as told. I didn't let up

though, keeping pressure on both pleasure points until her knees buckled and the only thing keeping her from falling to the floor was my hand.

I wrapped my arm around her waist, holding her as she shook. She was tall, but I didn't have a problem moving her over to the bench a few feet away. There was a bed in here too, but I didn't intend to use that. We'd both get off, but this wasn't love-making. A bed was simply too intimate.

I bent her over the bench, letting her go only when I was sure she could stay on her feet. The sound of her breathing was harsh as she dragged in deep breaths, but I barely registered it. I put my hands on her ass, felt the firm muscles under my palms. Damn, this was going to be good.

“You disobeyed.” I squeezed.

“Yes, Master.”

“And what does that mean?”

“I deserved to be punished.”

The breathlessness of her answer was unmistakably anticipatory, and I wasn't about to disappoint. After the first crack had Rose mewling and pushing back against me, I didn't hold back. One after the other until her skin was bright red and the palm of my hand burned. She'd come at least once from it, and by the time I knew she'd reached her limit, I was more than ready to go.

Her forehead dropped down on the bench as I reached into my pocket and made short work of getting my dick out and the condom on. After that, it was one thrust to get inside, then I was moving hard and fast toward the release we both craved.

Because that's what this was. Fun and pleasurable, yes, but only release.

I pushed the thought aside and focused on the wet heat gripping me, the friction of two bodies coming together. That was all that mattered in this moment.

## *Chapter Three*

---

## TANYA

---

Miss Foxe hadn't told me that I couldn't take the manuscripts home, and based on what Yvonne had said, my boss was the sort of woman who preferred her employees work more than the usual forty hours a week, but I still didn't ask her if it was okay. I figured this was a case of it being better to ask for forgiveness than permission. I didn't mind putting in the extra hours, especially when the time was spent reading, but if I had my choice, I'd rather do it in the comfort of my cozy little apartment than my little desk at the office. Since I saw pretty much everyone else taking work home with them, I figured it wasn't too far a stretch.

I wasn't ungrateful for my position, but I also didn't want to go out of my way to be uncomfortable when there was another option available. If Miss Foxe asked me – or told me, since I had a feeling that was more her style – to stay at the office, I would. But as long as she didn't tell me not to, I planned to work from home whenever I had to put in extra hours.

Besides, I thought as I curled up on my couch/bed, I'd worked my ass off to get a place of my own, and I planned on enjoying it as much as possible...even if it was barely bigger than my dorm room at NYU. I supposed I could've gotten a bigger apartment if I'd considered having roommates, but I was willing to take a smaller space if it meant I had it all to myself.

The fact that it came with an already-installed air conditioning unit that worked beautifully had been the final selling point. So even though summer was coming, I knew I'd be comfortable in my little one-room. And comfort was a luxury I'd been looking forward to for a long time. I'd gotten along well

enough with my NYU roommate, but she and I hadn't had much in common, so even though it hadn't been a negative situation, it hadn't exactly made for a space that felt like home.

Like it always did, the thought of home made my chest tighten, and my eyes burn. It shouldn't have been so close to the surface, not after all these years, but it was. No matter how much I told myself that I'd dealt with all of the baggage I had from my childhood, it was still there.

I cleared my throat and shook my head. I wasn't going to waste my time on things that I couldn't change. I had a job to do.

I'd finished one of the manuscripts at work and marked it as "Fair," but I hadn't gotten any further than that. The next one in the stack had the ominous title: *Black Dragoon of Death*, but I took a deep breath and dove in.

*The pitch-black night was as black as the pitch that held together the planks of the pirate ship floating in the wet darkness of the Black Sea.*

This was going to be fun.

Less than an hour later, I had to get up and retrieve some aspirin because my head was pounding. I understood that editing meant guiding an author through some places where their writing might have issues, but the first sentence of *Black Dragoon of Death* was actually the best written one in the half of the manuscript I'd read. The characters were flat, the phrasing cliché, the plot absurd. And considering how much I loved obscure fantasy and science fiction, that was saying something.

Still, I plugged through the rest of it, giving a sigh of relief when I finally finished and was able to label it as "Poor."

Book three had a slightly better title: *Flower of Love*. It might have been a bit sappy for my taste, but a title was usually the easiest thing to change. I turned the page and began.

By the time I was two chapters in, I was beginning to wonder if Miss Foxe had chosen these manuscripts as a joke.

*...Reginald's love rod pierced the lady's love petals and she sobbed into his shirt, the depth of her gratitude paling in comparison to the ecstasy he made her feel...*

Had I missed a class somewhere that listed the most bizarre terminology possible for human anatomy? I understood not using clinical terminology when writing a romance, but *love rod* and *love petals*? I rolled my eyes and kept going.

When I finished, I debated between ranking it "Fair" or "Poor." I knew



the market was hot for romances right now, particularly the ones with steamy sex scenes, but the thought of recommending this book for publication didn't sit right with me. Still, Miss Foxe had told me that I had to base my decision on the marketability of the book.

“Fair” it was then.

I glanced at my phone and sighed when I saw that it was already midnight. The next manuscript was thicker than the first two, probably a good thirty to forty thousand words over the company's standard fifty-five thousand word minimum.

I didn't want Miss Foxe thinking I couldn't do the work though. I'd existed on little sleep as a student, especially my senior year when I was reading six different books every week for different classes. I could keep doing it while I secured my place in the company.

On to *Heat of the Sun*. Not a bad title.

I flipped to the first page and began.

*The crack of the flogger against her bare flesh echoed off the walls, and I watched as a single bead of water trailed over her collarbone and down the swell of her firm breasts.*

The next thing I knew, I was turning the last page, my skin flushed, heart racing. Miss Foxe had said that I was supposed to rate the manuscripts on marketability rather than on whether or not I liked them. She'd also been firm on “Good” being the highest possible rating. If she hadn't, I would've written any number of accolades on my little sticky note.

With capital letters and exclamation points.

Sure, there were some rough patches that would need some polish, but for the most part, *Heat of the Sun* was one of the best romances I'd read in a long time.

Except it wasn't just a romance.

I leaned over and switched off the light, then settled back on the creaky, uncomfortable pull-out couch. It was four in the morning, and I had to be up in two hours, but I wasn't sure I could sleep. Not when my entire body was humming.

I'd read some steamy sex scenes before, but the things described in *Heat of the Sun* had contained the sorts of things I'd never imagined in my wildest dreams.

Except I was imagining them now.

I couldn't visualize some of the things the characters had used on each

other, but it wasn't those things that had appealed to me. No, it'd been the main character, the sexy alpha male protagonist who'd dominated his lover. Who'd protected her and kept her safe. Like all good love stories, there'd been conflict and misunderstanding, with plenty of angst, but he'd also given the heroine all the things that I'd spent most of my life wanting.

Stability. Someone to count on. Someone to trust. A home.

As I drifted off, snippets of the book kept floating through my brain, conjuring up the images and arousal I'd felt when I read them the first time. And with them came a slew of emotions that I knew would follow me into my sleep. The strongest one was desire, but not only a desire for something sexual. The desire for more.

But even as I went under, I knew it wouldn't happen.

People like that didn't exist. Men like that. And even if they did, it wouldn't make a difference to me. People like me didn't get to have that sort of thing.

## *Chapter Four*

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## TANYA

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I wasn't surprised that I was exhausted since I hadn't exactly had the most restful sleep, but my second cup of black coffee from the break room gave me the caffeine jolt I needed. I'd probably spend the rest of the day guzzling it too, but I was good for the moment.

Which meant I was ready to go talk to Miss Foxe about *Heat of the Sun*. I had all of the manuscripts I'd read ready to hand in, but I didn't want to risk her overlooking this one. Part of me, however, wondered if she'd just pitch them all because she didn't think they'd be any good anyway. She'd made it sound like this would be one of my regular responsibilities, but for all I knew, she was testing me. She seemed to be the sort of person who'd love to make tests just so she could watch people fail.

But I wasn't going to fail. I'd do whatever tasks she sent my way, and I'd do them well. And right now, that meant I needed to tell her about this book because I might've been new at this, but I knew books, and this one would sell.

When I knocked on her door, no one answered, so I waited. Miss Foxe came in a few minutes later, her mouth set in a tight line. She took long, determined strides, and I almost laughed when I saw an intern diving out of her way. The *almost* was because I was pretty sure I would've done the same thing. Miss Foxe was clearly the sort of person who'd walk right over anyone in her way.

She reached for the door, frowning as she raised her head and saw me standing there. "Do you want something?"

"I read through half the manuscripts," I began.

She went into her office without inviting me in, but I took the risk and followed her in anyway. She didn't kick me out, so I took that as a sign to keep talking.

Call me optimistic.

“There's this one that I really think we should take—”

“We?” She gave me a sharp look.

I forced a smile. I generally considered myself to be a person who was easy to get along with, but I had a feeling Jai Foxe would work hard to make a liar of me.

“I started reading this manuscript late last night, and I couldn't put it down,” I continued without acknowledging her comment. I wasn't sure I could do it politely, and if I'd learned anything during my years in the system, it was how to sidestep confrontation without actually giving anything.

Miss Foxe raised an eyebrow. “I'm missing the part where that means you think you need to barge in here, uninvited.”

“It's got everything you wanted,” I pressed on. “It really deserves some attention. The title's not excessively compelling, but *Heat of the Sun* isn't too bad—”

Her head jerked up. “*Heat of the Sun?*”

I nodded and held out the thick sheaf of paper, pleased that my persistence had paid off.

“I'll read it for myself,” she said, practically grabbing it out of my hand. “Put anything else you finished over there.” She pointed to a wire tray on a small table next to her desk.

I did as she asked and then turned back to see Miss Foxe scowling at her computer screen. I waited for her to say something, but when a minute ticked by and she didn't even acknowledge that I was still there, I figured that was all the hint I needed.

Besides, she said she'd read the manuscript, and that was most important. Hopefully, she'd do it by the end of today so she could confirm what I knew.

It was amazing.

I was beginning to think that Miss Foxe wasn't going to read *Heat of the Sun* after all. It was Thursday already, and the manuscript was still sitting on her desk where she'd put it Tuesday morning. I was trying to not take it personally, but I couldn't help wondering if she would've already read it if

anyone but me had given it to her. Maybe it was a little paranoid of me, but she didn't seem to be willing to give me a chance to prove myself. After all, how would she know if I was a good judge of literature if she didn't know what I thought was good?

“You look annoyed.”

Yvonne's voice cut through my thoughts, and I looked up to see her standing in front of my desk.

I forced a smile. “I'm fine.”

She raised one perfectly shaped eyebrow. “Honey, no one who's been *that* woman's assistant for more than three hours has ever been fine at work.”

Yvonne seemed to know more about what was going on in the company than anyone else, and she hadn't been reluctant to share when we'd first met, so maybe she could let me know if I was imagining things or if I seriously needed to rethink how I was going about my business.

“I've been wondering.” I glanced over at Miss Foxe's closed door. “Does she make...tests for her assistants? Things she has them do just to see how they react?”

Yvonne came around my desk and leaned against it, a speculative look in her sky-blue eyes. “You mean does she play games with them?” She shook her head. “No, she's pretty much just a bitch.”

I looked toward Miss Foxe's office, sure that she would show impeccable timing and come out just as Yvonne was sharing her opinion.

“Don't worry,” Yvonne said. “Her Majesty is rarely seen among us common people.”

I bit back a laugh. Miss Foxe did seem to be a bit of a diva. “Is she next in line to be a senior editor?”

“Hell, no. Not anymore, anyway.” Yvonne leaned closer. “In fact, I've heard that she actually hasn't signed anything for months.”

I wasn't a fan of gossip, but this could affect my job, so I didn't stop Yvonne as she continued.

“See, at Christmas last year, she had this book that she kept telling people was going to be the next big thing, that everyone would be talking about it. So the company pulled out all the stops.”

“What book was it?”

“That's the thing,” Yvonne said. “You wouldn't recognize the title. Complete flop. Bookstores wanted to send back all their orders. The author ended up disappearing for an entire month afterward, then showed up at his

ex-wife's office, stark naked except for a pair of boots. The cops came and got him, but not before he climbed into the fountain.”

“Wow.” I couldn't think of a single word to contain everything that story made me think.

“Complete nervous breakdown.” Yvonne shot a look toward Miss Foxe's office. “Last I heard, he was still in some psych ward somewhere.”

“That's awful.”

She nodded, but the pleased expression made me wonder just how much she agreed with me.

“Ever since then, Miss Foxe acts like she's busy and going through submissions, but she hasn't pitched a single thing since the incident. And I know for a fact my boss is thinking about looking for a replacement.” She gave me a speculative look. “I'll bet if someone brought in something big, it'd go a long way toward getting that position. There are some promising things out there. Rumor has it some new erotica author is shopping around a script guaranteed to be hotter than anything James has written. That'd be one huge fish to land.”

I had no way of knowing if Yvonne's rumors were based on the manuscript that I'd read, on something else entirely, or if she was baiting me into doing something stupid, but I was pretty sure I didn't want to sit back and just wait to see what happened.

“Anyway,” Yvonne straightened, “my advice is to make sure you've shown how indispensable you are to the company. That way, no matter what happens to Miss Foxe, you'll keep moving forward.”

I barely noticed when she walked away. The thought that had just come into my head took up too much room to allow for anything else. It would be risky as hell and could blow up in my face, but the rewards could be huge.

I pulled up my email, but there was nothing new since the one Miss Foxe sent an hour ago telling me about a couple files she needed me to organize. She clearly hadn't taken me seriously about how good the manuscript was, and I didn't doubt that if we waited too long, we'd lose out on something big. If the author went to another publishing house, I had no doubt Miss Foxe would be much closer to losing her job than she was right now. I probably wouldn't get fired with her, but if I could deliver the next best seller, maybe I could get a shot at an editor position.

Before I could second guess myself, I pulled up a new email and began typing. I kept it short and professional, asking one Erika Summers for a face-

to-face meeting to discuss Branch Publishing taking on *Heat of the Sun*.

Once I sent it off, all I could do was wait. My stomach started churning as the magnitude of what I'd done settled on me. What I'd done could be seen as initiative...or as going behind my boss's back. I just hoped I'd end up with a big enough pay-off that I could claim the former.

By the time my email program chirped at me half an hour later, I felt like I was about to throw up. Still, I didn't hesitate to open the reply.

And then I read it a second time to make sure I wasn't seeing things.

Erika Summers had agreed to have lunch with me tomorrow at noon.

A new wave of anxiety washed over me, but with it came a hint of hope. This could be it, the break I'd been looking for. My goal was so close I could almost reach out and touch it.

Now all I had to do was sell it to Ms. Summers.



## *Chapter Five*

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## ERIK

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*F*rom the outside, my life looked perfect. I was one of the wealthiest men in the country under thirty, and probably above that too, and the CEO of one of the world's biggest businesses. Most people wouldn't know it by name because, instead of being a singular company, it had its fingers in all the pies, so to speak. That had been my idea, which was why I was in charge. I didn't do anything half-way.

For a few years, it had been exciting, working on one thing after another, coming up with new ideas to implement, new techniques. I loved to see what worked and tweaked the things that didn't. I liked watching how things came together, figuring out how everything worked best.

Except everything was going smoothly. Sure, nothing was perfect, but any bumps were the sort of things management could take care of on their own. It was one of the reasons I'd insisted on overseeing the hiring for key positions. As much as I enjoyed being in control, it wasn't a good business practice – or practical if I wanted a life outside of my office – not to delegate at least some things.

The problem with having all the *I*'s dotted and *T*'s crossed was that it left me with too much time on my hands. I'd been trying to find hobbies, ways to occupy my time, but nothing had held my attention for long, not even sex. Earlier this week, I'd had the sort of scene with a gorgeous Sub that should have left me satiated for days.

Instead, I'd been tense again by the time I'd gotten home. And it wasn't the first time that'd happened over the last few months either. I'd gone to Gilded Cage with my friends, and on my own, sometimes drinking and

watching, sometimes taking a willing partner to one of the back rooms.

And then I'd wake up just as bored and frustrated as before.

I had two more meetings today that might yield something new. I always kept my eyes open for new propositions, and I'd been looking into purchasing a shipping company. This one was facing serious cutbacks and probably bankruptcy within the year. If the meeting gave me the numbers I wanted, I'd present the idea to the board, then get started.

The prospect of building my company, of using my skills the way I had in the past, should have made me edgy in a good way. Anticipatory. I should have been full of new ideas, eager to get started. But I couldn't manage to care. Not the way I had in the past.

But maybe that was the problem. I wasn't in the past, and doing the same things over and over had made them lose their appeal.

I needed something new and fresh. Unique.

Like my other afternoon prospect could be. I felt a flicker of excitement, an emotion that had only been present lately as I worked on this one particular project. It was a risk, I knew, but I was starting to think that it might be the only chance I had at getting out of this rut.

I glanced at the clock again and pushed back from my desk. I'd made reservations at one of my favorite restaurants for lunch, hoping it would help me get in the right mindset to change things.

The hostess took me straight to my usual table, a quiet corner booth where I could observe each person who came in. It'd kept me from being caught off guard more than once. I wouldn't say that I had enemies, exactly, but there'd been a disgruntled employee or two who'd decided that my position meant firings were all on me. And I'd had one former sexual partner who'd come here with a date and made a beeline for me. Because I had a heads up both times, I'd been able to get someone to intervene before scenes were made.

I kept an eye on the door, waiting for my lunch companion, and that's when *she* walked in.

Average height. Blonde hair so light it was almost silver. Smooth, fair skin. And even though her clothes were a bit on the plain, modest side, they only enhanced her luscious curves. As she approached the hostess, I couldn't understand why every man in the place wasn't staring at her.

A stab of something went through me at the thought of anyone else looking at her. Not while she was standing there alone like any man could

approach her. She didn't deserve to have just any random guy hitting on her, asking her out.

She needed someone who would take the time to learn every inch of that exquisite body, who'd bring her to the heights of pleasure, coax out more orgasms than she could handle.

I could almost see it.

Her spread out on a bed, ankles and arms restrained. Those gorgeous breasts heaving as she gasped for breath. Her tight pussy clamping down on my fingers. Hips coming up to meet each stroke.

She wouldn't be a quick fuck. No, she was the sort of woman I'd want to take to and over the edge for hours. Make her come on my tongue until she sobbed for more. Then fuck her in every possible position until she forgot her name.

I shifted in my seat, cock pressing against my zipper. I'd never had an issue getting hard when I was having sex, but this was the first time in a long time that I'd gotten an erection simply from watching a woman walk across a room.

I mentally cursed my luck as I realized I couldn't act on my instincts and go speak with her. I had someone coming for lunch, and if I approached the stranger, I wouldn't want to be interrupted until I was certain I'd have the opportunity to see her again. Normally, if I saw a woman I wanted that badly, I would've taken her back to a hotel for a whole different sort of lunch, but I didn't have the time for it now.

But unless I was done with lunch before she left, I wouldn't be spending time with her at all.

## *Chapter Six*

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## TANYA

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I'd never heard of the restaurant where Erika Summers wanted to have lunch, and as soon as I walked inside, I knew why.

I'd dressed in my best professional outfit, and a look around the dining room told me that I just barely made the cut in the dress code department. The men all wore suits that probably cost a couple thousand easy, definitely tailor-made. I had no doubt that the women were dressed by some of the most expensive names in the business. A single shoe probably cost more than a month's rent.

I'd be lucky if I could afford a water here.

*Sometimes you have to spend money to make money.*

A man's voice echoed in my head, and even though it had been twelve years since I'd last heard it out loud, it often whispered through my mind.

After my mom walked out when I was barely a toddler, Dad had raised me on his own. It'd been just the two of us until I was ten, and even though there were times I'd wished I had a mother, they were few and far between. My dad hadn't been the sort of single father who'd only cared for my basic needs and left my emotional ones to the care of others. He'd been everything to me.

But he was gone now. Had been for a dozen years. Just after my birthday, he'd taken me to visit my aunt...and then he'd vanished. Aunt Lolly had been furious, never wasting an opportunity to tell me how useless and unimportant I was, how neither of my parents had wanted me. The needling about my mom hadn't ever really bothered me. I'd accepted my mother's absence in my life without too much of a problem because my dad had always made sure I

knew that Mom's decision to leave wasn't my fault.

Dad leaving...that had devastated me. I'd told myself over and over that he hadn't done it voluntarily, that it must have been something beyond his control that had taken him away from me. Then, a few months into staying with Aunt Lolly, she had a little too much to drink one night, and I found out the truth.

Dad hadn't been working at a factory to make ends meet. He'd been gambling. And not like going to Vegas or Atlantic City gambling. He'd been into the backroom, illegal shit that got people's legs broken...or worse. Apparently, things kept getting worse until he found himself in too deep with the wrong people. Aunt Lolly said that was all my fault too, but all I'd cared about was the fact that Dad had been trying to protect me.

And I knew he'd be back. Aunt Lolly said not to get my hopes up, but I'd waited for him every day until living with her had become so unbearable that I wasn't able to take it anymore. That was when I ran away.

Aunt Lolly hadn't wanted me in the first place, and she'd wanted me even less after that. She only kept me at first out of obligation. Once I'd shown her how ungrateful I was, she handed me over to the state without a second look.

"Can I help you?"

I smiled at the hostess as I pulled my mind from the past. She looked a few years older than me, her dress classy, though not as expensive as what the patrons were wearing.

"Yes, I'm here with Erika Summers."

Something flickered across her face as she smiled, like there was something amusing about what I said. She wasn't mocking me, of that I was nearly certain. I'd had enough experience with hateful people that I knew what it felt like. This was more like she knew something I didn't.

"Follow me, please."

I kept my head up, eyes fixed right ahead, but I hadn't gone more than a couple feet when I felt eyes on me. Heat crept up my neck, and I mentally cursed. The last thing I needed was to show up to this meeting looking like some flustered child. I already knew I would have to work to sell myself. I was young and new to the publishing world, which meant Ms. Summers would be taking a chance on me as much as Branch Publishing would be taking on her.

My heart thudded against my ribs, and my stomach churned. I could do this, I told myself. This wasn't me trying to make friends. This was business,

and I knew business. I didn't need to make her like me as a person or want to spend time with me. I only needed to convince her that I was the best person to represent her work. Miss Foxe might not look too fondly on the way I'd gone about things, but if I made the connection here, there was a chance I could make an argument to be the one to follow through.

A waiter stepped out in front of me, and I took a step back, stumbling. My cheeks burned, hands curling into fists. I muttered an apology even though I hadn't done anything wrong, and hurried after the hostess. I forced myself not to duck my head, but my gaze stayed down. I didn't trust my feet not to turn on me.

“Here you are.”

I glanced at the hostess and gave her a tight smile. “Thank you.”

She had a strange look on her face as I sat down, but I didn't realize why until I raised my head...and found myself staring into the most beautiful bright blue eyes I'd ever seen...on a man.

Oh shit.

“I – sorry – dammit!”

He smiled, revealing a pair of dimples to go with his rugged features and sandy hair. “I'm not sure what you're apologizing for, but I'm sure it's all right.”

I looked around, wondering why the hostess had run off if she knew I'd sat down in the wrong place. Had I read her wrong, and she wanted to humiliate me after all? I couldn't see her, and I couldn't see a woman sitting alone, trying to figure out where her lunch meeting had gone.

“I'm sorry,” I repeated, starting to get to my feet. “I was supposed to meet someone here.”

“Erika Summers, right?”

I looked at him, startled. “Yes, that's right. Are you her agent?”

He chuckled, his gaze sliding down my body in a way that made my skin heat up for an entirely different reason than embarrassment.

“No, Miss, I'm not an agent. My name's Erik Sanders.”

Erik Sanders. I frowned. The name sounded familiar, but I couldn't figure out why. It's not like I would've had the opportunity to see someone like him while I was studying my ass off at NYU. Men like him generally didn't matriculate in the library. At least, none that I'd seen.

My confusion only lasted a few seconds though, because I suddenly remembered where I'd heard the name. Erik Sanders had been on a *Times*



magazine cover I'd seen a couple weeks ago.

I blurted out the words as soon as the memory came to me. "Are you the same Erik Sanders who *Times* called the most eligible bachelor under thirty?"

I didn't add Wall Street billionaire. It seemed crass to mention that part of things.

He rolled his eyes, a smile playing at his lips as if he knew what I was thinking but not saying. "I hate that title."

But he didn't deny it was him.

Now I was really confused.

How in the world did a billionaire on Wall Street know the name of the erotica author I was meeting with? It didn't make sense.

He leaned back in his seat. "It's one of the reasons I prefer to use the name Erika Summers when I write."

## *Chapter Seven*

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## ERIK

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Her eyes were the same color as dark, bittersweet chocolate, I decided. The sort of chocolate I'd always preferred over other kinds. With her fair skin and hair, they were a startling contrast. And they drew me in, captivated me in a way that nothing had in a long time.

I watched the realization dawn as my identity sunk in.

“You're Erika Summers?” The question came out choked.

I shrugged, unable to hold back a grin. “And you're Tanya Lacey, from Branch Publishing.”

She nodded, sliding her gaze away from mine. “Yes, that's me. Mr. Sanders, I apologize. You caught me off guard.”

“Erik, please.” I let my eyes trace across her features.

She was pretty, but not the sort of drop-dead gorgeous that would cause men to stop in their tracks and stare. No, her appeal came from inside, from her depth. I'd barely spoken to her, and already I could tell that there was much more to this woman than what I could see, no matter how appealing I found her.

I watched as a mask slipped into place. All of her nerves vanished, and her eyes met mine again. This was the Tanya who'd sent me an email, I realized. The professional who would handle work with confidence.

“Thank you for agreeing to meet with me.”

She gave me the sort of polite smile I easily recognized. I'd offered it to plenty of fellow businessmen over the years. A flare of annoyance went through me. I wanted something real, something without artifice. And I wanted to be the one to make her smile like that.

I pushed the thought away. She was interesting, attractive, and I planned on feeling her out, seeing if the chemistry I suspected we'd have truly lurked beneath the surface. If she felt it too, I'd negotiate an encounter that we'd both enjoy. If not, I'd keep things business between us and turn my attentions elsewhere.

Her tongue darted out to wet her lips and arousal tightened my stomach almost painfully. That one little movement and all I could think about was what it would look like to have those full lips wrapped around my cock. Images flashed through my mind, one right after the other.

Long, silky hair in my fist as I took her from behind.

Her face contorting in ecstasy as she came.

Filling my hands with those gorgeous tits.

Watching that pink flesh creep over every inch of her body.

“The first thing I need to know is if you've submitted *Heat of the Sun* to any other publishers for consideration.”

I jerked my attention back to her and to business. I'd have time for fantasies later. “No, I followed the company's guidelines regarding simultaneous submissions.”

“Good.” She nodded, then looked up as a waiter approached.

I ordered the chef's special and a bottle of wine. She asked for a Caesar salad and water. I held back a frown. I really hoped she wasn't one of those women who starved herself. Or just as bad, one who didn't eat in front of men because of some bizarre idea of what it meant to be ladylike.

She turned back to me as the waiter walked away. “May I ask why you chose Branch Publishing rather than one of the big five?”

“I like to think I'm a good judge of whether or not a business is a solid investment,” I said. “I wanted a publisher big enough to handle real marketing, but small enough that I wouldn't get lost in the masses.”

“So you did your research.” She made it a statement rather than a question.

“It's what I do.” I couldn't resist the opportunity to add, “I research *everything*.”

Her eyes widened, but only for a moment. The waiter was back again with our drinks, and that gave her the time she needed to compose herself again. I liked having her off balance though.

“I'm curious, did you read my book, or did you have someone else do it for you?”

Something passed across her face before disappearing. It looked like annoyance. “I read it.”

“What did you think?” I asked as I leaned forward.

Pink tinged her cheeks. “It was well-written. The characters compelling. I believe it will sell well, especially in today's market.”

“What about the...content?”

Her fingers curled into a fist, and more color flooded her face. She didn't look away though. She thought for a moment before answering, “Your...*subject matter* rides a fine line. Too many erotica authors rely on the sensationalism of graphic sex – or whatever kinks they put into the story – and lose sight of writing a good story. Characters become flat, plots trite. But then there's the opposite problem as well. People who try to incorporate sex scenes into an otherwise decent story, but there's no sizzle. It's clinical, dry.”

I reached across the table and let my fingers brush against her hand before I picked up the salt and set it down next to my plate.

“Are you saying that you don't find my writing *dry*?”

She grabbed her glass and took a gulp of water. Her skin was flushed a wonderful shade of pink, and I really wanted to know if her entire body was that color now.

“I'm curious,” I continued, “what did you think of it? Not as an editor. I appreciate that insight, but I'd like to know your opinion as a reader. After all, that's why I write.”

“You definitely don't need the money,” she muttered. She closed her eyes almost as soon as the words left her mouth. “Dammit. I didn't – I shouldn't have said that.”

“It's quite all right, Ms. Lacey.” Fuck me. She was cute when she was off-kilter. A part of me wanted to see just how flustered I could make her. “Or may I call you Tanya?”

She swallowed hard, looking like one of those proverbial deer caught in headlights. I could almost hear her sigh of relief when the waiter reappeared with our meals.

I let the silence sit between us for a couple minutes as we ate. At least she actually ate her salad, instead of picking it apart like even the thought of lettuce calories were too much. I caught myself staring at her mouth more than once, thinking about what she would taste like, the sounds she'd make if I caught her lower lip between my teeth.

“You didn't answer my question,” I said finally. “As a reader, what did

you think of my book?”

She took her time, eating a few more bites of her salad before answering. “It was...interesting.”

I raised an eyebrow, and her blush returned. “What *exactly* did you find interesting? Was there a particular passage that...*spoke* to you? Something that maybe brought up some good memories?” I let my gaze drop, moving my eyes over her body in a slow, deliberate manner. “Or maybe something you'd want to try?”

“*Heat of the Sun* isn't exactly my preferred genre,” she said.

She'd squared her shoulders, her posture as stiff as her statement. Hmm. Despite that, I was sure she wasn't being a snob like a lot of people in the literary world, the people who'd spend hours pontificating about the virtues of *War and Peace* or *Grapes of Wrath* because those were the only *true* form of literature. The closest they'd get to erotica was *Lolita* or *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. And that was only okay because they were 'classics.' They based their opinions on the books their English professors had told them were appropriate rather than what they actually enjoyed. I had nothing against the classics. I just wasn't of the opinion that they were the only books worth reading.

“Let me guess,” I said. “You mostly read authors like Jane Austen and Nicholas Sparks?”

Her mouth twisted into something too sardonic to be a smile. “Try Terry Brooks and Phillip K Dick.”

I gave her a surprised look. “*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*”

She looked impressed. “To be fair, I do like Sparks and Austen, but they're not as high on my list as science fiction and fantasy.”

Interesting. She was in the right demographic for my genre but didn't have the usual alternate preferences of sweet romance instead of the more sexual kind of books. I wondered if that was because her own experiences had been completely vanilla. It would mesh with what else I'd seen of her personality.

My cock hardened even more at the thought of being the one to introduce her to the pleasures of my world.

I stretched my hand out to touch hers. I didn't bother with any pretense this time. I wanted to feel her soft skin under my fingertips, and her hand was as much as I was going to get at the moment.

“I'm glad you enjoyed it,” I said. “Especially since the majority of those

*interesting* scenes are based on personal experience.”

Her lips parted, eyes going wide, the expression making me wonder what she looked like in the throes of passion.

Before I could follow up with an offer to show her exactly what I meant, we were interrupted by a tall, exotic looking woman. The moment Tanya saw her, all the color drained from her face, and she yanked her hand back, dropping it into her lap.

“Miss Lacey.” The other woman wore the sort of predatory expression that made me want to put myself between her and Tanya. “I believe your lunch break is almost over.”

“Excuse me,” I cut in before Tanya could run off. “I wasn't aware that companies put a clock on a business lunch.”

“I'm sorry, Mr. Sanders.” She held out her hand. “I'm Jai Foxe, editor at Branch Publishing. My *assistant* neglected to mention that we had a meeting today, or I would have been here to talk to you personally.”

I glanced at Tanya, but her face was blank. I could only guess what was going on in her head.

“That's quite alright, Ms. Foxe. Your assistant has been quite capable.” I made an unusually impulsive decision. “In fact, I think she's in tune with the sort of representation I'm looking for, so if Branch Publishing wants my book, I believe I'll continue working with Miss Lacey.”

Jai opened her mouth to argue, then snapped it shut again.

“Now, if you don't mind, Miss Lacey and I were in the middle of discussing the inspiration for some of the chapters in my book.” I turned back to Tanya, who was staring at me as if she couldn't believe what I'd just done.

I understood how she felt. I wasn't entirely sure why I'd done it either. Only that I was as turned off by Jai Foxe as I was turned on by Tanya Lacey, and I knew that only one of them was going to be right for my book.

And she was sitting right across from me.

## *Chapter Eight*



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## TANYA

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I had to be dreaming. This had to be a dream. There wasn't any other plausible explanation for the fact that one of the best-looking men I'd ever seen had basically told my boss that he wanted me and not her.

Well, not *wanted* wanted. That would just be crazy – *crazier*, was the more accurate word I supposed – since Erik sincerely wanting me to represent his book after he found out I was an assistant was crazy in and of itself.

Which was why this had to be a dream.

Or a hallucination. I could get being this being a hallucination rather than a dream. That could explain...actually, it couldn't explain anything. None of this made any sense.

Especially not the fact that, until Miss Foxe had shown up, I'd been enjoying the conversation about...yeah...*that*. Dammit. I was so in over my head.

“Now, where were we?”

Damn, his eyes were gorgeous. Then he smiled and my stomach twisted. The rest of him wasn't bad either. I told myself to ignore all of it. Because he hadn't meant anything by what he'd said. We were just talking about his book.

His fingers brushed mine, sending little electrical tingles across my skin. “Right, we were talking about *personal experience*.”

Shit. I blurted out, “I think maybe you should consider letting Miss Foxe take things from here.” I looked over to where my boss was stalking out of

the restaurant.

He went still, his gaze searching. “Do you want to represent my book? Because if you don't, I'll find someone else, but I won't be asking your boss. Not after the way she spoke to you.”

A wave of warmth washed over me. I wasn't used to people caring about how I was being treated.

Or caring about my opinion.

“Tanya?”

“I love the book,” I admitted. I needed to be completely honest with him. “And I'd love to represent it, but I'm afraid I wasn't entirely forthcoming in my email.”

His eyes sparkled as he curled his fingers around mine. “Is that so?”

I knew I should pull my hand back because this was supposed to be business. But I liked the way my hand felt in his. Since he was probably going to fire me, and then Miss Foxe was *definitely* going to fire me, I might as well let him keep holding my hand during the process.

“Miss Foxe gave me a stack of manuscripts, and when I read yours, I told her that it was great, except she didn't do anything with it, and I didn't want it to get lost in the shuffle because it was so good.” I was vaguely aware that I was babbling.

“So you believe in it?”

I nodded. “I do.”

“Then I think you're the perfect person to handle it.” He made it sound so simple, so matter-of-fact. “So what's next?”

I was pretty sure that what was next for me was clearing out my desk and looking for a new job.

His fingers tightened around my hand. “If you're worried about the fact that Miss Foxe walked out of here looking like she had a stick up her ass, don't. One of the reasons I didn't include my actual name on my manuscript is because I didn't want someone thinking of marketing me as Erik Sanders simply for shock value. But an official contract would have my name on it.” He gave me the sort of grin that made my stomach flip. “And I have no problem using my name to get what I want.”

“Oh.”

Eloquent.

“Now, Miss Tanya Lacey, shall we give dessert a shot?”

He flipped my hand over and traced along my wrist with a fingertip. I

shivered, wishing that I could believe that what he wanted was me.

“No, thank you.” The words came out more breathless than I intended.

He tilted his head, his eyes narrowing. I fought the urge to squirm. This was so not what I'd come to this meeting expecting. I was confident in my ability to see a book from submission to release, confident in my language skills. But *him*? I'd never been good with people, especially men, even before Aunt Lolly dumped me into the system.

“My treat.” He gave me a charming smile. “As long as you answer a single question for me.”

I pulled my hand back, suspicion giving me strength. “What question?”

“Did the company give you a card for lunch, or were you planning on paying for the meal yourself?”

Dammit. I didn't want to answer his question, and I really didn't care about dessert, but I couldn't lie to him. Not if I wanted him to trust me with his book. I wasn't a writer, but I knew that writing was deeply personal, no matter the subject matter, and him trusting me with it had to be built on an honest foundation.

I shrugged. “I wasn't given a company account, but that doesn't matter.”

“I'm not letting you pay,” he said, his eye sharpening, nearly piercing into my skin. “And don't bother arguing with me.”

I ignored his second statement. “I can't let you do that.”

“You will.” He gestured for the waiter to come back. “One piece of the Death by Chocolate cake, and two forks.”

“Mr. Sanders.”

“Erik.” Something in his voice shifted. “I don't want to be Mr. Sanders to you.”

Fuck me. I was in trouble.

“Now, we're going to eat that amazing dessert, and then you're going to go back to work where you'll get together a contract for me. And then you can give it to me tonight.”

“Tonight?” My eyebrows shot up. “What's tonight?”

He just grinned at me, looking more like a mischievous boy than a wealthy businessman. The waiter set down a plate between us, and the cake was definitely distracting enough for me to wait until I'd taken a couple bites before I asked again.

“Mr. San – Erik,” I amended, “what's tonight?”

I was pretty sure that no one should be allowed to make eating cake *that*

hot, but it was entirely possible I was the only one thinking that way.

“Tonight is when I plan to give you a taste of what you need to understand my book better.”

Judging by the heat in his eyes, I didn't think we were heading to a surf shop.

I was so in over my head.

## *Chapter Nine*

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## ERIK

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Wanting Tanya to represent my book instead of Jai Foxe made good business sense. If I'd learned anything working over the last few years, it was that a person who believed in something was usually better at promoting it than someone who was just paid to do it. And she said she believed in my work, so she was logically the best choice for it. Especially since I had my own business expertise to contribute.

Plus, my gut said she was the one to go with, and I trusted my gut when it came to business choices.

The decision to flirt, to touch her, to ask her out...I wasn't entirely sure what had made me think any of *that* was a good idea.

It wasn't a date, I reminded myself. I hadn't asked her to go out with me. I told her that she was coming with me and I'd give her some insight into my book. And the flirting was just me being charming and trying to put her at ease. It hadn't meant anything overtly sexual.

If I kept telling myself that, maybe I'd believe it by the time I arrived at her place.

It was what made the most sense, after all. I fucked tall, long-legged women who were experienced Subs after a few hours of fun. I didn't know anything about Tanya's sexual history, but I felt fairly certain in my assessment that she was quite innocent. And that definitely wasn't my type.

Which was what I told myself as my driver made his way through the city traffic.

I'd lived here my entire life, and I didn't think of myself as a snob, but I'd never been to this neighborhood before. It wasn't in the worst part of the city,

but it wasn't the best either. I directed my driver to the correct building, then instructed him to wait. I didn't intend to linger.

I scowled when I realized I didn't need to be buzzed in but pushed that thought to the back of my mind. Her safety wasn't mine to worry about, no matter how much I wanted her.

The stairs were steep, and by the time I got to the third floor, I was frowning at the cracks in the walls and the rips in the carpet. The building was narrow, and as I walked down the hall, I confirmed my suspicions by counting the number of doors crammed onto each side. The apartments here had to be one room and a bathroom, probably barely a few hundred square feet. I could probably fit one of these places inside my master bathroom.

I reminded myself that the size of Tanya's apartment wasn't any of my concern, and then I knocked on the door. A moment later, it opened, and I forgot all of the reasons why this wasn't a date.

She was wearing one of those little black dresses in the classic style that could stay in fashion for years. It wasn't anything fancy or daring. Mid-thigh hemline, neckline that revealed just a hint of cleavage.

But it hugged those curves perfectly, and I found myself wondering what she was wearing underneath. Her heels were only a couple inches, so she barely reached my shoulder. Her hair was twisted up behind her head, and she wore such little makeup that I could barely tell she had it on. Everything about her outfit screamed that she wasn't sure if this was a date or a business meeting.

That made two of us.

"I hope this is all right for where we're going." Her voice was softer than it had been at the restaurant, more uncertain.

"It's perfect," I assured her. "You look lovely."

I didn't think I'd ever used the word *lovely* to describe a woman. It was usually *hot* or *beautiful* or something like that. While those words fit her too, *lovely* was far more accurate.

"So do..." She flushed, the color moving across her chest and neck as well as her cheeks. "I mean, you look...nice."

I would've loved to ask her if she got this flustered every time she went out with someone, but I had a feeling that would just make her more nervous. While I enjoyed testing what made her blush, I didn't want to do anything that would make her change her mind about coming with me. If she wasn't comfortable with me, she'd bolt as soon as she saw what sort of club Gilded

Cage was, and I *really* wanted to take her there.

“Thank you,” I said and held out my arm. “My car's waiting out front.”

As we walked down, I tried to think of something to say, to ask, anything that would distract me from the heat of her hand on my arm. It was warm enough outside that I'd gone with short sleeves, but I hadn't considered what it would be like to have my skin against hers. I'd never felt this hum of electricity with someone before. It was always pleasure or nothing, not this half-way between state that made me want to keep touching her, even as I opened the door for her.

My driver already knew where we were going, so as I settled into the seat next to Tanya, I was able to focus all of my attention on her.

“Have you lived here long?” I almost rolled my eyes at the question. I was better at small talk than that.

“In New York or in my apartment?”

“Both.”

“I grew up in Albany.”

A shadow passed over her eyes, telling me there was more to the story than that simple statement, but I didn't push it.

“I came to New York for college,” she continued. “NYU. After I graduated, I moved into my own place.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask about her family when I realized she was bracing herself for what came next. Since the logical question to follow up with was the one I'd been about to ask, it didn't take a genius to figure out that family wasn't something she wanted to talk about. So I shifted the conversation and asked about college instead.

The relief on her face was evident as she seized onto the subject. She relaxed even more as I kept the conversation on work and school rather than anything personal. When it came to this part of things, the shy young woman I'd seen just a short while ago vanished, and in her place was the confident, hard-working woman I wanted to represent my book.

By the time we reached the club, she didn't look quite as nervous as before, though her cheeks turned pink when I took her hand to help her from the car. I didn't relinquish it as we walked toward the door. The best thing about Gilded Cage was that it was a private club, so no lines or bouncers or anything like that. All I had to do was show the man at the door my membership card, and we were in.



I'd tightened my grip on her hand as we walked inside, but she hadn't tried to pull away. Instead, she simply stared, mouth open, eyes wide. I'd taken her upstairs then, leading her to my favorite alcove where we could have privacy but also enjoy what the club had to offer.

One of the reasons I'd wanted to bring her on a Friday night even though I knew it'd be packed was because Friday and Saturday nights were performance nights. Some of the performers were employees of the club, others were volunteers from the membership, but I'd never seen a disappointing scene played out on the club's stage.

Now, Tanya was sitting next to me on the love seat, her body tense. She'd been people watching from the moment we'd arrived, not saying a word as she'd taken in the array of attire: everything from leather to lace to chains to silk. We fit right in, but so did the couple making their way to the stage.

The woman was about Tanya's build, with short dark hair and coffee-colored skin, while the man was well over six feet tall, broad-shouldered with the sort of defined muscles that made me think he was into bodybuilding. The tiny shorts he wore were also a clue. The woman wore a wispy dress, filmy white material floating around her that left very little to the imagination. I hadn't seen them perform before, but I'd seen them around the club, and they had the sort of chemistry that screamed.

I pulled Tanya back against me, easing my hand out of hers so I could put my arm around her shoulders.

"Put your feet up," I said. "You'll enjoy the performance more if you're comfortable."

"Performance?" She looked up at me but shifted so that her legs were up. The fact that she obeyed sent blood rushing to my cock.

I moved too, arranging until her back was against my chest, my arm across her stomach, just under her breasts. I'd been dying to touch more than just her hand, and knowing that she was going to experience one of the voyeuristic aspects of this lifestyle for the first time, I couldn't resist.

I put my mouth next to her ear even though the music wasn't loud enough to warrant it. "They're going to do a scene for us. Sometimes that means just some bondage or flogging, sometimes it's sex. All depends on what the couple wants to do."

"They're going to..." Her eyes were so wide, so innocent. "In public?" Her voice squeaked on the last word, and that familiar flush stained her cheeks an even darker shade of red.

“If that's what they want to do,” I said. A strand of her hair had come loose, and I reached for it, twisting the silky lock around my finger. I could only imagine what it would look like loose and spread across my bed, what it would feel like to bury my hands in it. To have it brush my thighs while she went down on me.

Fuck me. I'd be forced to spend the entire night with an erection at this rate. Then she shifted, and I caught a whiff of some floral scent. Calla lilies. My mother had loved them. A wave of nostalgia washed over me, which definitely helped with the hard-on, but I didn't want to be thinking about the past tonight either.

No, the only thing I wanted to be doing tonight was introducing Tanya to the pleasures of this world.

“Keep your eyes on them,” I murmured, tracing my fingers up her arm. “If you want to know the world I write about, the world Chase introduces to Leia, this is a taste.”

On the stage, the man was securing the woman's wrists with a pair of leather restraints as a pair of chains descended from the ceiling. A moment later, the cuffs and chains were attached, and her arms were being pulled over her head.

“Some people think of BDSM as being one specific thing,” I said quietly. “Usually based on whatever movie or book they've seen. But it's not. There are so many different aspects of it.”

The man untied two ties on either of the woman's shoulders, and her dress fell to her feet. He stood behind her and slid his hands over her hips, up her ribcage, and then forward to cover her breasts. His thumbs moved across her nipples, and she arched her back.

“Do you do that?”

Her question was so soft I almost missed it. “Do what?” I cupped a breast through her dress, but she didn't protest.

“Perform.”

I circled her nipple with my thumb as I answered, “No. I'm not an exhibitionist. Not exactly, anyway.”

I dropped my hand to her lap and began inching up her skirt. She stiffened.

“What are you doing?”

Even though her voice was low, I could hear the faint tremble in it. I stilled my hand and leaned down to press my lips against her neck. Her

breath caught even as I felt her pulse pick up.

“Relax, sweetheart. I'll stop if you want me to, but I just want to make you feel good.”

The man on the stage now had his hand between the woman's legs. Even from where I was sitting, I could see the tension in the woman's body as the man's fingers worked over her flesh. When he stopped, her body sagged, and I knew what he was doing.

“That's called orgasm denial,” I explained. “Where one partner is taken to the brink, but not allowed to finish. A good Dom can keep a Sub on the edge all night.”

Tanya squirmed, and I wondered how much of it was her being uncomfortable due to what she was seeing...or how aroused she was.

“Don't worry,” I assured her. “I don't plan on leaving you hanging.”

When my fingers brushed the inside of her thigh, she tensed again.

“Tell me to stop, and I'll take you home,” I promised. “But if you want me to take care of that ache inside you, spread your legs and let me in.”

I no longer cared about the couple on the stage or what anyone else in the club was doing. Every bit of my attention was focused on the woman in my arms as I waited for her response. Either the night would be over and we'd stick with the book business, or I'd find out what it felt like to have my fingers buried in her tight pussy.

Her legs slowly moved apart as she turned her face toward the back of the seat. A red flush crept up her neck, but she didn't try to stop me as my hand moved under her skirt. I made a sound in the back of my throat as I found her panties wet.

“Damn, sweetheart,” I murmured. “You're soaked.”

She sucked in a shuddering breath as I slipped my fingers beneath the elastic. My cock pressed against my zipper, but I ignored it. Right now, it was all about getting her off.

The second I touched her clit, her body jerked, and I smiled. I would've loved to take it slow, to drag out every last drop of ecstasy I could give her, but I meant what I said about not being an exhibitionist.

“Don't think about anything other than what you feel,” I spoke the words into her ear as I moved my fingers over her clit. “About the pleasure signals each of those thousands of nerves are shooting up to your brain right now. The pressure and friction that are making your heart race and your breathing ragged.”

I dipped a finger into her and swallowed hard at the wet heat. I could only imagine what she would feel like wrapped around my cock.

I rubbed the heel of my hand against her clit even as my finger circled her entrance. I could feel her tension and knew she was close. She just needed to let go.

“If you want to come, sweetheart, you need to do it now.” I lightly bit down on her earlobe. “If you don't come when I tell you to, I'll stop, and you'll be left wet and aching.”

She whimpered, her hips moving up against my hand.

“Come now,” I ordered her. “Now!”

Her legs clamped down on my hand, and she made the hottest sound I'd ever heard.

Fuck.

I wanted to hear that sound again.

## *Chapter Ten*

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## TANYA

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I wasn't a prude. Just because I liked clothes that were more on the modest side, and I didn't spend most of my reading time with stories that had a lot of sex, didn't mean anything. And just because I'd never experienced *anything* remotely like what just happened didn't mean I was the ice princess the kids in college had always accused me of being.

But I wasn't entirely sure what *this* made me. I'd just had my first orgasm...ever. And I'd had it in the middle of a sex club. Okay, not necessarily the middle, but it had still happened in a public place. Where people were having sex on a stage. And I'd been watching them before I'd let a virtual stranger stick his hand under my skirt and touch me in a place that no one aside from a doctor had ever touched me before.

Fuck!

How the *hell* had I gone from being a virgin who'd had only one kiss, to going to a BDSM club with a billionaire client and then letting him...

Fuck!

I sat up, yanking down my skirt. My face was burning as humiliation flooded me. I couldn't even look at Erik. Mr. Sanders. My client.

Not only had I done something completely out of character, I'd probably just completely screwed up any shot at being taken seriously in my field. If Branch Publishing didn't fire me, I'd still never be able to be an editor. Not without wondering if every client I signed was thinking that I'd do something like this with them.

"I need to go." I stood up, smoothing down my dress with shaking hands.

I didn't look back, not wanting to see the sort of smug triumph I was sure Erik had on his face. I didn't slut shame, so if a woman wanted to have sex with a man on a first date, or hook up with some random guy, that was her business. But I could never be that woman, not if I wanted to be taken seriously in my field.

“Tanya.”

I ignored him as I hurried back the way we'd come. I needed to get out of here. This was a huge mistake. I thought I could handle things, but I was wrong. I was in so far over my head that I was drowning. Why had I thought I could deal with people? Give me books, and I knew what to do. I could even talk to people about books. But this wasn't me.

Tears burned in my eyes as I pushed through the crowd, my embarrassment giving me the strength to be bolder than usual. My thighs were slick, and every step was a reminder of just how much I'd enjoyed what Erik had done...and that made everything worse because none of it was his fault.

He'd given me the chance to say no and made it clear that he wouldn't hold it against me. Actually, he'd even gone one step further. He hadn't just told me to say no and acted when I hadn't. He told me to spread my legs if I wanted him to keep going, and I'd done it without a thought, so I couldn't even blame my inaction.

I stepped outside and took a gulping breath as I closed my eyes and willed back my tears. I couldn't take the chance that he'd see me crying and think that he'd done something wrong. I didn't even think that *I'd* done something wrong. It wasn't like I was intentionally saving sex for after marriage or anything like that. If I'd met Erik under different circumstances and we'd come here on an actual date, I wouldn't have been so upset.

“Tanya, are you okay?”

I plastered a fake smile on my face before turning. “I just needed some air.”

The concerned look on Erik's face didn't change. He reached out and took my hand, giving it a light squeeze. “I didn't read you wrong in there, did I? Because I thought—”

I shook my head. I couldn't let him think that I was going to be weird about this. “Nothing like that. I enjoyed...I mean...it just caught me off guard, that's all.”

“All right.” He didn't sound like he quite believed me, but he didn't push

the subject either.

“It's been a long week,” I said. “And I'll want to be in the office first thing on Monday with your – shit! I forgot to bring your contract.”

He smiled, whether at my language or because he was relieved that I wasn't making a big deal out of what happened. “That's okay. You can bring it to me on Monday.”

“Oh, okay then.” I half-turned toward the street. “I'll catch a cab, so you can go back inside.”

“You're not taking a cab.” He pulled his phone out of his pocket, tapped the screen a couple times and then put it away. “My driver will be here in a few minutes.”

His driver. Right. As if I needed anything else to remind me of how far apart our worlds were.

“You didn't need to do that,” I said, wrapping my arms around my middle. I wasn't cold, but I was suddenly very aware that I was standing on a sidewalk in wet panties that weren't quite back in place.

“Monday,” he said, brushing aside my comment, “I'll have a car pick you up at eleven-thirty, and you'll join me for lunch. Bring the contract with you, and I'll sign it before we get started on anything else.”

Some of the surprise I felt must've shown on my face because he gave me a wry smile.

“You didn't think I'd change my mind about having you represent me because of what we did back there, did you?” He slid his hand up my arm, leaving a burning path on my skin. “Believe me, Tanya, I can separate business from pleasure.”

Before I could try to figure out what the appropriate response would be, a car pulled up to the curb and Erik was stepping away from me to open the door.

“I had fun tonight.” He took my hand and helped me into the back seat. “I'll see you on Monday.”

It wasn't until he closed the door and the car pulled back into traffic that I realized he wasn't coming with me. I pressed my lips together, fingers twisting together hard enough for my knuckles to turn white.

It didn't mean anything, I told myself. He said he still wanted me to represent his book. We'd had fun. I didn't need to make it into something it wasn't. Whatever had prompted him to do what he did, it was out of his system now. We would focus on work, and that would be fine. Better than



fine.

Because it'd just been some fun between consenting adults. Nothing more.

And I definitely didn't want to do it again.

## *Chapter Eleven*

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## TANYA

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Who did I think I was kidding? I hadn't been able to stop thinking about what we'd done. I tried everything over the weekend. Reading more of the slush pile Miss Foxe had given me. Cleaning. Cooking. Rummaging through a couple different thrift stores to see if they had anything I could use.

None of it helped. Just when I'd thought I'd managed to get him out of my head, something would make me remember, and I'd feel the ghost of his fingers, the memory of my stomach tightening, and the pleasure that had, for a single moment, made me forget about everything.

I was actually thankful to get back to work on Monday morning, not just because I enjoyed having a job that didn't make me insane, but because I knew I had enough work to keep my mind occupied. Until lunchtime, anyway.

I'd been going over the standard contract with the proverbial fine tooth comb for the past hour. I didn't think Branch was trying to get anything over on Erik, so I wasn't looking for any tricks in the fine print. What I wanted was to know the contract well enough that I wouldn't need to search for answers if Erik had any questions.

He said he wanted me to represent his book, but I wasn't foolish enough to think that our little bit of 'fun' on Friday night would do me any good if I was shit at my job. Since I was just an assistant, I couldn't be just okay or competent. I couldn't even be merely great. I had to be excellent, better than anyone else. Every time I had to look something up, or if I hesitated, I risked Erik second-guessing his decision and asking my boss to take over.

“Jai's on the warpath,” Yvonne said, her grin saying she wasn't really bothered by the fact. “More than usual, I mean. I'd love to know what happened this weekend to get her in such a snit.”

I told myself that it could've been anything. Jai Foxe wasn't exactly the most easy-going person in the world. Except I wasn't an idiot.

“Did you have a good weekend?” I hated small talk, but I wasn't about to give Yvonne the chance to go digging.

I should've known she wouldn't be so easily distracted.

“She left for lunch on Friday, and then locked herself in her office when she got back.” Yvonne leaned against my desk. “Did she say anything to you?”

I was saved from having to make up a lie by something I liked even less.

The inter-office messaging system popped up on my screen, saying that I was wanted in Jai's office.

Shit.

“Sorry, Yvonne.” I gave her a tight smile. “Boss wants me.”

“Guess I better be going then.”

As I walked toward the office, Yvonne went the other way, probably following some other line of juicier gossip.

I knocked on the door, then entered when I got the okay. Jai was sitting behind her desk, but instead of having her head down, her attention on something else, her gaze zeroed in on me the moment I stepped inside.

“Sit.”

Erik had been so certain that this wouldn't happen, I'd almost convinced myself of the same thing. I folded my hands on my lap and waited to be told to clean out my desk. I wondered if this was a record for shortest amount of time for one of Jai's assistants.

“What the *fuck* did you think you were doing?!” Her voice was low, but the venom in it dripped from every word.

And now I was thinking I'd probably lasted longer than a few other assistants.

After a moment of silence, she raised an eyebrow. “I'm waiting.”

Oh. It hadn't been a rhetorical question. Good to know.

“I knew you were busy, and I didn't want to risk Branch losing the chance to represent Mr. Sanders.”

“How did you know Erik Sanders was the person behind Erika Summers? Had you spoken to him before you just 'happened' to pick up his

manuscript?” Jai's pretty face was screwed up in a vicious looking scowl.

“I didn't know who he was until I sat down at the restaurant.” At least I was able to answer that one with complete honesty. “I didn't know Erika Summers was a pen name, or who it was for.”

“Really? Then when did you start fucking him?”

My jaw dropped, but the heat in my face was only half from embarrassment. The rest was anger. It didn't matter what Erik and I had done at the club, or even that I'd gone behind her back contacting him. Firing me was definitely a realistic option, and not one I'd really fight. The language wasn't even really the issue.

Her question and what it meant, however, was.

“That's what happened, right?” She gave me the sort of condescending look I'd gotten used to from people like her. The ones who liked to act like they were better than me because I didn't have a family or money.

I straightened and squared my shoulders.

Fuck *that*.

“What *happened*, Miss Foxe,” I said firmly, “is that I set up a meeting with the author of a manuscript that I believed in, and Mr. Sanders appreciated that initiative and the belief in his book. *That* is why he decided that he wants me to represent him. Which means, if Branch Publishing wants him to sign the contract I'll be taking him at lunch, then they must honor the terms he asked for, including me being his representative.”

Jai glared at me but didn't argue.

I stood. “Now, I have a little more to do before my lunch meeting. After lunch, I'll continue with the manuscripts you gave me last week.”

I turned and walked out, all the while expecting her to fire me anyway. After all, I hadn't yet put my name into the contract as Erik's chosen point of contact. That was one of the things I need to do before I went to lunch. I'd put in a clause that Erik could request another representative at any point in time, but I wasn't going to let Jai be the one making that call.

“Um, excuse me?” I leaned forward and tapped on the glass separating the front of the car from the back. “Where are we going?”

“Mr. Sanders requested I take you to his place for lunch, Miss.” The driver's voice was bright, and I wondered if Erik had told him to be prepared for an argument when I found out where we were going.

I frowned but didn't argue. It wasn't the driver's fault Erik was being presumptuous.

Then again, I didn't know if it was anything like that. Maybe Erik just felt like being at home for lunch so we could avoid interruptions like our last lunch had experienced. The knot in my stomach said I didn't quite believe myself.

My nerves multiplied as we pulled up in front of a stunning townhouse. I'd never been to the Upper East Side before, and definitely not anywhere near East 83<sup>rd</sup>, but I knew this was one of the city's wealthiest neighborhoods. The vast gap between myself and Erik had never been more evident than now. The rent on a place like this had to be astronomical.

Then the door opened, and Erik stood there, looking just as good as I remembered. He was dressed more casually today, wearing a pair of jeans and fitted t-shirt that showed off his muscles when he moved.

"Come on in," he said with a smile, dimples flashing.

I followed him inside, trying not to gawk as I went. We went through a living room that was easily two and a half times bigger than my entire apartment, and then into a spacious kitchen slash dining room. A pair of French doors led out into a small garden where raised beds held some plants I recognized as thyme and lavender. Not exactly what I would've expected from a man like Erik Sanders.

"You have great timing," Erik said as he walked over to the stove. "I was just putting the finishing touches on lunch."

"You cook?" I blurted out the question, then flushed.

"I do." He gestured toward the breakfast nook. "What would you like to drink? I'd normally try to suggest the correct wine to complement the chicken I'm making, but since we're supposed to be working..."

"Water's fine," I said and held up the manila envelope I'd carried in. "I have your contract."

"Great," he said with another smile. "First we eat, then we'll take care of business. Now, why don't you tell me a little more about why you went into editing."

The next half hour passed quickly as we made small talk and enjoyed the meal he'd prepared. With each minute that passed, I became more comfortable in his presence. I'd never felt so at ease in a social situation, and it wasn't only because I was trying to look at this from a professional perspective. It was how Erik didn't treat me as an inferior, how even his

flirting was light. If we could put the other night behind us and stay like this, we'd have a great working relationship.

I just wished I wanted to forget about what happened at the club.

“All right,” he said as he reached for the envelope. “Do you have a pen with you? I don't usually have one in here.”

I dug around in my purse as he read through the papers, and by the time I handed over my pen, he was ready to sign. I waited for a comment on the inclusion of my name, but it never came. Instead, he handed me back the envelope and stood.

“If you could make a copy for my records and have it sent over, I'd appreciate it.”

I nodded, getting to my feet as well. “Of course.”

I tried not to show my disappointment. I'd assumed he'd wanted me to come to his house for more *personal* reasons, but now he looked like he was ready to show me out. That should be what I wanted to happen. Keeping things strictly business.

“I've been working on one of the scenes I know needs some improvement,” he said as he held out his hand. “I'd like to get your opinion on it.”

Oh. Apparently, he wasn't ready to get rid of me just yet after all.

I took his hand and told myself to ignore the tingle that went across my skin at the contact. He led me back into the living room and over to the massive couch that took up three-quarters of the entire back wall. He sat and then pulled me down next to him.

“Which scene?” I asked as I told the butterflies in my stomach to calm down. This was still work. Nothing more.

“Why don't I read it to you?” He released my hand and reached over to a small table to pick up his manuscript.

I really hoped he was asking for help with one of the scenes where the main character, Chase, is struggling to decide whether or not he should train Leia. I'd have no problem helping Erik out with the psychological battle Chase was going through.

Or maybe the scene where Leia wipes out for the first time and Chase wants her to quit.

Anything but...

“I'm not sure if the first time Chase and Leia have sex is hot enough.”

Shit.

“With the book opening on Chase dominating a Sub,” Erik continued, “can the more vanilla sex be enough to make readers want more of Chase and Leia together?”

I wanted to tell him that I remembered the scene and didn't need him to refresh my memory, but something deep inside me held back my words. I wanted to hear him read it.

He cleared his throat and began.

*“She was too innocent, too pure. I knew I shouldn't want her. Shouldn't want to do the things to her that I enjoyed. She'd told me she was a virgin, and her guileless eyes had assured me of the truth. That should have been my signal to run away. To tell her that she needed someone who would be soft and gentle with her, who would only want to cherish every inch of her delectable body. That person wasn't me.*

*I wanted to kiss her hard enough to bruise her lips. Make her come on my tongue until she begged me to fuck her. I wanted to use my hands, a flogger, a cane, anything really. Turn that pretty skin of hers pink. Teach her how to blur the line between pain and pleasure. Show her that the sting of a bite or the agony of denial could transform into the most intense experience of her life.*

*I knew that being her teacher would only corrupt her...and I didn't care.”*

Dammit. I was in trouble.



## *Chapter Twelve*

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## ERIK

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*F*rom the first moment I'd seen her walk into the restaurant, I'd wondered what she tasted like, what her mouth would feel like against mine. And the moment I finished with the scene, I tossed the manuscript onto the table and reached for her.

Her eyes widened as I cupped her face between my hands, but she didn't pull away. She made a surprised sound as my mouth came down on hers, but her fingers curled around the front of my shirt, pulling me closer. I traced the seam of her mouth, and she parted her lips. Part of me wanted to rush, but I held myself in check, savored the way she felt, the taste of the spices from our lunch.

When I finally broke the kiss, I kept one hand curled around the back of her neck. "So, what do you say, sweetheart?" I was surprised at how unsteady my voice sounded.

"About what?"

"About you and me exploring how hot the scene plays out?"

She went still, and for a moment, I was afraid I'd crossed a line. I'd been sure I'd read her right, that I wasn't the only one feeling a connection between the two of us. But maybe I was wrong.

"You..." She swallowed hard. "You want to do that...with *me*?"

I straightened and gave her a puzzled look. "Why wouldn't I?"

"I'm not exactly..." Her dark eyes slid away from mine.

"Look at me, Tanya." I caught her chin and held it until she did as I asked. "I'm not a man who gets pressured into doing things or one who settles for anything less than what I want. And right now, I want you to come

upstairs with me.”

I could see her hesitation, her anxiety. I leaned forward and brushed my lips across hers.

“We won't go any further than you want,” I promised. I ran my thumb along her bottom lip as one corner of my mouth twitched up in a partial smile. “And you can tell me if the descriptions from Leia's perspective are accurate.”

She raised an eyebrow, a ghost of a smile in her eyes. “So it's just business then?”

I winked at her. “Who says business can't be pleasurable?” I stood and held out a hand. “Just say the word, and we stop.”

We didn't go to the master suite. Having her at my home was more than I'd ever done with any other woman. It didn't matter how much I wanted her, I wasn't going to take her in my bed. She didn't ask about it though, even though the room I led her to was clearly a guest room.

“Shoes.”

She toed off the flats she was wearing, and I saw that she'd painted her toenails a seashell pink that matched her fingernails.

“Arms up.”

She obeyed, and I pulled her shirt over her head, dropping it on her shoes. Her bra was a pale sort of pink that would've washed out a different skin tone, but on her, it just made her porcelain complexion glow. My eyes locked with hers as I reached down to the side zipper of her skirt and pulled it down. The skirt pooled at her feet, leaving her in a pair of simple panties and bra that should've been easily dismissed. Except on her, it was hot.

Everything about her was different, and I knew I had to handle things different as well. While I wanted to teach her all sorts of things about how good it could be to submit, I wouldn't go about things the way I usually did. Instead, I would do exactly what I told her I wanted to do.

I was going to act out the scene.

I stepped into her, our bodies close enough that the scent of calla lilies flooded my nose. I raised my hand and brushed my knuckles across her cheek before pulling my own shirt over my head.

Like Leia had done in the scene, Tanya started to reach for me, then dropped her hand and looked down. Damn, she had that innocence down to a science. It was hard to tell what was her and what was her insight into the characters I'd created.

“It's okay.” I picked up her hand. “Touch me.”

Her fingertips traced over the ridges of muscle before moving over the tattoo that covered my right side.

“What is it?”

The question was original, so I answered with the truth. “It's a Japanese prayer for the dead. I got it after my mother passed away.”

Her eyes were soft as she looked at me. “I'm sorry. I didn't know.”

“It's okay,” I said with a smile. “I lost my father when I was twelve, my mother just before college. I miss them, but it doesn't hurt to think about them anymore.”

“Still.” She leaned forward and pressed a kiss over my heart. “I'm sorry.”

I slid my arms around her waist and ran my hands up her back. “Thank you.”

I bent my head to kiss her as I unfastened her bra. She gasped as I cupped her breasts, and I took advantage of her parted lips to sweep my tongue inside. Her nipples pebbled as I rolled them between my fingers, and I couldn't wait any longer to see that beautiful body.

I took a step back and let my gaze fall to her full breasts, pale peach-colored nipples.

“Damn, you're beautiful,” I murmured.

And that blush did indeed spread across *all* of her skin.

“On the bed.”

She sat down on the edge of the bed and pushed herself backward until she was able to rest on her elbows. She watched as I stripped off my jeans, eyes darkening to nearly black when she saw I wasn't wearing anything under them.

I wrapped my hand around my cock, watching her expression as I stroked myself. I wanted to be buried inside her so badly it ached, but I intended to see things through. Besides, the next step in the scene was something else I'd been wanting to do since I'd slipped my fingers between her legs at the club.

I leaned down over her and hooked my fingers into the waistband of her panties. I pulled them off and tossed them aside, all my attention focused on the thin layer of pale curls covering her flushed skin. I used her hips to pull her to the edge of the bed, then sank to my knees.

I'd never been the sort of man who minded performing oral sex, or who only used it as foreplay. I enjoyed giving it as much as receiving it. Some Doms thought only Submissives should do it, but I understood the power that

came with having such control over another person's pleasure.

That part of Chase's personality had definitely come from me.

I pulled Tanya's legs over my shoulders and kissed the inside of her thigh. She shivered, and I wondered how many of her previous lovers had done this for her. I didn't ask though. I wasn't sure I really wanted to know the answer. Instead, I focused on making this so good that she'd forget about everyone else.

I started slow, teasing her with my tongue before parting her folds to lick at the even more sensitive parts of her flesh. When I reached her clit, she gasped, hips jerking hard enough that I had to hold her in place. Her hands fisted in the sheets, back arching, as I circled the bundle of nerves.

“Let me see you come, sweetheart.”

I slid a finger inside her and curled it, sliding the tip along her wall until she cried out. I placed my free hand just under her belly button, keeping her in place as I worked my finger over her g-spot.

“Do you want to come?”

“Yes,” she panted, her hands twisting in the bedspread. “Yes, I want to come.”

“What else do you want?” I kept up the pressure, wondering how long I could keep her on the edge. “Tell me what you want.”

“You. I want you inside me.”

I looked up the length of her body, and the sight took my breath away. Her nipples were hard, breasts heaving as her breathing grew ragged. Then her eyes met mine, and I knew the line between fiction and reality was blurring. She wasn't just giving the same answer Leia had given Chase. She truly meant it.

“Then come for me, and I'll give you what you want.”

I pressed the flat of my tongue against her clit, moving the muscle in counterpoint with my finger until the alternating friction made her scream her release.

Fuck. That sound was almost enough to make me come right then. A man with lesser self-control would have.

I moved back, letting her curl onto her side as I stood. I'd been hopeful enough about today to put a stash of condoms in the bedside table, so I grabbed one and rolled it on before going back to the bed. I climbed on and gently pulled Tanya into the center.

I brushed her hair back from her face, waiting until her eyes focused

again. “Ready for more?”

She nodded, a shy smile on her face. Her touch was light as she ran her fingers across my cheek. I didn't feel any hesitation on her part, but there was something strange in her eyes. Something I couldn't quite place.

I'd stop if she said no, but she wasn't taking back her consent, so I pushed all other thoughts aside. We weren't in a relationship. This was sex. Fun. It wasn't my responsibility – or my right – to ask her to share.

I settled between her legs, lowering my head to take a nipple between my lips. She moaned, fingers running through my hair, tugging as I applied suction. Some primal part of me wanted to dig in my teeth, to make her nipples so sore that she wouldn't be able to think of anything but my mouth for days. I wanted to mark her, show her how good it could feel to have some pain with pleasure.

But that wasn't what we'd discussed. Even if we weren't entirely playing out parts, I wouldn't cross that line without talking to her first, until we'd set boundaries in place.

That was a thought for later though. Right now, my cock was so hard it hurt. I needed to be inside her.

I released her nipple and raised my head so I could see her face when I entered her. I'd felt how tight she was, so I knew I couldn't just slam into her the way my body wanted to, no matter how wet she was.

She hooked her legs around my waist, her hands on my biceps, but she didn't say a word. As I began to ease my way inside, her eyelids fluttered, and her nails dug into my arms. Her head fell back as she bit her bottom lip, myriad expressions passing across her face.

Her passage tightened, and as I pushed past the slight resistance, that was when I saw it. A wince. Just a hint of pain that I wouldn't have thought anything about if I hadn't still had some of Leia and Chase's scene running through my head.

Because I'd described this moment in my book.

The moment Chase took Leia's virginity.

I froze, heart thudding against my ribcage. I had to be wrong. But I didn't think I was. All the pieces fit. All of her blushing and the innocence I'd thought had just meant inexperience in non-vanilla areas. She wasn't just acting the part for the scene. She *was* that innocent.

Or had been, until I'd just...fuck.

What had I done?

## *Chapter Thirteen*

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## TANYA

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The moment he stopped moving, I opened my eyes. The horror on his face told me everything.  
He knew.

From my regular check-ups, I knew my hymen had been pretty much broken after a week of horseback riding during a foster kids' retreat when I was seventeen, but there'd still been enough to give me a sharp twinge of pain when Erik had pushed past it.

And he'd figured it out.

“Tanya.” His voice was hoarse. “Please tell me you aren't...I didn't...”

I reached up and put a finger over his mouth. “I want you. I want *this*.” I shifted my hips, sucking in a breath as he moved a little deeper. “Please, Erik.” I used the line Leia used on Chase. “Make me fly.”

He closed his eyes, his head dropping forward. I could feel the tension in him, see it in every muscle. I used my legs to urge him to move. He was so hard inside me, so full, that I knew he wanted this – *needed* this – as much as I did.

When his eyes opened, they met mine. “Are you sure?”

I nodded, rocking up so that I took another few centimeters of him inside me. He cursed under his breath and took my mouth, the kiss almost savage even as he began to move slowly, gently. The faint burn of discomfort faded quickly, replaced by a new sort of feeling, different than anything I'd felt before. Different than what it felt like having his finger in me, his mouth on me, and those things had been like nothing I'd ever experienced. Every new sensation Erik created was nearly overwhelming.



I didn't know how he expected me to tell him how to describe any of this. My brain could barely manage to process it, let alone put it into words. Each sense brought its own unique contribution.

The spicy scent of Erik's aftershave. The soft cotton under my back. The salty taste of my own arousal on his tongue. The thick, raw sounds Erik made in the back of his throat when I nipped his bottom lip. The feel of his fingers digging into my hips and ribs as he moved against me.

But it wasn't just the physical.

It was something more. A connection on a level I hadn't known existed. It wasn't because we loved each other, I knew that. We barely knew each other. But there was still a connection, an acknowledgment of how we now had an intimate knowledge of each other's bodies that not everyone else had.

I ran my hands through his hair, moaning as his mouth traveled down my jaw to my throat. He was holding back. I could feel it in his touch, the way he kissed my skin, how careful he was with every stroke he made.

“More,” I begged and tugged his hair until he looked at me. “Don't hold back, Erik.”

“I'm not sure that's—”

“I won't break.” I leaned forward and bit down on his earlobe.

A shudder ran through him, and he drove into me hard enough to make me gasp.

“Yes!” I arched up against him.

That was all the assurance he needed, apparently, because his thrusts became fast and deep, each one sending a new explosion of sparks through me. I could barely breathe as the pressure inside me built, pushing me toward another orgasm.

He pressed his face against the place where my shoulder and neck met, his mouth working over my skin, the sting of suction and teeth telling me that he was leaving a mark. He reached down, grasping my leg behind the knee and pulling it up as he drove in even deeper than before.

I exploded, crying out as I came even harder than I had the first time. Erik swore as I tightened around him, and then his body stiffened above mine. We clung to each other for a moment longer, and then he moved off of me, rolling onto his back. He made a quick motion, and the accompanying sound told me he'd gotten rid of the condom, but still, neither one of us spoke.

The silence between us quickly became awkward, and I couldn't take lying there naked any longer. I sat up, being careful not to look at him. Not

that he didn't have the sort of body I'd enjoy staring at, but because I wasn't sure where we stood now that we'd had sex.

I grabbed my clothes, then made my way into the bathroom, as much to give me a few minutes to think as to clean up. By the time I went back into the room, Erik was dressed and pulling bedding into a pile.

Before I could figure out what I was supposed to say – the after part of sex was new to me too – he beat me to it.

“You should have told me you were a virgin.” His voice was low. “I deserved to know what I was getting into.”

Stung, I took a step back. I understood him being surprised, but that seemed a bit harsh considering I wasn't the one acting weird about it.

He turned now, his eyes cold. “I didn't ask for that responsibility.”

Everything good I'd been feeling disappeared, replaced with anger and hurt for a split second before I shut down everything. I'd had years of practice keeping my thoughts and feelings locked down so they couldn't be used against me, and it seemed like I wasn't done protecting myself.

Good to know.

“Don't flatter yourself,” I said flatly. “I wasn't waiting for someone special. It was just fucking.”

I walked out before he could say anything else.

What the *hell* had I been thinking? I was finally working in the field I'd always wanted to be in, and I'd managed to get a client with a promising book.

Then I risked everything by giving in to a moment of weakness. I knew better. After Aunt Lolly handed me over to the state, I promised myself that I would do whatever it took to get everything I wanted. So when I decided that I wanted to be an editor, I focused on what I needed to do to accomplish just that. I'd been careful, cautious. I didn't do impulsive things, and the only risks I took were calculated ones. I never took my eyes off what I wanted.

Until I was stupid enough to think that Erik would actually want to be with me. I hadn't been thinking we'd be in a relationship, but I'd expected something...polite, I guess. I figured Erik was the kind of guy who'd be used sex without strings attached, and that he'd be grateful I wasn't acting all clingy. That I could enjoy having a first time that was better than anything I'd heard the other girls in school or in the home gossiping about.

I'd forgotten one of the cardinal rules about being who I was. Hope was futile.

It was only mid-afternoon, but I didn't feel up to going back to work. Unfortunately, that wasn't really my call. I did, however, intend to go home for a quick shower. I'd stay a bit over to make up for the extra time I'd taken for *non-work* activities. And then I'd do the right thing.

I waited until I got home to write the email. And since I'd stayed two hours over, it was almost eight o'clock by the time I settled down on my couch to re-read what I'd written over dinner.

*Mr. Sanders,*

*Upon further consideration, I have come to the conclusion that I will be unable to fill your needs...*

Yeah, that wasn't going to work.

*Upon further consideration of your manuscript's needs, I have come to the conclusion that you would be better served if someone with more experience took over. I will be turning over notes and all paperwork to my supervisor, Jai Foxe, first thing in the morning.*

I took out a sentence thanking him for placing his trust in me, but not because I thought it was unprofessional. I did it because I couldn't fully trust that he'd chosen me to represent his book because he believed in my capabilities. It was hard, after the way he treated me, to not wonder if Erik had only wanted me taking care of his book until he got me in bed. Now that he knew I didn't have the experience he usually looked for in a sexual partner, he'd probably be grateful I was saving him the trouble of asking to have me removed from the position.

It was the right thing to do.

And it had absolutely nothing to do with the fact that I didn't want to deal with him anymore.

I sent the email before I could talk myself out of it. Despite what happened between us, a part of me still wanted to be the one working on *Heat of the Sun*.

Once the email was off, I closed my laptop and set it aside. I knew I should probably do some additional work, but I just didn't have it in me. All I wanted to do right now was take a hot bath and go to bed.

So I did just that, right after indulging in a rare glass of wine from the bottle I'd purchased for my birthday a few weeks back. It helped relax me, which was what I'd been hoping for, but it couldn't keep me from seeing Erik

every time I closed my eyes.

I'd only been asleep for an hour or so when someone pounding at my door woke me up. I grabbed my robe and pulled it on as I crossed the short distance to the door. I was just about to look through the spy hole when the person on the other side spoke.

“Open up, Tanya! I'm not accepting this damn resignation, so you might as well let me in so we can talk.”

## *Chapter Fourteen*

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## ERIK

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I kept playing it over and over in my head. Her honest surprise that I'd wanted to have sex with her. The way she'd responded to my touch. The taste of her. The sounds she'd made. How she'd felt wrapped around my cock.

And then realizing that I'd been her first.

Logically, I knew that even if I'd stopped right then, it wouldn't have changed what I'd done, and it might have even made things worse. She told me that she wanted me to keep going, and I made sure she came again. As far as first times went, I thought hers hadn't been too bad. A lot of women didn't climax when they first started having sex, and she'd gotten two orgasms.

But that didn't make me feel like any less of an ass for being the one who'd taken her virginity.

That wasn't the only reason I spent most of the afternoon and evening berating myself though. No, most of that had been because I'd not only felt like an asshole, I'd behaved like one. I'd been freaked out, but that hadn't given me the right to talk to her the way I had. As a man, and as a Dom, it was unacceptable to treat a woman that way. Most people thought being a Dominant meant being a jerk, bossing others around, but a good Dom wasn't like that. They were supposed to take care of their Subs, even if they were only together for one scene.

I hadn't taken care of Tanya, no matter how good I'd physically made her feel.

I considered all the possible ways to make amends, but I had no idea what to buy to say that I was sorry I'd been a jerk after sex. It'd never been a

problem for me before. I always made sure my partners knew I wasn't looking for a relationship, so if they ended up with unrealistic expectations, that was their own fault, not mine.

I wanted to be angry at her for not having told me, but she hadn't been the one acting weird about it. That'd all been on me.

I was still trying to decide whether flowers or jewelry would be the best thing to give her when my email pinged, telling me I had a message. I pulled it up, read it...and then read it again.

“Oh, *hell*, no.”

Despite the late hour, I managed to catch a cab to take me to Tanya's place. Fortunately, the traffic was light, so it didn't take us too long to get there. I tossed a couple bills at the driver and headed inside, taking the stairs two at a time. The lack of security I noticed the first time I'd been here bothered me even more now, but I pushed that thought to the back of my mind. We'd deal with her safety after I took care of this joke of a resignation she'd sent me.

I pounded on the door, realized I was probably waking her neighbors, and then decided I didn't care.

“Open up, Tanya! I'm not accepting this damn resignation, so you might as well let me in so we can talk.”

I heard locks sliding, and then the door opened. Her face was blank, her arms crossed, mouth flat. I couldn't read her expression, but I could still feel the anger and pain radiating off her.

“You want to do this here and wake up your neighbors?” The question came out harsher than I'd intended, but she stepped back, so I counted it a win.

I stepped past her, catching a whiff of those damn calla lilies. It had to be shampoo or body wash. And immediately on the heels of that thought came images of her in the shower. Water coursing over those curves. A lather of floral bubbles slipping over her skin. Her hands on her breasts, between her legs...

Fuck.

“Is there something I can help you with, Mr. Sanders? Because I have a busy day tomorrow.”

My eyes narrowed at the words, and I took a step toward her. She stiffened but didn't step back. “A busy day? I'd think with one less book to represent, your day would have freed up considerably.”

She raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything.

I glared down at her. "I don't accept your resignation." When she opened her mouth to argue, I kept going. "I chose you for my book because you believed in it. As long as you still do, I'm not taking it to Jai."

Something flickered across her eyes, and it hit me that she thought I'd picked her because I wanted her in my bed. While I couldn't deny my attraction had been from moment one, I wasn't that sort of man, and the idea that she could think that about me hurt. Then I realized that I'd hurt her even worse, and my anger softened.

I lowered my voice. "I didn't choose you because I wanted to sleep with you." I reached for her, frowning when she tensed. I brushed my hand down the soft cotton of her robe. "I'm sorry about being an ass earlier. I was caught off guard, and I lashed out. It's all on me."

Something flickered across her expression but vanished before I could name it.

"Apology accepted." Her voice still held no warmth. "But I don't know if it's a good idea for me to keep working with you."

I let my fingers brush against her cheek as I tucked some hair behind her ear. It was longer than I'd realized, almost to her waist. "Well, I think it's a good idea because I don't want anyone else representing my work."

I could see her battling with herself. She wanted it, and I was pretty sure she still wanted me too. Now that I'd gotten over the initial shock, I found her inexperience not only intriguing, but exciting. I'd written a book where a Dom introduced an innocent virgin to his world, and now I was practically living it. And I wanted it. Badly.

"And I don't want anyone else going over scenes with me." I took another step toward her, closing the distance between us to only a couple inches. "What do you say, sweetheart? We were hot together, and I know you weren't faking how hard I made you come. I promise I won't be a jerk again. We can have some fun, enjoy our time together, and then part ways civilly when we've had enough." I paused and then added, "But if you don't want anything other than a professional relationship, I'll accept it and won't ask again."

I hated not being in control of the situation, but I'd never forced a woman into something she didn't want, and I didn't intend to do it now. Still, I wanted to kiss her again, coax her indecisiveness into submission, remind her how good I could make her feel, but she wasn't like any other woman I'd ever been with. She had to make this decision without any persuading from me, or it



wouldn't work.

After a pause that seemed to last for hours, she nodded. "Okay."

"Okay?" I repeated, then shook my head, amused. "That's the best response you could think of?"

She scowled at me, but her eyes were sparkling, so I knew she wasn't mad anymore. "Were you looking for more enthusiasm?"

I shrugged. "Couldn't hurt."

"Well, too bad," she countered. "I don't do the whole cheerleader thing."

Her comment was innocent, but the thought of her putting on an NYU cheerleading outfit – sans panties – sent my blood rushing south. I ran my gaze down her body, realizing for the first time that I'd probably gotten her out of bed.

Which meant that whatever she was wearing under that robe was what she normally slept in.

A hundred possibilities danced through my mind. Tiny shorts and an even tinier shirt. A silk nightshirt without anything under it. Daring lingerie.

Nothing.

Fuck.

I had to know.

"I know it's late." I crossed that last bit of distance between us. "But I'd like to make up for my previous bad behavior."

Color flooded her cheeks. "Erik..."

Damn, I loved hearing her say my name. "I'm thinking maybe the scene from chapter twelve."

Her eyes widened, and I knew she remembered which one I was talking about. Now the ball was in her court. Whatever she decided, I'd do without arguing.

## *Chapter Fifteen*

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## TANYA

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Not for the first time since I met Erik, I felt like I had to be dreaming. There was no way, after how he'd treated me, he'd come here to apologize, and then say that he wanted to have sex with me again. Not just once, but until we decided we'd "had enough." And now he wanted us to go through the scene in chapter twelve.

I knew my expression didn't show any of the anxiety I had knotting inside me, but it didn't make me any less torn. Or embarrassed. Embarrassed because I wanted him again. I'd gone my whole life without sex, and it'd never been an issue. I'd always assumed my sex drive was low enough that I could take or leave sex. But now that I'd had it, I wanted more. Except I didn't think I wanted sex in general. I wanted it with *him*.

I had no doubt that he could separate feelings and sex, that it would be no problem for him to move on once he got bored.

The real question was, could I? I'd never considered casual sex as an option, but I'd never completely thought it through though. I'd never cared enough to think about it that much.

Erik was standing close enough that I could smell the soap he'd used to clean up, and it made my stomach twist, but not because of nerves.

My brain told me this might be a bad idea, and my heart agreed, but the rest of my body said I should try it out.

And then a little voice in the back of my head piped up and said that maybe this would actually be good for me to do. It'd give me some insight into the sort of books I'd probably be reading in the near future.

That was enough to tip me over the edge.

I reached down and untied the belt of my robe. His eyes darkened as I let it fall to the floor. There wasn't anything sexy about what I was wearing, but it was the intention that mattered.

“I'm sorry I'm not wearing something—”

He curled his hand around the back of my neck and yanked me toward him, his mouth coming down on mine. I had a second to process that this wasn't how the scene in chapter twelve started, and then it was all about how he devoured my mouth, the force of his hunger making my head spin.

When he finally lifted his head, I was breathless and dizzy...the latter probably because of the former. He slid his palms down my arms and took my hands, threading his fingers between mine.

“Did I ever tell you that kangaroos are my favorite animals?”

I stared up at him, confused. He chuckled, the sort of low, manly sound that said he was pleased with the fact that he'd managed to befuddle me. In my defense, the question wouldn't have exactly made sense without my head spinning.

“Your shirt.”

I looked down. Oh. I'd completely forgotten that the ratty t-shirt I'd worn to bed had a pair of kangaroos on it.

He continued, “I believe that things start to heat up in chapter twelve when Chase asks Leia what she's wearing under her nightgown.”

A hot flush rushed through me. He was right. Chapter twelve started with a jealous Chase walking in the rain until he arrived at Leia's beach house and she let him in.

And the things that followed...

“So how about it, sweetheart?” Erik reached down and tugged on the hem of my shirt. “This isn't the silk nightie Leia wears, but I still want to know what's under it.”

I swallowed hard, my face burning.

“Um...”

“Tell me.” His voice had that impossibly sexy authoritative note to it that sent a shiver down my spine. “Tell me what you're wearing under that t-shirt.”

Fuck.

“Nothing.”

The word was barely a whisper, but I knew he heard me because he froze for a moment before taking a step back. “Say that again, sweetheart. Nice and

loud so I know I heard you correctly.”

“Nothing,” I repeated. “I’m not wearing anything under my shirt.”

His hands flexed, but he didn't reach for me. “Not such a good little girl after all, are you?”

I recognized Chase's line to Leia when he saw the tiny panties she was wearing under her silk nightie. Still, I felt the need to explain. “I haven't had a chance to do laundry in a while.”

He smiled, and it was the sort of genuine amusement that lit up his entire face. “I think you were supposed to take it off now.”

I frowned as something occurred to me. “That doesn't make sense.”

“What doesn't?”

“Why does Leia take off her nightgown before Chase gets undressed?”

Erik looked thrown by my change of subject, but he answered anyway. “Why's that strange?”

“Because Chase was out walking in the rain before Leia invited him in, so he's soaking wet.”

A sheepish expression came over his face, as he admitted, “I was thinking more about getting the female character naked than I was about the rain.”

I gave him a little smile. I couldn't deny that him being all dominant like Chase was in the book turned me on in a way I hadn't thought possible, but there was a part of me that liked that he wasn't perfect.

And it made me a bit bolder than usual. “I guess that means you should be the one getting naked first.”

He grinned and pulled his shirt over his head, revealing the muscular torso I hadn't been able to get out of my head all day. He tossed it onto my table and then made short work of his jeans. I supposed when a man looked like him, there was no need to be self-conscious about how he looked naked.

He took a step forward and curled his fingers around the ragged hem of my shirt. “Your turn now, sweetheart.”

I raised my hands, and he pulled my shirt up slowly, letting his fingertips trail up my ribs. I shivered as he pulled my shirt off, then made a squeaking sound as he turned me around and used my t-shirt to tie my hands behind my back.

“Did you forget that Chase used Leia's panties to tie her wrists?” There was a note of concern in his voice.

“I did.” I was suddenly more aware that I was naked than I had been when my shirt had first come off. Maybe it was the way my shoulders were

pulled back now, pushing my breasts out. Maybe it was how exposed I felt.

Or maybe it was because I knew that making a conscious choice to participate like this couldn't be dismissed as a heat of the moment sort of thing like before.

“Are you okay?” He stepped around me, all amusement gone. His gaze dropped to my chest, and he swallowed hard.

Seeing his reaction chased away my nerves, so by the time his eyes returned to mine, I was ready. “I'm fine.”

“Are you sure?”

I nodded, took a shaky breath, and said, “My bed folds into a couch, if you want to follow the scene exactly.”

Erik cupped my chin and leaned forward to brush his lips across mine. “I think a bed will work perfectly for what I have planned.”

My apartment was small enough that we didn't have far to go. Once there, I knew what was coming, but I still let Erik take the lead. Part of it was because we were following what Chase and Leia had done in Erik's book, but there was another part of me that liked letting him take charge. He didn't make me feel weak or helpless because, despite not having known him for long, I trusted him. He wouldn't do anything to hurt me.

“I'm going to do everything Chase does,” Erik murmured as he nudged my legs apart. “But if, at any point, you want me to stop, I will. Chase and Leia's safe word is *daisy*. Is it all right to use that one for us?”

I nodded. *Daisy*. I could remember that. I didn't think I'd have a problem with anything from this chapter, but I appreciated Erik's consideration. My anxiety had turned into anticipation – mostly anyway – and as he gripped the t-shirt binding my hands, I waited for the feel of his fingers between my legs.

My eyes closed as his fingers slid down my spine, over my ass, and then down even further. He used my hands to hold me in place as he slid his middle finger inside me. I was still a little sore from earlier, but he used his index finger to make circles over my clit and the dull burn of friction mixed with pleasure.

“It doesn't take much to get you wet, does it?” Erik murmured as he pushed a second finger inside.

I was surprised I could remember Leia's response. “You were the one out in the rain.”

He laughed, the sort of rich sound that sent flutters of heat through my belly. “I must not be doing my job if you can quote the book verbatim.”

“Or maybe you're just a good writer,” I countered, then moaned as he twisted his hand inside me, knuckles rubbing against my g-spot.

He kissed my shoulder blade, surprising me. “Sweet talker.”

I started to laugh, but then he bit down. It wasn't hard enough to really hurt, but it stung enough to turn my laugh into a gasp. I could feel him waiting for me to complain, to use the safe word, but then he made a pleased sound, and I knew he'd felt my body's positive response to what he'd done.

“You like pain, or just teeth, sweetheart?”

It was getting difficult to concentrate on the questions Erik was asking because his fingers were still moving inside me, stroking me, building the pressure with each skillful caress. When I read this chapter in Erik's book, I'd wondered what it felt like to have someone be able to make me feel as good as Leia with just his fingers.

Now I knew.

And it felt fucking *amazing*.

I let my head drop forward as I came, and Erik's grip on my shirt kept me from falling.

“Damn, you're gorgeous when you come.” He removed his hand, chuckling when I made a noise expressing my disapproval. “Now, you didn't answer me, sweetheart.”

“About what?”

He pulled me upright, sliding his arm around me so that he could hold me up and get a hand on my breast at the same time. He put his mouth against my ear, his fingers rolling my nipple.

“Do you like all pain, or just biting?”

I turned my head so I could see him. “How would I know that? You know I'm – I mean, I *was* a virgin.”

He gave me a searching look. “Yeah, but...” His eyes widened slightly, and his hand on my breast stilled. “Exactly how much – what have you done before...shit. You know what I'm asking.”

My expression was wary as I considered the best way to answer that question. I didn't want a repeat of this afternoon.

Erik brushed his lips across the corner of my mouth. “I'm sorry about before, and I promise I won't do it again. I just want to know, sweetheart. What other ways have I been the first?”

I turned my head away, familiar heat flooding my face. “Pretty much all of them.”

His hand was gentle as he took my chin and turned me back to face him. "Maybe it'll be easier if you tell me what you *have* done."

"Do we really need to have this conversation right now?" I shifted. "I'm not sure how much longer I'll be comfortable with my arms tied behind my back."

"Shit, I'm sorry." He started to untie my hands.

"Erik, Erik," I half-turned. "It's okay. I'm okay. I'd just rather get back to the fun stuff and save the rest for some time when I'm...well, when I'm not so naked."

Physically and emotionally.

"Are you sure?"

I smiled, the concern in his voice warming me in a way that wasn't completely sexual. "Unless you want me to get dressed so we can talk."

His eyes narrowed. "Back to chapter twelve."

The tension that had eased a bit with his questions was back. He took a step behind me, his naked body pressed against mine, his cock half-hard against my hands. He reached around me and put his hands on my breasts, fingers rolling and teasing my nipples until I was pushing back against him.

"Touch me, sweetheart." He shifted his hips, rubbing his erection on my fingers, over my palms.

I couldn't exactly touch him, not in the way I wanted to, but I concentrated on feeling every inch of soft, velvet skin, on feeling him harden again until he pulled back. I heard something tearing, then realized what it was.

"You were pretty sure you were getting lucky tonight, huh?"

He laughed. "I think hopeful is a better word for it."

He put his hand between my shoulder blades, the heat blazing across my skin. The slight pressure he put on me told me what he wanted me to do. I bent at the waist, letting his grip on my shirt stop me. The new position put more of a strain on my shoulders, but I had only a moment to register it before Erik was sliding into me and all my attention focused on the place where his body entered mine.

It seemed like he'd been inside me moments before, but at the same time, it felt like it'd been too long. My body stretched around him, and I moaned as pricks of pleasure and pain danced across my nerves. It was a different sort of pain than I'd had earlier, and it faded more quickly as Erik began to move after only a few seconds.



The hand not holding my shirt moved around my hip to dip between my legs. I jerked back against him as his fingers moved over my throbbing clit. Every inch of me was overly sensitive, each touch and thrust sending sensations through my overloaded nervous system until I was racing toward release.

Suddenly, my hands were free, and I caught myself as I fell forward. The change of angle made him hit me in a different spot, and I cried out. Remembering how thin my walls were, I shoved my blanket into my mouth, letting the fabric stifle the screams I couldn't stop as Erik drove into me. My second orgasm of the night was an explosion of sensation so intense that I barely registered Erik following me over the edge.

## *Chapter Sixteen*

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## ERIK

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Reb Union was the easiest one of my friends to spot in a crowd. An inch taller than me, he was well over average in height, but it was more about the way he carried himself than how tall he was. A musician, his manager encouraged the bad boy image Reb's clothes and tattoos portrayed, but I'd spent two years with him in college and knew better. He barely drank, and never enough to get drunk, not even the short time he'd been in school. Which was why I frowned when I saw him staring into a glass of something that was definitely not his usual beer.

The dark-haired man next to Reb had a concerned expression on his face too. Alix Wexler was my cousin – our mothers were sisters – and a talented photographer. He was two years older than me, but we'd always been close. It'd been Alix who'd brought me to Gilded Cage after I'd expressed an interest in the BDSM lifestyle. I'd brought Reb a couple months later.

That was how we'd met the oldest member of our group of friends, Jace Randell. He was an artist, but he'd inherited enough from his father that he was able to paint for art's sake rather than trying to make a living. All four of us were Doms, but we had different enough taste in women that we'd never had to worry about being interested in the same Subs.

I just hoped that applied to Tanya as well. It hadn't been until now, as I walked toward my friends, that I realized it was possible she could find one of them more to her liking. My feelings must've been showing on my face, because as soon as I sat down, Alix was leaning toward me.

“What's wrong?”

I shook my head but kept my voice low. “Nothing. What's up with Reb?”

Alix shrugged. "He won't say. I think he and Mitzi are having problems."  
Ah. Mitzi.

Out of the four of us, Reb was the only one with a girlfriend. Jace hadn't dated anyone since his girlfriend from a few years ago had broken up with him. Alix had dated on and off, but nothing recent. The three of us who were unattached usually found our partners here at the club because a bit of discussion before hooking up was necessary to be safe, which meant we were always able to set the expectation that we were only into sex.

Except I wasn't looking for someone to fuck. Well, not someone new. Tanya was supposed to be meeting me here, and she was the only one I planned on being with tonight.

We'd met a couple times since I left her place on Monday night, but it'd been all about work. She hadn't been acting cold or anything like that, but we'd both been too busy to indulge in anything else. At first, I thought she'd be mad that I hadn't stayed the whole night with her, but she'd actually thanked me on Tuesday, saying she wouldn't have been able to get enough rest if I'd stayed, and she needed to be up early for work.

"You said you wanted to tell us something?" Jace looked bored as he used a toothpick to poke at the ice in his glass.

"I invited someone to meet me here tonight."

All eyes turned to me.

"Are you fucking with us?" Alix said what the others were probably thinking.

Before I could explain, Jace's jade eyes flicked over my shoulder, and he let out a low whistle. "She's new."

I turned as my friends followed Jace's gaze, and my stomach clenched painfully when I saw her. I didn't need to know that she was the one Jace had been talking about. She was fucking hot.

Compared to the other women here, Tanya was dressed simply and modestly in a form-fitting sheath dress that made her practically glow, but I wasn't the only one staring at her. The saying "less is more" had never been more true than it was with her. No jewelry, no flash. Her heels were sensible, giving her just a couple inches of height. The neckline and hemline were both sensible, giving glimpses of what I knew was underneath, without giving it all away.

"What do you think, guys?" Alix spoke behind me. "Are we calling dibs, or bringing her over to see who she wants?"

A flare of jealousy went through me, even though I'd said some version of that question more than once over the last couple years. Whenever we saw a new Sub, it was a discussion among us. Women never came between us, and we intended to keep it that way.

For the first time, though, I wasn't going to do things the way we'd always done them.

“She's mine.”

The words were out before I'd actually thought them through. I stood without looking back at my friends, making my way through the crowd to get to Tanya before someone else swept in. She and I hadn't talked about labels, and I'd made it clear to her how I felt about relationships, but I'd be damned if I let someone else get to know what it felt like to be buried inside her. Right now, I was the only man who could say I knew how tight she was, how good she tasted, and I intended to keep it that way.

I ignored the voice in the back of my head that reminded me I never kept anyone. For now, she was mine.

Period.

## *Chapter Seventeen*

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## TANYA

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Oh shit.

My stomach had been in knots all day. I wanted to be here at Gilded Cage, wanted more of what Erik and I had been doing. I didn't plan on getting close to him emotionally, to let him be in a position to hurt me when he decided to move on, but that didn't mean I had to give up the physical benefits he was offering. But no matter how much I wanted this, I couldn't help freaking out every time I thought about walking into a sex club on my own.

The moment I stepped inside, a surreal feeling washed over me. Like I was somehow outside of my body, that I wasn't me. I supposed, in some way, that was true, because this wasn't like me at all. I was the girl who put work first, focused on her career to the point of ignoring sex altogether. I didn't interact with people on a personal level, and I sure as hell didn't frequent clubs of any kind, let alone this kind.

But Erik had changed all that. At least when it came to him, anyway.

Everyone was staring as I walked into the club, and I resisted the urge to tug at my dress. I'd splurged on something new, telling myself that I needed something nice enough to wear to work functions, but now I was starting to regret the moment of weakness that had led me to purchase the scarlet sheath dress rather than something more sensible. It was modest enough, especially compared to what I was seeing here, but it wasn't like what I normally wore.

Maybe that was why I wanted it. Being with Erik had done something to me. Made me want to step out of the shadows. I didn't think I'd ever be the sort of woman who wanted the spotlight, but for the first time since my father

left, I could see myself wanting more than just a job.

I took a slow breath and willed myself not to trip, then started toward the bar. I hadn't thought to text Erik when I arrived, which I now realized had been a mistake. I'd never find him in this crowd. Before I got to the bar, however, the throng in front of me parted, and I saw Erik coming toward me.

His normally bright blue eyes had darkened, and there was something in them that spoke to a deep and primal yearning inside me. As he got closer, I saw that it wasn't only desire, but the sort of declaration that made the people around me take a step back. I'd done a little of my own research, and there wasn't a doubt in my mind that Erik was a Dominant, but watching people move out of his way without him having to say a word brought the point home with a new understanding.

When he was just a few inches away, he wrapped one hand around the back of my neck, the other going to my waist. His eyes locked with mine as he pulled me against him hard enough to make me gasp. Then his mouth was on mine, claiming, possessing. This wasn't some sweet kiss, or even something a little more heated with the promise of more to come. No, this was the sort of kiss that told everyone watching that I was taken. I didn't really know what that meant outside of this moment, but I pushed aside any thoughts that weren't of now. I planned on enjoying each moment I had with him.

When he broke the kiss, he was breathing as hard as I was, his fingers flexing on the small of my back. Without a word, he turned and took my hand, leading me back the way he'd come.

We paused next to a table where three gorgeous men were staring at us.

“Tanya, this is my cousin, Alix Wexler, and our friends Jace Randell and Reb Union. Guys, this is Tanya Lacey.”

Each of the guys nodded as he said their names, and they all looked like they were trying not to laugh. There was no maliciousness in their eyes though, which made me believe the mirth was directed at Erik rather than me. Before I could attempt to figure it out though, Erik was moving us away from the table toward the back of the club.

The music was loud enough that I didn't try to ask where we were going, but when we stopped at a door, the butterflies in my stomach took flight again. Erik pulled what looked like a credit card from his pocket, ran it through a scanner next to the door, then pushed heavy wood open.

The lighting in the room was as dim as the rest of the club, but when the



door closed behind us, the silence was almost deafening.

“I think I've seen your friend Reb bef...” My sentence trailed off as my brain registered what my eyes were seeing.

One of the things I'd done in my personal research had been looking up terms and definitions, but there was a huge difference between seeing pictures on a computer screen and having them right in front of me.

The bed was massive and covered with pillows of all sizes and shapes. It didn't have a canopy but did have posts at each corner. Posts that had a variety of rings and cuffs hung on each one of them. A padded bench sat near the center of the room with its own set of restraints. And those weren't the only restraints in the room by a long shot. Handcuffs and leather cuffs and strips of silk and cotton and ropes...one entire wall was covered with them. One of the other walls had a giant X on it, and the cuffs at the top and bottom left little doubt as to what it was for. Another wall had all those fun things like whips and floggers and canes.

Oh shit.

I was *way* over my head, no doubt.

Then Erik was stepping up behind me and wrapping his arms around my waist. He put his mouth against my ear.

“Do you have any idea how many men out there right now are wishing they were in here with you?”

I shivered as he ran his hands back to my hips, then forward again and up to cup my breasts. Even through the dress and bra, I could feel the heat of his palms, the strength in his fingers. My pussy clenched at the memory of his fingers inside me.

“But they can't have you,” he continued. “Because you're *mine*.”

The word made something inside me twist, but I told myself not to read into the word. He didn't mean it any way other than sex and tonight. That was enough.

“I'm thinking chapter fourteen.”

For a moment, I wasn't sure what he was talking about, but then I remembered the book.

And then I remembered chapter fourteen and heat flooded me.

“This is a beautiful dress, sweetheart,” he murmured. He pressed his lips to the side of my neck as he slid his hands down to the hem of my dress. “But I think I want to see what's underneath it.”

To my surprise, he didn't toss it on the floor after pulling it over my head,

but instead draped it over a nearby chair, then turned came around to face me.

He let out a low whistle. “Damn. You look good enough to eat.” I flushed as he chuckled. “You know, when I first met you, I wondered if that blush covered your whole body.”

I swallowed hard, digging my nails into my palms instead of covering myself like I wanted to.

“I asked you a question earlier this week, and we decided we'd come back to it. I think it's time.”

What in the world was he talking about? And how the *hell* could he manage a normal conversation when I was standing here in a sheer bra and panties?

“I asked you to tell me all the ways I was your first.”

Right. *That* question.

“I said pretty much everything,” I remembered. “And then you asked me to tell you what I *had* done before.”

“So, sweetheart, how about an answer.” He pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it onto the seat of the chair where he'd put my dress. “I know you hadn't had sex before me but was that just 'regular' sex or...all kinds?”

That was at least an easy one to answer. “All kinds.”

He raised an eyebrow as he kicked off his shoes. “So when I went down on you...?”

I nodded, cheeks burning.

“Fingers?”

I nodded again.

“Was that someone else's or your own?”

I ducked my head, wondering if I'd made a mistake coming here.

Erik's touch was gentle as he hooked his finger under my chin, tilting my head until I was looking at him. “Sweetheart, you need to answer my question.”

There was an edge to his voice that should have made me nervous, but instead, made me want to lean into his touch. The hand cupping my chin was firm, but not hard.

“A kiss,” I said quietly.

His eyes narrowed. “That didn't sound like the answer to my question.”

“It was.” I forced my eyes to meet his. “The question about what I *had* done before.”

I would probably regret telling him this, despite the fact that he'd

promised not to freak out, but he deserved to know just how much experience I lacked.

“Sophomore year in college, my roommate set me up on a blind date with her cousin.”

Erik's fingers tightened on my chin for a moment, and something flashed across his eyes. I didn't try to analyze it, but it'd looked something like jealousy.

“He was nice enough,” I said. “But it wasn't anything special. He walked me back to my dorm and kissed me goodnight.”

After nearly half a minute of silence, Erik spoke, “And?”

“And what?”

“What else?” he asked. “Did you two go back to your room together? Or did you just fantasize about what you wanted to do?”

I shook my head. “Neither. I didn't do any of that.”

“Fuck me,” he muttered as he took a step back, his expression unreadable. “Are you telling me that you never...was the first time you ever came when we were here before?”

I wrapped my arms around myself and wondered if I should just go get my dress now. He'd promised he wouldn't freak out, but I should have known...

Erik took my face between his hands, his mouth hard on mine as he kissed me. His hands slid up, fingers buried in my hair as his lips parted mine. His tongue twisted around mine as he made a sound in the back of his throat.

I wasn't even aware that we'd moved until my leg bumped against the bed. As Erik broke the kiss, he rested his forehead against mine. “Since we were together, have you touched yourself?”

I shook my head.

“I'm the only one who's ever made you come?” His thumb brushed across my bottom lip as I nodded. “Fuck, Tanya, do you have any idea how hot that is?”

Hope flared in me. “It is?”

“Yes, sweetheart. It is.” He took a step back, eyes gleaming. “And now I want to watch you make yourself come.”

I stared at him. “What about chapter fourteen?”

The corner of his mouth curved up. “I changed my mind. I want to do chapter seventeen.”

The chapter where Chase spanked Leia so that every time she sat down, she remembered that she was his.

And then he had her touch herself, but she wasn't allowed to come until he gave her permission.

I was so screwed.

Erik sat down on the edge of the bed and pulled me across his lap. I held myself on my elbows and tried not to think about the fact that my ass was in the air, about to be spanked by a sexy billionaire.

“You remember our safe word?”

“Daisy.” I swallowed hard and wondered how I was supposed to prepare myself for something like this.

“Relax, sweetheart.” He ran his hand down my back, and then over my ass. “Love the panties, by the way.”

The sound came a split second before the sting. I sucked in a breath, then let it out with a gasp when his hand came down on the other side.

“Breathe. Feel.” He tugged on the pin holding my hair in place, and a curtain of silvery-blond fell on either side of my face. “Block out everything else. Just feel.”

Like I had much of a choice in the matter. I'd never been so aware of anyone as I was of him right at this moment. The heat radiating off him. The hard muscles of his stomach against my arm. The feel of his erection under my stomach. The scent of him, spicy and masculine.

I concentrated on those things as he delivered several quick blows, alternating where they landed until every inch of my ass felt like it was on fire. It wasn't painful, exactly, but it wasn't pleasure either. It was the sort of deep burn that made every nerve so sensitive that I knew I'd feel the lightest touch.

As if to prove this point, he ran his hand over the curve of my ass, and I whimpered.

“You did well, sweetheart.” He shifted us both until he was able to lay me on the bed. I made a pained sound as fabric rubbed against my skin, and he leaned over me, concerned. “Are you all right?”

I nodded. “We can keep going.”

Desire flared in his eyes again, and he moved back from the bed. He grabbed the chair and pulled it over until it was facing me. As he settled in it, he flicked open the top button to his pants and pushed them down his hips enough for me to be able to see his cock straining against the fabric of his

boxer briefs.

“Touch yourself, sweetheart. Let me see you make yourself feel good.”

It was clearly an order, but I didn't mind it. In fact, there was something freeing about knowing I didn't have to think about what to do, that I could just let myself go.

I closed my eyes and spread my legs, slid my hand beneath the waistband of my panties. He hadn't told me to take them off, so I wasn't going to. I might not have done this before, but I wasn't so naive that I didn't understand the basic mechanics.

I shivered as my fingers slipped between my folds, finding myself slick and wet. I tried not to think about Erik watching me, about how it must've looked, my hand moving under my panties, my skin flushed with arousal. The pressure inside me built quickly, each touch of my fingers sending pleasure racing across my nerves, mixing with the raw feeling of my skin against lace until I teetered on the edge.

“Come for me, sweetheart.” Erik's voice was rough.

I raised my head, watching as he moved his hand over his cock with firm strokes. He swiped his thumb over the head, but his expression didn't change. Despite his hand's movements, all of his attention was focused on me.

“I want to be buried inside that tight pussy of yours,” he continued. “But not until you come first. Do you want to come?”

“Yes,” I moaned. “I want to come.”

“Then do it, sweetheart.” Erik's voice was nearly a growl. “Let me see you come. Show me that you're mine.”

My back arched up off the bed as I climaxed, but all I could hear was that word, *mine*, echoing over and over in my head.

“Say it,” he demanded. “Say that you're mine.”

I didn't think, didn't question. In that moment, there was no doubt. As I dropped back to the bedspread, limbs weak, heart racing, I gave him the only answer I could. “I'm yours.”

## *Chapter Eighteen*

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## TANYA

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When I'd first read the scene in *Heat of the Sun* where Chase watched Leia touch herself, I'd been intrigued by the description of Leia giving up control. Her character had been portrayed as strong and independent, the sort of woman who had what it took to make it in a sport as tough as surfing, so I'd wondered how that would fit into the submissive role where Chase clearly wanted her. For someone who didn't have a submissive bone in his body, Erik had done a good job capturing how Leia felt. But after last night, I thought I had a few insights into what would make a woman like Leia – like me – not only dabble in BDSM, but actually want to be dominated.

I sighed as I took a step back and ran a critical eye over my work. The window was spotless, even if the view wasn't much. I wasn't a messy person by nature, so tidying up after myself was generally easy. Every once in a while, though, a thorough cleaning was a good idea. Physical work when my mind was so full I could barely think had always helped. Things like washing dishes and windows or scrubbing my tiny shower allowed me to slip into the mindless repetition that usually managed to calm my overthinking brain.

Except it wasn't working this time. I'd cleaned every inch of my tiny apartment, even climbing on tables and chairs to wipe down the ceiling. None of it had been able to put aside the memories of last night, or the thoughts that accompanied them. Part of it, I knew, was the fact that my every movement caused the soft cotton of my panties to rub against my still sensitive skin. Sitting didn't hurt, exactly, but there was no ignoring that my ass still smarted from being spanked.

While that was enough to make me blush, none of the physical stuff – not the spanking or the masturbation or even the sex that followed – was foremost in my mind. Instead, two simple words blazed in my head, wanting me to pay attention, to analyze what they meant.

*Mine.*

*Yours.*

He'd claimed me, ordered me to acknowledge the claim.

And I had no fucking idea what it meant.

“Dammit!” I muttered as I tossed the paper towel into the trash. I'd known dealing with Erik in any way other than business would bite me in the ass, but I'd done it anyway.

What the hell had I been thinking?

My phone rang, distracting me for the moment.

“Hello?”

“Tanya.”

I scowled but forced my voice to stay even. “Hi, Aunt Lolly. Is everything okay?”

“Everything's fine. Why wouldn't it be?”

*Because you only call when you want something.* The words were on the tip of my tongue, but I swallowed them. Over the last few years, I'd tried to see things from her point of view. She and my dad had been half-siblings and hadn't gotten along well, so until Dad had left me with her, the two of us hadn't spent much time together. I knew she'd taken me in out of obligation, and it wasn't because I'd merely sensed it. She'd flat-out told me so more than once.

“I'm just surprised to hear from you,” I finally said.

“I was wondering if you'd heard from your father recently.”

I sat down on the floor and leaned back against the couch, closing my eyes as I told myself that yelling at Aunt Lolly wouldn't do anyone any good. During the year I'd lived with her, she'd never wasted an opportunity to tell me that my father was no good, that he left me with her because he'd gotten himself into trouble. That I was nothing more than the constant reminder of the burden he placed on her because he'd fucked up his own life.

“I haven't spoken to him in twelve years. You know that.” I couldn't keep the edge out of the last few words.

“I don't know that,” she sniped back. “It's not like you keep me up to date with what's going on in your life. For all I knew, he came back for you, and



the two of you have been off living your own lives without a thought for what you'd put me through.”

What *I'd* put *her* through? I was eleven years-old when I'd gotten so tired of the constant verbal abuse that I'd run away. When I was found and brought back, instead of trying to find out why I'd run, she handed me over to the state like I meant nothing to her. Since then, I'd spoken to her twice a year: Christmas and my birthday. Even as a kid, I'd known the only reason she'd even gone through that trouble was so she could tell herself – and anyone else who'd listen – that even though she hadn't been able to handle me, she still felt the need to make sure I knew that she cared about me.

“No, Aunt Lolly, I haven't seen him or talked to him. For all I know, he could be dead.”

The little gasp she gave was so theatrical I almost laughed. “You shouldn't say such things, Tanya.”

What she didn't add was the sentiment she'd drilled into my head for over a year. That it didn't matter if my father was alive, he wouldn't be coming back for me. He'd abandoned me just like my mom.

“Do you want me to have him call you if I hear from him?” I didn't think it would happen, but if I made the offer, maybe I could get her off the phone. As much as I'd wanted a distraction from the situation with Erik, I didn't want to talk to my aunt any longer than absolutely necessary.

“Unless he's planning on offering an apology for dropping you on my doorstep all those years ago, I don't want to speak to him. Make sure he knows that. I washed my hands of him and his failures when he vanished.” Her voice was exactly how I remembered it. Cold. Hard. Biting.

Apparently, moving to Miami for a promotion and a continuing affair with her boss hadn't made her any happier.

“I'll make sure I tell him that,” I said through gritted teeth. “Is that all?”

The sigh on the other end of the phone was enough to make me roll my eyes. I'd met teenage girls who were less overly dramatic than my aunt.

“I was actually calling to see if you'd offer to pay me back since you're working and my finances are tight right now.”

“Pay you back?” I really hoped she wasn't suggesting what it sounded like.

“For all of the expenses I accrued when I took you in.”

She was serious. Anger boiled up inside me. I'd put up with a lot of shit from her over the years, and I'd always behaved myself, but this was too

much.

“Don't ever call me again.”

I ended the call before she could respond, then pulled up her number in my contacts and blocked her. When people heard that I'd grown up in foster care, most of them assumed that was the reason I had trust issues, and why I struggled with accepting that anyone could care about me. Except that wasn't the case. Sure, it hadn't helped, and I'd perfected my ability to shut people out during those few years, but it was Aunt Lolly who'd done the most damage.

And I was through taking it. No more guilt trips, no more being nice because she was my aunt and she hadn't asked for my dad to leave me with her. Fuck that. I didn't deserve to be treated this way. Sure, I hadn't always been the easiest kid to get along with, but I was a kid, dumped on an aunt I didn't know and who didn't want me. It didn't make my running away the right thing to do, but I hadn't been the adult. She'd been, and she'd behaved like a spoiled child.

I was done with her. I didn't need her back then, and I didn't need her now. I didn't need anyone.

## *Chapter Nineteen*

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## ERIK

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I hadn't been happy with chapter sixteen when I submitted my manuscript even though it was well-written from a technical standpoint. Something about it just didn't quite ring true, and I hadn't been able to figure out what or why.

The characters had been having sex for a few chapters already, and their relationship was growing from the physical to something more. Things weren't at the point yet where Chase's fear of something happening to Leia was interfering with the relationship, but there needed to be some tension between them.

That was it, I realized. Sex between the two characters had lost that edge, despite the inclusion of BDSM elements. In chapter sixteen, Chase was at work, and Leia wanted to see him, so she headed to the surf shop. He closed the store so they could go to his apartment over the shop and they had sex. All the right words were there, but they fell flat without any real tension, and I couldn't figure out how to fix it.

“Dammit!” I ran my hands through my hair. I'd been staring at this page for nearly twenty minutes and still didn't know how to make it say what I wanted.

I'd never had a problem with focusing. Being single-minded was part of what made me successful. When something was in my sights, nothing got in my way.

Until now.

I'd start reading, and the next thing I knew, I was remembering what it had been like watching Tanya bringing herself to orgasm for the first time. It

didn't seem possible that someone as beautiful and sensual as she was had never gotten herself off before, but I had no doubt she'd been telling the truth.

It had to be that innocence that captured my attention. I'd had sex with a lot of women, and I'd ordered at least a few Subs to touch themselves in front of me. But none of them had ever managed to distract me from my work.

I'd never considered myself a possessive or jealous man. I didn't demand exclusivity from partners because I didn't want them to expect it in return. When a Sub showed how well she'd been trained, I never even considered being jealous of the man or men who'd had her before me. I'd appreciated the experience and knowledge they'd offered.

But there was something about knowing that I was the only man who'd ever seen every inch of her, watched her climax, felt her body shudder with pleasure under mine...I couldn't deny the appeal there.

What was actually freaking me out was that some part of me had moved beyond enjoying the idea of being her first, to wanting to be her *only*. What I'd felt at the club when I'd seen the way other men had looked at Tanya hadn't gone away. If anything, it was even stronger now that I knew what it was like to have her say she was mine.

I hadn't intended to say it, and I hadn't meant to make her respond. It'd just come out, and it'd felt so right that I'd gone with it.

And now I didn't know what to do.

I wanted her. That much was clear. I couldn't stop thinking about her. Thinking about what it was like to watch her fall over that edge. And then what I hadn't yet experienced but wanted to. Like opening my eyes one morning and coaxing her awake with my mouth.

That particular fantasy had been especially strong the last two mornings, and it wasn't doing anything to help my writer's block. If anything, it made it worse. All I could think about was Tanya and when I'd see her again. Each time I went through a scene that she and I had acted out, it was the two of us I saw in my head rather than my characters even though neither of us looked like Chase or Leia.

I sighed and turned away from my desk. I loved the view my office window gave, but I would've preferred to be staring at a screen, fixing this scene so that my book would be one step closer to finished.

I had a bad feeling that if I couldn't figure out whatever this was with Tanya, I wouldn't get anything done, and I wasn't the sort of person who took kindly to the thought of not accomplishing something I'd set my mind to.

## *Chapter Twenty*

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## TANYA

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I hadn't realized it was possible, but Miss Foxxe was actually getting *more* difficult with each passing day, insulting me, giving me all sorts of shit assignments. Coffee and lunch runs. Writing form letter rejections. Editing manuscripts she had no intention of ever sending back to the authors. And I knew if I made even one excuse about needing time to work on *Heat of the Sun*, she'd tell me that she could take it off my hands and that would be it.

So I'd been working through lunch every day, taking work home with me, barely having any time for myself. In a way, I supposed it was good since every second of my free time was spent thinking about Erik. No matter how much I wanted to believe he meant the things he said the last time we were together, I knew that making more out of it than it appeared was a bad idea. I needed to keep my head in the game so that I didn't accidentally do something extra stupid the next time I saw Erik.

Whenever that would be.

I hadn't spoken to him all weekend, and the more time that passed without contact, the more I worried that he regretted what happened between us at the club.

Which was why I was completely astonished to see Erik stepping out of the elevator, looking completely out of sorts. He ignored the startled looks he got as he headed straight for my desk.

I stood, smoothing down my skirt with nervous fingers before brushing at my shirt. I had a moment to hope that I didn't have anything stuck in my teeth, and then he was there.

“You need to help me with something.”

I blinked at his abrupt words, but before I could ask him what he meant, he grabbed my hand and pulled me after him. It was all I could do to keep up with him as he dragged me into a little-used corridor. He looked around for a moment, opened a door, and a moment later, we were standing in a supply closet.

“Are you okay?” I asked as my gaze ran over his disheveled hair, the dark circles under his eyes. There was something in his eyes too. Something that made me catch my breath.

He looked like he was about to speak, but then he covered my mouth with his instead. Something like desperation poured off of him as he clutched my arms, dragged me up against him.

When he finally tore his mouth from mine, our breathing was harsh. “I’m stuck.”

My mind spun, not processing the words for several seconds. Then, when I did, I still didn’t understand.

He started to explain before I had to ask. “I’ve been trying to work on this scene for the past two days, and I can’t get it right. I don’t understand what’s missing, why the scene isn’t working right. And I can’t figure it out without you.”

My stomach flipped at his words, and I reminded myself not to read into things. “What do you need?”

“You.” He kissed me again, backing me up against the door.

His arms locked me in, body pinning me in place. I should have felt panic or at least some sort of unease, but I didn’t. He didn’t need to tell me that he wouldn’t hurt me, or that he’d stop if I just said the word. I knew it without having to hear it.

Besides, I wasn’t about to stop him. My skin was humming, arousal pooling between my legs. I’d have been lying if I said that knowing I was at work didn’t make it at least a little hotter. Either way, I wanted him.

“I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you,” he murmured against my lips. “Dreaming about you.”

“Me too,” I admitted. I forced myself to focus on the one part I knew wasn’t a mistake. “How can I help you?”

He grabbed my hips and turned me around. My hands slapped against the door, and I braced myself, body thrumming with anticipation. He pulled my skirt up, baring the plain white panties I wore underneath.



“This is what I need,” he growled against my ear. “To be with you, be inside you. To feel what Chase felt for Leia.”

“And what's that?”

He nudged my feet apart, and I heard a zipper, but he didn't answer me. I cried out as he buried himself inside me with one quick thrust. It was too much, and I pressed my fist against my mouth to muffle the sounds I made as he drove into me. It wasn't pain, exactly, but it wasn't exactly pleasure either.

Then he had his fingers on me, finding my clit with practiced skill. His touch wasn't gentle, but it was exactly what I needed. Then his free hand slid up my stomach and pushed under my bra, fingers pinching and twisting my nipple until I was writhing back against him, craving the release he promised with every touch, every stroke.

“So fucking good.” He nipped my earlobe. “Do you have any idea how amazing you feel?”

I assumed it was a rhetorical question because I didn't think I was capable of even a single word answer, and then I couldn't even think of my name because I was coming. My teeth sank into my knuckles, and he groaned as I tightened around him.

“Fuck, sweetheart.” His hips jerked against me, and I felt his cock swell and pulse as he came.

And I wondered if I'd given him what he needed.

## *Chapter Twenty-One*

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## ERIK

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*I*t'd been four days, and I still couldn't believe that I'd fucked Tanya in a supply closet at Branch Publishing. And that I'd done it without a condom.

She hadn't been pissed at me when she realized it. She said she was on the pill, and she hadn't even asked if I was clean. I'd told her anyway, but she'd simply said that she trusted me.

*Trusted me.*

As a Dom, I understood the importance of trust, and I made sure my partners knew they could call things off at any moment and I'd listen. That was something else, a trust that went beyond the basics of pleasure and respect within a sexual situation. She was trusting me with her body in a way that no woman had ever done before. It had shaken me to the point that I'd walked three blocks before realizing I had a car service waiting for me back at Branch.

And when I'd gotten home, it was like something had opened up inside me.

I'd always had a good imagination, and I'd gotten good marks in English, so writing *Heat of the Sun* felt natural. I'd enjoyed creating the characters and the plot, and while it had still been work, it was the sort I liked. But it hadn't been the same as this.

I'd sat down at my desk, my head full of what had happened, and pulled up my manuscript, intending to polish the problem scene now that I understood what was missing. After making a few changes here and there to convey the urgency Chase had felt, the scene worked much better...but I still

felt like something was missing.

When it finally hit me, I opened a new document and started writing.

That was Tuesday evening, and I'd barely done anything else since. I'd switched from desktop to laptop a couple times, my body needing a change of position every few hours or so, but I'd eaten – when I'd remembered – at my computer, taken quick showers, and slept only four to five hours each night.

I'd always been good at delegating, and it wasn't strange for me to go a whole week without going into the office, especially if the only meetings on my schedule were over the phone or video conference, so sending out an email saying that I'd be working from home wasn't anything new. What was new was that I'd postponed three meetings and spent all of my time on a new book.

It was now Friday morning, and I was both exhilarated and exhausted. I'd outlined every chapter, and my most recent word count stood at around twenty-two thousand. I'd never gotten so much done in such a short time, and while I knew there'd be edits and polishing needed, I was confident that the overall content was even better than *Heat of the Sun*.

I still thought my first book was good, but the one I had practically bursting out of me now was better. There was a different sort of depth to the characters, an edge to the plot. *Heat of the Sun* had conflict, but it was the sort of book that someone could read and know that, no matter what the protagonists had thrown at them, they'd find their way back to each other. Not that there was something wrong with that. I didn't dislike happy endings, and I was fairly certain that my new book would end up that way, but it had an uncertainty in it that wasn't in my previous story. It would keep the readers guessing, turning each page with an anxious anticipation, desperate to know that things worked out in the end.

At least, that's what I was hoping.

My knees popped as I stood, and the rest of my joints followed when I stretched. I'd been drinking coffee by the potful, but I hadn't eaten anything yet today, and my stomach was making its protests known. I needed to stop for lunch.

As I rummaged through my fridge to see what I had, bits of the last chapter I'd written floated around in my head. I'd let everything come out naturally for this book, so I hadn't tried to stop myself from basing the lead character on Tanya. Where thinking about her had distracted me from

working on *Heat of the Sun*, this book had the opposite effect. My mind was full of her, and it fueled my work rather than hindering it.

The desire to see her was almost painful, the sort of primal urge that was nearly impossible to ignore. I was getting in deeper with her with every passing day, and I wasn't sure I could stop it. Or if I wanted to.

As I made myself a sandwich and grabbed an energy drink, a plan formed. One that let me indulge in what I wanted while still keeping myself at a safe distance. For it to work, before I got back to my book, I needed to do some shopping. It was time to test some more of Tanya's limits.

## *Chapter Twenty-Two*

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## TANYA

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I hadn't talked to Erik since our encounter in the supply closet, but I didn't want to make the first move, not after the awkward way we'd left things. I supposed I should have been mad at him for not asking before taking me without protection, but I'd meant what I told him. I trusted him. He wouldn't have risked me like that. We might not have been in a relationship, but he wasn't the sort of man who thought only of himself.

I wasn't worried about anything coming from what we'd done, but I was concerned about him letting it come between us. I had no illusions about what we were to each other, but I didn't want things to get weird again.

Except not having spoken to him since that afternoon made me feel like things were weird.

That, on top of the headache work had become, meant that by the time I got home on Friday evening, I was ready for dinner, wine, and lounging on the couch while I binge watched some shows that I'd gotten behind on over the last couple weeks. Normally, I'd read a book to unwind, but after I'd spent the week wading through stories, I needed to turn my brain off.

I'd just finished dinner and was cleaning up when someone knocked on my door. A little flutter went through me, a hope that maybe Erik had come by to tell me that he'd had a busy week but wanted to see me. The person on the other side, however, wasn't Erik. I pasted on a polite smile, pulled my robe more tightly around me, and opened the door.

“Sign here.” The guy sounded bored as he held out his clipboard.

The package was the size of a small book, wrapped in plain brown paper. My name and address were on the front, but I didn't see anything about who

the sender was. I went over to the couch and settled on it, tucking my feet up under me. When I opened the box, there was a card on top of white tissue paper.

*Join me on Skype before you finish opening your gift. - E*

Curiosity made me want to disregard the instructions, but I knew that following them would be worth it.

I pulled out my couch, grabbed my laptop, and settled back in my bed. I'd make it before I slept, but I had a feeling I'd be more comfortable this way for whatever Erik had in store.

Less than a minute later, his familiar face appeared on my screen. And then I realized that he wasn't wearing a shirt. Or pants. Just a pair of dark gray boxer briefs that only served to remind me exactly what was underneath them.

"Is this a bad time?" He arched an eyebrow.

I answered his question with one of my own. "You bought me a present?"

"Well," he gave me that slow, lazy grin that never failed to twist my insides, "technically, they're for you, but I plan on enjoying them as well."

I pressed my hands together on my lap so he couldn't see them trembling. I'd always been a shy person, but rarely a fearful one. Something about Erik scared me though. Not in a physical sense, but rather that he made me feel things, want things, that I didn't want to believe I could have.

"Open it."

His words brought me back to where we were, back to the place where it was only about the moment, the physical.

I folded back the tissue paper to reveal two things. The first was a delicate looking gold chain with beautifully worked butterflies on either end. Knowing what I did about Erik, I had no doubt the jewels in the wings were real chips of diamonds and rubies, but I couldn't quite figure out what sort of necklace it was.

Until I picked up one of the butterflies and saw that it didn't have a latch, but rather a clip. Then I remembered a later chapter in *Heat of the Sun* and realized it wasn't a necklace at all.

Shit.

Now I was rethinking looking at the second gift. I ran my thumb over the butterfly wing. Sort of. Okay, so nipple clamps weren't exactly a normal gift, but Erik and I weren't exactly a normal couple. Or a real couple at all.

I moved aside the rest of the tissue paper, and my entire body went hot. I



didn't need a book to tell me what that was.

“You bought me—” My voice cracked. I couldn't say it. I could barely believe it, actually.

“Come now, sweetheart, you let me watch you at the club. Now you're in the comfort of your own home. That has to be easier.” Despite his coaxing tone, there was still that undercurrent of steel that made me feel the same way I had at the club, in the supply closet. Like I wanted to submit.

Like I was safe.

“Open up your robe,” he said. “Let me see what you have on under it.”

I swallowed hard as I set the box aside and untied my belt. As I parted the robe, he sucked in a breath.

“Tanya,” his voice was low, dangerous, “did you answer your door wearing nothing but a robe?”

“Yes.”

His eyes narrowed. “Was it a guy who made the delivery?”

Shit. Erik had been all possessive at the club, but I'd managed to convince myself that had been more about the location than it was about me. The gleam in his eyes now, however, said that it was *all* about me.

“Yes,” I answered honestly. “But he was gay.”

Erik gave me a skeptical look. “And you knew this by how he handed you a box?”

“More by the way he checked out my neighbor's ass on the way out.”

“I still don't like it.” Erik leaned back and crossed his arms. “I think you should make it up to me by breaking in your new toys.”

If I'd had this conversation with him even a week after we first met, I might've thought he was being an ass, but I knew him better now, and I could hear the teasing note, see the hint of a smile.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Attach the clips to your nipples.” He rubbed his hand over his crotch, like he couldn't help touching himself. “They'll pinch at first, but you need to get used to wearing them.”

“Really?” A little thrill went through me. It wasn't a commitment, but at least he was thinking of us being together again.

“I fully intend to use them when we're up close and personal. Except when I put them on you, I'm going to hold on to that chain, give it a little tug now and then.”

That shouldn't have turned me on as much as it did. I picked up the

clamps, shivering as the chain slid across my stomach, cool against my skin. It was easy to fasten the butterflies into place, the pressure just the wrong side of comfortable, but not quite painful. Not yet anyway.

“Damn.” He pushed his hand under his waistband. “I knew those would look great on you, but it's even better than I imagined. How do they feel?”

“Strange,” I admitted. “But not bad.”

“The vibrator already has batteries in it,” he said. “Pick it up.”

I didn't know what material it was made out of, but it was cool against my fingertips. I spread my legs without having to be told, the air cool against my damp skin. I'd never used one of these before, but it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure it out.

“Are you wet?”

I nodded.

“Good girl.” He pulled his cock out, already more than half hard. “Put it inside.”

I bit my bottom lip as the shaft entered me. The fit was snug, but not as tight as Erik had been. I might have been a virgin until recently, but I knew Erik was bigger than average. Which meant the vibrator didn't quite measure up. Little would. Still, it was promising. A second part that rested right against my clit, and I didn't doubt what it was supposed to do.

“Turn it on.” His fist moved up and down in slow, deliberate motions.

I moved my thumb to the switch, gasping as the vibration moved against that sensitive bundle of nerves. My back arched, eyes closed.

Damn, that was intense.

“Open your eyes, sweetheart. I want you looking at me while you pleasure yourself.”

Lines like that should have made me roll my eyes, not obey without question. Instead, my eyes met his, and I waited for him to tell me what to do next. He didn't say a word as he nodded, giving me permission to continue. I let instinct guide me, rocking the vibrator back and forth so that it moved inside me without removing the vibrating part from my clit. My nipples were beginning to throb with that sort of deep pulsing that wasn't yet pain, but promised that it was on its way.

“How does it feel?”

I struggled to find the words, appreciating on a deeper level what it had to be like for him to try to describe the sensations a woman felt.

“Have you ever touched one of those electric fences? Not the ones that

can kill a person, but the sort that farmers use to keep animals from roaming around?” I took a shuddering breath, fighting to keep my thoughts coherent. “I grabbed one once when I was on vacation with my dad. It felt like every atom in my body came alive in a new way.”

“That doesn't sound very pleasant,” he said, amusement tingeing his words.

I shook my head. Fuck. The pressure inside me was building fast, the sort of inexorable force that came with instinctual biology.

“It wasn't, but...intense...” I moaned as my hips moved, shifting the vibrator to a new angle.

“Are you close?”

“Mm-hm.” I couldn't manage the word. All the concentration I could muster was focused on keeping my eyes on him.

“Do you have any idea how incredibly sexy you are right now?” His hand moved faster over his cock, wrist twisting on every other stroke so that his thumb swiped across the tip. “I want so bad to be able to bury myself in that tight pussy of yours, make you scream my name. Come for me, sweetheart. Only me.”

His words were enough to tip me over the edge, and I pushed the implications aside as I gave myself over to my climax. I couldn't think about what *only me* meant. Or how easily I'd given in to what he wanted me to do. A little voice in the back of my head wondered what I would've thought of all this if Erik hadn't been my first. Would I have been so turned on by his domination if I'd had sex a couple times before I met him? Would I have enjoyed the edge of pain? The unconventional things he wanted me to do? How much of my tastes were being set by these initial experiences?

The bigger question was, did I care?

## *Chapter Twenty-Three*

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## ERIK

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Three weeks. That's all it had been since I first met Tanya, and I felt like everything had changed. *Heat of the Sun* was on its way to being published, and I was far enough into my second book to know that it was even better than the first. The monotony I'd felt in my life before was gone. Business dealings for my company went through more smoothly as I delegated more, and nitpicked less. I hadn't suddenly become irresponsible, but I no longer felt the need to analyze every angle with the same intensity I had in the past. Work was important, but not as important as the rest of my life had become. I cared about writing more than I did about business.

And then there was Tanya.

She'd completely taken me by surprise, not just because of who she was, but because of how she made me feel. My time with her didn't feel like a means to an end like sex did with other women. I enjoyed talking to her, spending time with her even without sex. Not that I wanted to give up that part of our time together. Her innocence and inexperience made me see things in ways I never had before. It wasn't just about getting to climax, feeling the release that came with domination. I cared about her pleasure, her enjoyment, in a way that was entirely new to me.

It should have freaked me out, the depth of what I felt for her. Instead of looking for a way out, I kept thinking of more ways to spend time with her, new things I wanted to do. With every other woman I'd been with, I'd essentially forgotten about them as soon as we were done. Not in a mean way, but more like I only existed in the moment when it came to sex. Once

the moment was gone, I didn't think about it again.

Except I was always thinking about Tanya.

I couldn't stop myself from grinning as my driver turned the corner. I'd gotten an email from Tanya a half hour ago, asking me to meet her for lunch at a hotel. While I loved when she was submissive, I liked that she'd taken the initiative for us to meet. I didn't want to think that this was all coming from me. I didn't doubt that she was enjoying what we were doing, but it meant something to me that she wanted us to be together enough to make us lunch reservations at a hotel.

I hoped that meant she'd reserved a room for us too. It was Sunday, so neither one of us had to be at work today. We could take our time, order room service. Do more than just fuck and go our separate ways. If she hadn't made a reservation, I could probably get a room anyway. It wasn't like there were really any bad rooms at a place like this. I didn't like the idea of her spending money when I could afford it, but I'd respect whatever she wanted to do.

That was new for me too. I respected women, but when it came to the details of sexual encounters, I was the one who set the guidelines, made the rules. I never forced a woman to do something she didn't want to do, but I'd also never had a problem declining to spend time with a woman who wanted something else. If we both weren't looking for the same thing, there was no point in wasting our time. But with Tanya, it wasn't a waste of time at all because any time I spent with her was what I wanted.

“Would you like me to wait for you, Mr. Sanders?” the driver asked as he pulled up in front of the hotel's entrance.

I shook my head. “No, thank you. I'm not sure how long I'll be.”

“Have a good day,” he said as I headed inside.

I glanced around as I approached the restaurant but didn't see Tanya. I hoped that meant she'd gotten us a private table in the back. I didn't mind if we were seen together, but I didn't want to waste what little time we had fielding questions from curious people.

“Good afternoon.” I gave the hostess a polite smile. “I'm meeting with—”

“Of course, Mr. Sanders.” She didn't give me a chance to finish. “Right this way.”

My pulse picked up as I followed the woman around tables. Any other time, I'd have been checking out her ass as we walked or thinking about how to get her in bed. Now, I just wanted to get to Tanya.

Then the hostess side-stepped out of my way, and I realized that I'd been lied to.

“Erik.” Jai Foxe smiled as she stood. “Thank you for joining me.”

“I wasn't aware that I was,” I said as I took a seat across from her. “Is something wrong with Tanya?”

I was fairly certain I knew what happened, but I hadn't gotten this far in life by making assumptions.

Jai made a dismissive gesture with one hand as she sat down. “I don't think we need to worry about Miss Lacey, now do we? After all, she's just an assistant. You deserve someone with experience.”

The coy smile on her face made me think she wasn't just talking about her work at Branch Publishing, but I didn't think it'd be polite of me to call her out on it, and the last thing I wanted to do was make things more difficult for Tanya. If I turned Jai down flat and she thought it was because of Tanya, Tanya could lose her job. Plus, Jai struck me as a woman who'd get vindictive over something like this. She could make it so Tanya would never work in publishing again. It wouldn't matter how much money and influence I had. Everyone would assume that Tanya had basically slept her way into a position.

I wouldn't do that to her.

“I ordered us some wine,” Jai said. “I hope you don't mind. I thought it would take the edge off.”

“I'm not sure I understand,” I said carefully. “With Tanya in charge of my manuscript, I assumed I'd be working solely with her. Is there something specific you needed to talk to me about?”

Jai reached across the table and placed her hand over mine. “I just thought it was time for us to get to know each other better.” She leaned closer, her fingers stroking my wrist.

“Oh.”

The word made me look away from Jai to see Tanya standing two feet away, her gaze fixed on where Jai and I were touching.

Shit.

## *Chapter Twenty-Four*



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## TANYA

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I planned on spending most of the day running errands since I'd stayed in yesterday looking over a manuscript I needed to get to Miss Foxe first thing Monday morning. Without knowing how *Heat of the Sun* would do, I needed to make sure I did every task assigned to me, no matter how clearly trivial, and did it well. I couldn't give her any excuse to take the book from me, or fire me. If Erik's book sold as well as I thought it would, I'd feel a bit more stable about my position at Branch, but until then, I'd work my ass off.

I was at a thrift store, trying to find a nice dress that wasn't too out of style or worn, when my email alert went off. I paused in my perusal of a simple midnight blue maxi dress and pulled up the email.

*I'd love to meet you for lunch. The Ritz-Carlton is a great choice. I have the rest of the day free, in fact, if there's anything you'd like to do after. - Erik*

I frowned. Lunch? I checked the time on the email and saw that he'd sent it just a couple of minutes ago. I hadn't asked him to go to lunch today. It had to have been a mistake.

Except he'd sent it straight to my work account. And the tone of the email definitely sounded more personal than business. Had I scheduled something and forgotten about it? I went to my sent folder, but there was nothing there.

I put the dress back.

Whatever was going on, my gut told me it wasn't good.

Traffic was awful, so it took the cab nearly forty-five minutes to get me to the hotel. I kept glancing at my phone the whole way, but I didn't get anything from Erik. I replied to his email but hadn't heard back from him. I

wanted to text him, but if he had a reason for how he contacted me, I'd follow his lead.

I thanked the driver as he pulled to a stop and headed inside before I could list another dozen ways that this was a bad idea. The hostess gave me a disapproving look, but when I gave her Erik's name, she motioned for me to follow her. She was tall enough that I couldn't see over her, so it wasn't until she stepped aside that I saw them.

Leaning toward each other, they looked quite cozy there, Jai's fingers caressing Erik's wrist, a pleased smile on her face.

“Oh.”

I hadn't meant to say anything, but the word just slipped out. Erik's head jerked around, but I couldn't bear to look at him. And I certainly couldn't let him see the emotions churning inside me.

“Excuse me,” I murmured as I hurried away. I heard noises behind me but didn't stop. I needed to get out of the hotel, away from the eyes I could feel on me.

I turned right as I stepped outside, more because there was a crowd of people to my left than having any actual thought of where I was going. I made it a few feet before I heard him calling my name.

Dammit.

I could let him make a scene by forcing him to chase after me – or worse, find out that he didn't care enough to keep chasing – or I could have this conversation and get it over with.

I fixed my expression into something that I hoped at least passed for neutral and turned to face him.

“Jai sent me an email pretending to be you,” he said quickly as he closed the last of the distance between us. “I thought I was meeting you.”

That didn't explain why they'd looked so cozy, but I did feel better knowing that he hadn't arranged to meet her.

“I still want you to represent my book,” he said, smiling down at me. “And you're still the only one I want to act out scenes with.”

Right. The book. And sex. Acting.

“Come on, sweetheart. I don't want to lose this thing we've got just because your boss is trying to steal my business.” He reached for my hand. “I haven't had this much fun in a long time.”

My stomach twisted. I didn't know why I thought he might say something different. I knew better than to hope. He'd been perfectly clear about where

things stood with us. Sex. Fun. He'd never talked about wanting anything more. Neither had I, so I couldn't blame him for assuming we were on the same page.

No, this was all my fault. As soon as I'd started thinking about more than just sex with him, I should have ended things. If I learned anything in my life, it was how to protect myself, and it'd taken Erik just three weeks to make me forget it.

I couldn't do this anymore. It was a mistake to have gotten involved this much.

I pulled my hand away from his and took a step back. "Maybe she had the right idea."

His smile faltered, confusion crossing his eyes. "Tanya?"

"Miss Foxe is right," I said, sliding my gaze away from him. "She should be the one representing your book. She has the experience."

He scowled. "I don't want her."

I shook my head. "You need someone who can maintain distance, and I clearly haven't done that." I took another step. "If there's anything you need from me, please speak to Miss Foxe about requesting it. I don't think it would be a good idea for us to spend any additional time together."

I was impressed that I'd managed to get all that out without my voice shaking, but I knew I wouldn't be able to last much longer. I didn't want to cry over him, but if I couldn't stop the tears, I'd at least let them loose in the privacy of my own home.

"Goodbye."

As I walked away, I kept waiting for him to yell at me to come back, for him to grab my arm and stop me.

But he didn't do any of that, so I just kept going and tried not to admit that my heart was breaking.

## *Chapter Twenty-Five*

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## ERIK

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She. Week. From. Hell.  
Or maybe I was in hell.  
That could explain a lot.

I'd hoped that Tanya's reaction to seeing me with Jai had just been an over-reaction, that she'd realize I didn't want her boss. Not as an editor, and not as a sexual partner. Tanya was the only person I wanted as both, and I waited for her to calm down and come to her senses.

But she hadn't.

Or maybe she had. Maybe she'd calmed down but still didn't want to see me.

I didn't get it. She said she believed in my book, that she wanted to represent it. She'd enjoyed having sex with me, if the number of orgasms she'd had were any indication. She was far too honest to have faked those. So why had her boss hitting on me made her decide that we shouldn't spend time together?

I could have asked Jai, since every time I'd gone into Branch Publishing, I'd spent at least an hour in her office, listening to her talk about all the ways she was going to make my book the next big thing. They were grand schemes, all the flashy sorts of things that attracted new authors to a publisher, and attracted people to books. I should've been thrilled, but something about it just didn't sit right with me.

I supposed it could have been because it was Jai and not Tanya who was pitching the ideas to me, but I hoped I wasn't that petty. Then again, was it really petty for me to want to be with the person I'd chosen? From the

moment I met Tanya, I'd wanted *her* to represent my book, not Jai Foxe.

And that wasn't the only thing I wanted from Tanya.

In fact, as the week continued on and she continued to avoid me, I considered telling Jai that she could stay on my book if she'd just tell me how I could get in touch with Tanya. Well, how to do it without looking like I was chasing her.

Because I wasn't.

By the end of the week, though, I'd started telling myself that I was better off. I always made sure that there was a clear understanding with my partners that it wouldn't go beyond sex, but some women thought they could *change* me and didn't take it well when I didn't pursue them. Tanya ending things between us meant I didn't have to worry about that. Sure, it stung that she'd been the one to walk away, but I would've done it soon anyway. The most time I'd ever spent with one woman was a couple weeks, and we'd been getting close to a month. It was time to move on.

And that's what I'd been doing.

Monday, I distracted myself by going into work and taking care of all the things I'd put off the week before. When I'd gotten home, I told myself that I was too tired to work on either of my books, and since I'd done so much the previous week, I didn't feel guilty.

But then on Tuesday, I spent half an hour staring at my computer screen before admitting that I had nothing to write. So I'd gone to work again.

Then did the same thing on Wednesday.

And yesterday.

And again today.

I hadn't written a single word since she left me. Not on *Heat of the Sun*, even though I had hundreds of notes of things I needed to fix. And not on the new story I'd been so passionate about. I knew the story was there, I could feel it. But it couldn't find its way from my brain to my fingers and out onto the screen.

I told myself that it was just a coincidence. That it had nothing to do with Tanya being gone. I'd written *Heat of the Sun* without her. I didn't need her to be able to write. And every time that little voice in the back of my head piped up to say that she'd made my writing better, I ignored it.

Like I was ignoring it now. I'd made it through the week, and now I was heading into Gilded Cage to meet Alix, Jace, and Reb. Even though we sometimes met at the club other times, we always came together the last

Friday night of the month. I was grateful this was one such night. I told myself that the best way to clear my head would be to find a Sub and fuck her until I couldn't remember my own name, but drinking myself into oblivion was infinitely more appealing.

“Erik, glad you could make it.” Alix slapped me on my shoulder as I sat down next to him. “We weren't sure you'd show tonight.”

I gave him a sideways look as I flagged down a waiter. “Why wouldn't I?”

“You seemed a little preoccupied the last time we were here,” Reb said as he accepted another drink from the waiter.

I put in my order for a Springbank Scotch Whiskey, then turned back to my friends. “I wanted to get laid last time we were here. I thought that's why we came here instead of a regular bar or club.”

“Really?” Jace raised one of those perfect eyebrows of his, completely ignoring the looks women were throwing his way. “That's what happened last week?”

I glared at him. “I have no idea what you're talking about.”

Reb leaned back in his chair, a cocky expression on his face. “So you wouldn't mind me finding that hot piece of ass you—”

I grabbed the front of his shirt before he could finish. “Keep your hands off her.”

He grinned at me, but I could see the bitterness behind the smile. “Just wanted to get laid?”

“Fuck off,” I snapped as I let him go.

“Who is she?” Alix asked.

“Doesn't matter.” I shook my head and picked up my drink. I tossed it back in a single gulp and gestured for another. “I'm not here to talk about her. I just want to drink and forget about everything else.”

I could see the concern on my friends' faces, but they didn't ask anything else, and I didn't offer. I meant what I said. I just wanted to forget.

*Chapter Twenty-Six*



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## TANYA

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*F*or someone who'd always prided herself on making smart decisions, I'd seriously fucked up when I got involved with Erik. If I would've just left it alone, let Miss Foxe do her thing, I wouldn't have spent the last week hiding from him. And no matter how much I tried to tell myself that it hadn't really been hiding, I knew what it was.

Okay, so I wouldn't have had the amazing experiences with him that had opened up my world in a way I'd never imagined possible. But I wouldn't have spent the last week being utterly depressed either. I was starting to think it might've been a good trade.

As much of a pain in the ass as Miss Foxe could be, I would've been content at Branch. This was the job I'd always wanted, and I should've been happy with that. But no, I'd had to push my luck. So the fact that I'd spent more time this week in the break room, washing out everyone's mugs, than I had at my own desk was entirely my fault.

What made it even worse was that I missed him. I knew all I'd been to him had been a fun couple weeks, but that didn't stop me from thinking about what it was like to work with him. Remembering how his eyes had shone when he smiled. Hearing the echo of how he'd say my name.

Or how he called me *sweetheart*.

The part of me that had never believed that I deserved anything good, the part that spoke with Aunt Lolly's voice, telling me that no one would ever want me, couldn't stop wondering if he called Jai *sweetheart* too.

On Friday, when I saw him coming into the building, I hadn't been able to

force myself to stay away. I'd still kept out of sight, waiting for him to come back out of Miss Foxxe's office. Then, like the pathetic fool I was, I followed him as he came out. I wouldn't talk to him, but I had to see him, had to see if he looked as miserable as I was.

He didn't.

He looked the same. Put together. Gorgeous. And completely oblivious to my wretched existence.

"Mr. Sanders!"

I backed into a nearby doorway as one of the interns came running up. She was a tiny thing, with the sort of big blonde curls that made her look like a doll. I thought her name was Lily or Millie or something like that.

"Yes?" He sounded polite but distant. Like he had something on his mind.

"Miss Foxxe wanted to invite you out to drinks after work. She said it would be a perfect time to discuss promotional events for your book." The girl said it all in a rush that made me think she'd memorized the words exactly.

"Let Miss Foxxe know that I must decline her offer."

A ray of hope shot through me...only to vanish at what he said next.

"I'll be out with my friends tonight, and it's a standing commitment so it would be rude of me to cancel."

Out with his friends. I remembered his friends. And where I'd met them.

He was going back to Gilded Cage. Without me.

He'd moved on in less than a week. At least now I knew that I'd been right about how much I actually meant to him.

While he was out tonight, I planned on draining every last drop of alcohol I had in my apartment and possibly finishing off the giant bag of M&Ms I had stashed in the back of my kitchen cabinet. I'd been saving them for a PMS chocolate craving, but this seemed like an appropriate occasion as well.

Which was how, at nearly midnight, I found myself drunk enough to be sitting in the dark, squashing the hard little candies between my fingers, and reflecting on the mess I'd made.

"I knew better," I confided to the room. "Get involved with anyone and *squish*."

The thin shell cracked, and I stared at it for a moment before popping it into my mouth.

"Dad loves Mom. Mom leaves Dad." I frowned as I downed the last of

my wine. "Aunt Lolly gets left for a younger man." I snorted a laugh. "Or maybe he just got tired of listening to her. I did."

I dumped the last handful of candy onto my lap. I had a feeling I'd regret the chocolate and wine combination at some point, but at the moment, I was more interested in waxing philosophical about what a joke *love* was.

"I should have walked away," I said with a sigh. "Erika Summers would've been nicer to me. Wouldn't have fucked me...over." I frowned again. Erika Summers wasn't real. *She* was Erik Sanders. Billionaire. Asshole.

I really liked him.

Maybe more than liked him.

Tears welled up in my eyes, but I passed out before they could fall.

I didn't know if it was the throbbing in my head, or needing to pee, that woke me up, but the result was still the same, and it wasn't pretty. I stumbled to the bathroom, grateful for the first time that my apartment was so small. Moving was not my favorite thing at the moment, especially when it led to me kneeling in front of the toilet, regretting the previous night's indulgences.

I was feeling more human by the time I emerged, towel wrapped around me. My stomach was empty, my teeth brushed, and the headache had receded to the base of my skull. Since it was Saturday morning, I didn't need to worry about going into work, so I didn't bother dressing in anything more than my robe. When the memory of the last time I'd been wearing only my robe popped into my head, I pushed it away. I refused to think about *him* today. No more pity parties either. I'd sit down today and come up with a plan.

I liked plans. They gave me something specific to focus on, to do. They had a goal to reach and clearly outlined steps to get there. After Aunt Lolly had handed me over to the state, one of the few helpful case workers had told me that if I wanted to make something of myself, I'd need to figure out what I wanted, and what I'd need to get there. I'd taken her advice to heart, and until I made the choice to contact 'Erika,' I'd followed my plans exactly.

That was where things had gone wrong. I needed to get back on track and focus on doing things the smart way. No more shortcuts, no matter how tempting. I'd put in my time at Branch, do everything that was asked of me. I'd work my way up the ladder the right way.

I'd just sat down to start when my phone rang, the default tone making me wince. It was probably a sales call, but I grabbed it anyway, needing the ringing to stop. I could've sent it to voicemail, but my finger automatically

swiped to accept before my befuddled brain could process a different response.

“Hello?”

“Tanya.”

I froze. I knew that voice, but it couldn't be him. It wasn't possible. The alcohol had muddled my thoughts enough that I was hearing things that weren't there.

“Tanya? Honey? Are you there?”

“Dad?” The word came out cracked.

“Yeah, it's me.” He sounded relieved, but a trace of tension was still there.

Understandable since I hadn't spoken to or seen him since he'd left me with Aunt Lolly. Anger and hurt warred with the part of me that was still that little girl who wanted her father. My hands were shaking as I closed my eyes and tried to find that place inside me that had kept me calm and sane since that moment.

“I'm so glad I found you,” he continued, the words coming out in a rush. “Lolita gave me your number.”

It took me a moment to realize he was talking about Aunt Lolly. She'd always hated her name, so I'd never used it. “You talked to Aunt Lolly?”

“Last night,” he said. “I had to work up the courage to call you.”

“Why did you call?” The question came out harsher than I intended, but not more than I'd meant. “After all these years, why now?”

Silence stretched out as I waited for him to answer, but I didn't break it. I still couldn't quite believe it.

“I never wanted you to get involved in this,” he said finally.

Something I'd heard as a child came back to me, and my stomach sank as I realized that he hadn't called because he missed me.

“Aunt Lolly said you'd been gambling, and that's why you left me with her.”

“She's right,” he admitted. “I couldn't stop, and I just kept getting deeper and deeper in it. I wouldn't have been able to live with myself if something happened to you because of me.”

The laugh that escaped was full of all the bitterness that had accumulated over the years. “Something did happen to me because of you, Dad. Did you think Aunt Lolly was going to just take over, be the mother I don't remember? That she'd love me and I'd have a fairly normal childhood?”

“I...” He sighed. “It would've been worse if I'd kept you with me. Trust me.”

“Trust you? Are you fucking kidding me?” My nails dug into my palms. “You *left* me.”

“I didn't mean for any of this.” There was another long sigh. “Tanya, this wasn't what I wanted for you.”

I heard noises in the background, muffled voices, and what sounded like people moving.

“If it was just my life on the line here, I never would've called. I would've let them do what they want.”

I straightened at the undercurrent of fear I could hear in his words. “What's going on?”

“They know who you are.”

A chill went down my spine, and I pulled my robe tighter around me even though I knew the cold I felt had nothing to do with temperature.

“Who knows who I am?”

“I meant to come back for you. A year, at the most.” His voice was strained. “But then I lost big, and I had to make arrangements to work off my debt. But I still couldn't stop. For years, I always managed to break even. But a couple weeks ago, I got in over my head. I lost too much.”

I didn't want to hear this, but I didn't hang up. I was beyond furious with my father, but he was in serious trouble.

“They knew threatening me wouldn't do any good. I don't have anything to give them. But they found out about you. If I don't get them the money I owe them, they'll hurt you. I tried calling Lolita, but she said she couldn't help me.”

More like *wouldn't*, I knew. She'd probably brushed off the threats to me without thinking twice.

“You're the only one I could go to,” he continued. “I need you to get the money together, or they're going to hurt me...and then they're going to hurt you.”

I swallowed hard. “Dad, I don't have money. I can barely pay my bills.”

Someone said something I couldn't understand, then there was a thump, a pained sound, then a new voice on the line.

“Look, I don't give a fuck what you have or don't have. It's simple. Your dad owes me seventy thousand, and nothing he can do will work it off. So you either get it, or I'll be coming to collect your ass to work off his debt at

twenty bucks a trick. Got it?”

I couldn't speak. What was I supposed to say to that? I didn't have that sort of money. I didn't know *anyone* who had access to that kind of money. But I sure as hell refused to just sit here and let some thugs come after me so they could pimp me out.

“I'll take your silence as agreement,” the man said. “Here's the address.” He rattled it off almost too fast for me to write it down, then added, “You have until midnight tonight.”

The call ended, leaving me staring at a blank screen.

What the fuck was I supposed to do now?

## *Chapter Twenty-Seven*

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## ERIK

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I drank too much last night, and I'd known it then that I'd pay for it now. I'd had worse hangovers, but that didn't make this one any more pleasant. I woke a couple hours before noon and made myself the hangover remedy Alix taught me the first time he'd taken me out to get drunk when I was nineteen. We hadn't done it very often, but he'd always made sure we had the 'magic' ingredients, and when I moved back into the townhouse as an adult, I'd kept it up.

It didn't matter how many times I'd drunk it, the shit still made me grimace. It did its job though. By the time I'd showered and dressed, the hangover was nearly gone, and I was looking at a weekend of nothing.

I'd try to work, of course, to get the story I'd had in my head onto the page, but I wasn't optimistic about my chances. I couldn't feel any of it, not the story, not the characters. Whatever happened when I started it, that spark was gone, and I didn't think I'd be getting it back.

Still, I had to try.

So I sat down on my couch and stared at my laptop until the screensaver came on. I tapped a key, and then repeated the actions over and over until my phone rang, interrupting the pointless monotony.

“Hello?”

“Erik, I-I need you.”

Tanya's voice was shaking, and that was enough to get me on my feet. I didn't care what happened between us. She'd called me for help.

“I'm on my way.” I stuffed my feet into the first pair of shoes I could find. “Are you in danger? Do you need me to stay on the phone with you?”



“No. I'm okay. I just...” she paused, then continued, “Thank you.”

My stomach clenched as the call ended. She hadn't sounded scared, exactly, but the only word I could think of to accurately describe it was...*small*. And that scared the shit out of me. Tanya was shy, sweet, but she wasn't small. She was one of the strongest women I knew, and if something had shaken her like that, it had to be bad.

I didn't bother calling for a car. I needed something quicker and managed to flag down a taxi. Sunday afternoons weren't exactly high traffic, so we made good time. A little voice in the back of my head told me it was a bad idea, that going to Tanya now would only make things more complicated.

But I had to go.

I couldn't let her go through it alone, whatever had prompted the call.

She opened the door before I raised my hand to knock a second time, and any doubts I'd had fled. Her eyes were red, her skin blotchy. Her arms were crossed over her waist, shoulders hunched forward, every inch of her posture telling me she was trying to protect herself.

A stab of guilt went through me. Had *I* done this to her?

“I didn't have anyone else I could call.” She stepped to the side so I could come inside. “It's my dad.”

I waited until she closed the door, then sat down next to her on the couch. She pressed her hands together, her fingertips turning white.

“Your dad?” I prompted.

She nodded but didn't look at me. “He called and told me that he owed people money. Bad people. They threatened him. Threatened me.”

I clenched my jaw to bite back the growl forming in my throat. Someone had *threatened* her? I didn't care that she'd ended things between us. *No one* was going to hurt her. Not as long as I was around.

“They told me that I have to get them seventy thousand dollars by midnight.” She shuddered. “Or they're going to—”

“He'll be okay, Tanya,” I promised. “We'll make sure nothing happens to him.”

She raised her head, her dark eyes hollow. “They're not going to kill him if I don't give them the money. They said they would come for me. And force me to...*work* it off.”

Fuck. No.

I wrapped one arm around her waist, pulling her close. I placed a hand on her cheek, keeping her looking at me.

“I'm going to take care of this.” I brushed my thumb across her cheekbone. “And no one is taking you anywhere. I'll keep you safe. I promise.”

Her lips trembled, and I watched as all the walls she'd put up crumbled. She pressed her face against my chest, her entire body shaking as she cried. Tears usually freaked me out, but I didn't feel the urge to run away from her. No, I wanted to protect her. Check that. I didn't *want* to protect her. I *would* protect her.

I kissed the top of her head. “It's okay, sweetheart. I've got you.”

What she said to me before, and what she'd say to me when this was all over didn't matter. I'd take care of her. Nothing else mattered.

Aside from occasionally slipping a hostess a tip to get a better table, I didn't like to use my money to influence people, but as soon as I put my arms around Tanya, I knew I'd do anything to protect her. And if that meant calling in every favor I had owed to me, paying off whoever I had to, and making promises of my own, I'd do it.

Which was why, less than half an hour after I arrived at Tanya's apartment, I had a couple of friends in the FBI looking into her father and who he might owe money to, and a few friends on the police force working off the clock to try to find him. And Alix was taking the ransom demand to the FBI in case that was the only way to get Tanya's father back. I didn't take what I had for granted, but seventy thousand didn't mean much to me, especially when I knew what was at stake. I'd pay those assholes if it kept her safe, but I wasn't an idiot. They'd keep coming for her. So even if I had to pay them off tonight, no way in hell would I let it go.

And if the authorities couldn't do anything, then I'd talk to the head of the security firm I worked with and find out who I had to hire to get things taken care of. I had several of the firm's men outside right now. They'd make sure Tanya was safe until it was all over.

Not that I planned on leaving her anytime soon.

“They won't find him,” she said dully.

I sat down next to her and set my phone on the table in front of me before turning to look at her. “I told you that I'd take care of it, and I meant it.”

“Why?” She reached a hand out to me, then dropped it back to her lap before she touched me. “I mean, I'm grateful you came, but after what

happened—”

“We don't need to talk about that.” I curled my fingers around her hand. “Right now, just know that my people are taking care of things, and I'll be here while you wait.”

She shook her head, something desperate in her eyes. “I can't wait. Not like this. If I have to sit here for hours while not knowing if my dad's okay or if men are coming to get me or—”

I silenced her with a kiss, barely suppressing a moan as she leaned into me, parting her lips. Her tongue flicked against my bottom lip, and I pulled it into my mouth, reveling in the taste of her. Her hands clutched my shirt, and I buried my fingers in her wet hair. It wasn't until she dropped a hand on my lap, palm pressing against my half-hard cock, that I broke away.

“Tell me what you need.” My voice was rough.

“You.” She ducked her head. “I can't...”

“I can take you out of your head,” I said. “Make you stop thinking for as long as you want.”

I knew what I offered would make it harder for me when all this was over, but I would do that. For her.

I couldn't deny it anymore. I'd do anything for her.

She nodded. “Please. Please, Erik, I can't...”

“Shh, sweetheart.” I kissed her forehead. “It's okay. I've got you.”

## *Chapter Twenty-Eight*

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## TANYA

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I hadn't really been thinking when I called Erik. I'd just known that I was so far in over my head that I was drowning. I didn't have any close friends, no family I could count on. From the time Aunt Lolly handed me over to the social worker, I told myself that I'd never count on anyone else again. I'd be independent. Self-reliant. I'd never give another person the opportunity to let me down.

I'd broken that promise when I started falling for Erik. I thought I'd be able to handle things, but something about him had gotten through my defenses. Breaking it off with him had been an act of self-preservation, but when I'd gotten that call, I'd known that I couldn't handle things alone. He was the only person I could think of to call.

No, that wasn't entirely honest. He was the only person I'd *wanted* to call.

I hadn't expected him to take care of things – at least, that hadn't been a conscious thought – but I couldn't deny the relief I felt when he took charge. I was a twenty-two-year-old assistant with a degree in creative writing and a tiny one-room apartment. I couldn't have done anything on my own.

After how I'd ended things between us, he'd gone above and beyond what I had any right to expect, but then he'd kissed me, and the last of my defenses had crumbled. When he asked me what I needed, I let go of all the analysis and the questions and the doubts. There'd be time enough for that when all this was over.

So I let him take my hand and pull me to my feet. His touch was gentle as he kissed my forehead, and that faint flutter of hope I'd thought was gone perked up.

“Go wash your face and pull your hair back in a braid.” He dropped his hand as he turned to the couch. “We don't want it getting knotted up.”

I did as he asked, letting myself just go through the motions without any real thought behind any of them. By the time I came back out, Erik had pulled the couch out, spread an extra blanket over the bedspread, and arranged my pillows at the head of the bed. He'd taken off his shoes and shirt but kept on his jeans so that those v-grooves and the dark trail of hair all disappeared beneath the waistband.

“Come here, sweetheart,” he said as he held out a hand. “Let me take care of you.”

It was strange, I thought as I took his hand, how he could manage to make those orders rather than requests, but still sound so gentle. The moment my palm slid across his, I felt the tension start to leave my body. I'd missed him more than I'd wanted to admit, and now that he was here, I felt like I could breathe again. Like I didn't have to carry everything on my own.

He helped me onto the bed and removed my robe, his eyes darkening as they moved over my body. My nipples automatically tightened under his gaze, my stomach twisting, pussy throbbing. It shouldn't have been possible for my body to react so strongly to just a look, but with him...I couldn't explain it. I was attuned to him in a way I'd never been with anyone else.

“Lie on your stomach,” he said.

I did, letting him position my arms at my sides, turn my head, shift my legs until I was exactly where he wanted me.

“Lotion?”

“Bathroom, right drawer.”

He walked away for a moment, then returned, bringing the scent of calla lilies with him. A few seconds later, he took my foot between his hands and began to press his thumbs against the sole. I moaned as he worked the tension out of first one foot, and then the other, before moving to my calves. His moves were unhurried and precise, finding each knot and working it through before moving to the next place.

I'd never had anyone give me a massage of any kind, but I was fairly certain that the heat pooling between my legs had more to do with the man giving it than it did with how amazing it felt. And it felt pretty damn amazing.

Up and over my body he moved until his hands had explored everywhere but the place I wanted him the most. As he coaxed the last of the tension from

my muscles, his touch changed and he slid his hands down my sides, stopping on my hips.

“Spread your legs a bit wider, sweetheart.” His voice was low in my ear, making me realize for the first time that neither of us had spoken since I told him where to find my lotion.

The bed shifted under his weight as he moved between my legs. He pulled my hips up, not enough for me to be on my knees, but just enough so I wasn't flat on the mattress. A moment later, the wet heat of his tongue moved over my skin. I shivered, fingers curling into fists, then relaxing again as I gave myself over to the sensations of his mouth on my body in a new way. I'd never given thought to how oral sex could feel different when done in a different position. He certainly had a way of making me see things in all sorts of new ways.

I let out a yelp as he nipped the inside of my thigh. I looked over my shoulder, frowning, but he simply raised an eyebrow.

“Stop thinking,” he chided. “Just feel.”

I nodded, resting my cheek on the blanket again. No thinking. Feel. Hot, wet friction against sensitive nerves. Changing pressure on my clit, then the slide of his tongue up to my entrance. Tip teasing before dipping inside. Pleasure coiling low in my belly. Building. Climbing. Pushing me toward the inevitable conclusion. All the things I'd read about before but had only just begun to experience.

I turned my face so the blanket muffled my cry as I came. He held me open with his thumbs, continuing to lick every inch, prolonging my orgasm until I was beating my fists against my bed, my body unable to process any additional stimulation.

When he released me, I collapsed back onto the bed, panting. I hadn't realized Erik had moved until I caught a glimpse of him out of the corner of my eye as he came around to stand in front of me. I didn't protest as he pulled my arms toward him, or even when he tied my wrists together.

“Get up on your elbows and knees.”

I pushed myself up, surprised that my muscles had recovered enough to hold me. When I raised my head, I saw something glinting in his hand, my breath catching when I realized he was holding the nipple clamps he'd bought me. He didn't say a word as he climbed onto the bed and leaned down, sliding his hand beneath me.

“Oh,” I gasped as he fastened the first clamp into place. The pinch was

more than I remembered, but I didn't complain. Instead, I closed my eyes and let all that fill my mind, chasing away the chaos that wanted to return. My body jerked when the second clamp was attached, but I kept my eyes closed and drifted into what my research had referred to as subspace.

I liked it here.

All I had to think about was the dull ache in my nipples, the feel of the blanket against my knees. His palms were hot as he slid them up my legs to cup my ass, and his jeans brushed against my calves, reminding me that he was still clothed. Then his finger began making circles around my opening, light teasing touches that made me shiver.

“Stay still, sweetheart,” he warned me. “If you don't, I'll have to punish you.”

My stomach clenched. So much about this shouldn't have been turning me on, not the least of which was the thought of how he'd *punish* me. Still, I would try to do what he wanted.

I sucked in a breath as he pushed two fingers into me, each twisting stroke slow and sweet. Then he began to tug on the chain attached to the clamps, and every ripple of pleasure upward was countered by a sharp sting of pain. The two contradictory sensations twined together in my gut, burning with the sort of fire that made me writhe.

Suddenly, the hand under me was gone and coming down with surprising force. Two sharp cracks that made me cry out...then push back. For once, my brain didn't flood with the questions and doubts that would have normally come to mind. Instead, it was wonderfully quiet, full only of him and me.

“Now, sweetheart,” his voice was low in my ear, “are you going to be good?”

I nodded, skin humming.

“Good girl.” He pressed his lips against my spine. “Now, don't move.”

I stiffened as something hard brushed against a place that definitely *wasn't* my pussy, but I didn't pull away. I didn't know what Erik was using, but I shuddered as he pushed it into my ass. My muscles quivered, throbbed, and I forced myself to take slow, deep breaths. It wasn't very big, but it was definitely *there*.

He didn't ask me if I was okay, but I knew if I said the word, he'd stop. I didn't want him to stop though. I wanted more.

“Good girl.”

And then he was pushing inside me, filling me even as the motion rubbed



against whatever it was he'd inserted in my ass, creating a rough, almost harsh, sensation that I'd never felt before. Hard, deep thrusts made me cry out until I exploded, but he didn't stop, relentlessly driving me from one climax to the next.

Time and place all faded away until all I knew was the waves of pleasure he gave me. The freedom from myself.

## *Chapter Twenty-Nine*

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## TANYA

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I knew what just happened between us didn't change anything, not in the big picture. Erik still didn't do relationships, and I still couldn't keep my emotions separate enough for casual sex, which meant sleeping with him again could have been a colossal mistake. I didn't let it get that far though. As soon as my legs were working again, I headed for the shower. An awkward morning-after type of conversation wouldn't be quite so bad if I had a chance to clear my head, and if I gave Erik some time alone to think as well.

What he'd been thinking while I was in the shower, I didn't know because as soon as I came out of the bathroom, he went in. I told myself it was for the best when I heard the water turn back on because that meant I could be dressed for whatever happened next. It didn't matter how intimate the two of us had been not more than twenty minutes ago, talking to Erik while I was only wearing a towel wasn't exactly comfortable.

I pulled on my favorite pair of jeans and a nice short-sleeved peasant blouse, then worked my wet hair into a braid. I could face Erik like this, and I'd be ready to go as soon as he heard something about my father.

Or if I needed to make a quick getaway.

Erik had promised that he'd protect me from the men who were threatening me, but I wasn't stupid. I knew better than most that while promises like that could be meant in the moment, they rarely lasted. If my own father hadn't been able to keep his promise to come back for me, I certainly wouldn't hold Erik to something similar.

A phone rang, and I jumped. I had it in my hand before I realized that it

was Erik's phone, not mine. The name on the screen, however, was one of the people he'd mentioned as being an FBI contact. I snuffed out the twinge of guilt I felt as I answered the phone.

“Hello?”

“Erik?” The man's voice was deep, the sort that would echo in a large room.

“This is Tanya Lacey,” I said. “Erik can't come to the phone right now.”

I flushed as I said it even though I knew there was no way the agent could know that Erik was showering, or why.

“Ah, Miss Lacey. You're the daughter.”

What felt like a lump of ice formed in my stomach. “Yes. Jefferson Lacey is my father.”

“I'm Agent Kinney with the FBI. Your father's safe.”

I sat down on the edge of the bed, legs unable to hold me. Tears spilled down my cheeks as I closed my eyes. He was okay.

The agent continued, “We found him and were able to arrest the men involved. There didn't appear to be anything more than a few superficial injuries, but we took him to the hospital just in case. We probably have another two or three arrests to make, but the men in custody are already asking for deals. And you can let Erik know that we didn't need to pay the ransom, so he can pick up the money at our office.”

“What hospital?” My voice shook, but the agent didn't comment on it as he answered my question. I thanked him and ended the call.

My dad was safe. He had a lot of explaining to do, and I was still furious with him for leaving me, but none of that translated into wanting him dead or hurt. I wanted him to have the chance to make things right, and now he had it.

I needed to see him.

I stood, glancing at the bathroom door. I could wait until Erik was done so he could go with me. It'd only be a few more minutes, I was sure. Once I told him that everything was okay, I knew he'd rush so I didn't have to wait.

He'd done so much for me, and I didn't even know all of it. Like the ransom. Seventy thousand dollars, and he hadn't even mentioned it. It killed me to think about walking away from him now, but I knew it was for the best.

I found a piece of paper and wrote a quick note, thanking him and telling him that my father was safe. I added what the agent said about the money, then paused, debating if I should say anything else. No, I didn't need him to

think I expected anything else. He just needed to know I was grateful, and that I was safe. After a moment more, I set it on the bed where I knew he'd see it. I grabbed my purse, slipped on a pair of shoes, and left, just in time. I heard the shower turn off as I closed the door. If I hurried, I'd be downstairs and hailing a cab before he finished reading my note and thought to come after me.

If he thought of following me at all. I wouldn't blame him if he walked away and decided he never wanted to see me again.

I pushed the thought from my mind as I hurried down to the lobby. My dad needed to be my focus right now, not whether or not there was something more to Erik and me. I'd waited more than ten years to find out what happened to my father. That had to take precedence.

The ride to the hospital brought back all of the anxiety that my time with Erik had eliminated, so by the time the taxi stopped in front of the building, my nerves were stretched to the breaking point. I managed to pay the driver and get inside, but I felt like I was barely holding it together. The woman at the desk pointed me in the right direction, and it was all I could do not to run. A pair of uniformed officers stood at a door, telling me which room I wanted without needing to look at numbers.

"I'm Tanya Lacey," I said as I got close enough for them to hear me. "Agent Kinney told me that I could come see my father."

The men exchanged glances, then one shrugged. "Kinney's in there, so it's his ass or hers."

I ignored them as I stepped inside. A tall, broad-shouldered man stood at the foot of a hospital bed, but I barely glanced at him. All my focus was on the man in the bed. I'd been a child the last time I'd seen him, and he'd always seemed larger than life to me. As I'd gotten older, and my good memories of him had been tainted with the bitterness and anger and hurt that had come with knowing he'd left me, I still saw him through a child's eyes.

He looked older than I knew he was. Early fifties, but he could've been nearly a decade more than that. His hair was still the same dark blond I remembered, but it was thin, receding. I'd gotten my eyes from him, and they hadn't changed either. But he was smaller than I remembered. Probably only two inches taller than me, and so thin.

As I stepped closer, I could smell the familiar scent of tobacco and cheap aftershave. He'd never smoked around me, but he'd never given it up completely either. I wondered if he smoked inside wherever his new home

was.

“Tanya?” His voice was hoarser than it had been on the phone. “Is that you, honey?”

“Yeah, Dad.” The last word wavered. “It’s me.”

“I’ll come back later, Jefferson,” Agent Kinney excused himself and left without another word.

I pulled a chair over to the bed, unsure of where things were going to go from here. All those years, I hadn’t let myself wonder what I’d say to him when I saw him again. I was starting to wish I had.

“I’m so sorry.” He held out his hand, but the expression on his face said he didn’t expect me to take it. “I know I don’t deserve to be forgiven, and I will spend the rest of my life hating myself for putting you in danger.”

I wanted to hold his hand, to have things go back to the way they had been before he’d left, but I knew that couldn’t happen. Maybe, one day, we’d get to a place where I could feel like he was my father again, but we weren’t there yet.

And if we were ever going to get there, there was something I needed to know first.

“If those men hadn’t threatened me, would you have ever contacted me?”

His hand fell back into his lap as he turned his head away. That in itself was an answer, but I still waited for him to say it.

“I don’t know.” His voice was quiet enough that I had to lean closer to hear him. “I missed you so much, but I kept telling myself that you were better off without me in your life. That I needed to wait until I’d gotten my life together, but the longer I was away from you, the more I had to make up for.”

“I didn’t need you to be perfect,” I said. “I just needed *you*.” Everything I’d held back came bubbling up to the surface, but there was one particular thing I needed him to know. “Do you have any idea how much you screwed me up? I have no family. No friends. No relationships. I spend my entire life not trusting anyone other than myself because if my own parents could walk out on me, how could I believe that anyone else wouldn’t? That anyone could love me enough to stick around?”

With each word I said, the look of pain on his face increased, but I didn’t stop until I’d said my piece. He deserved to know that it wasn’t just about a shitty childhood. What he’d done had changed the person I was supposed to be. If I’d been raised in a relatively normal home, with at least one parent

who'd stuck with me, I probably still would've been reserved and shy, but I could've at least trusted people enough to have at least one close friend, one relationship.

“I thought I was doing the right thing by you,” he said. “It's not an excuse, and I won't lie and say that it was all selfless on my part, but I do love you. I never stopped.”

I sniffled, rubbed the back of my hands against my eyes, then took a slow breath. “I didn't come here to fight with you,” I said. “I came to make sure you were okay. Because no matter how pissed I am at you, I don't wish you dead.”

He managed a watery smile. “That's good to know.” He raised his head to look at me. “I'm not going to push you. I'll leave it completely up to you, but I would like to be a part of your life.”

I held up a hand. “That isn't something I can decide now. It's – it's too much.”

“I understand,” he said and swallowed hard. “But unless you tell me to leave, I'm not going away again.”

I nodded, unsure what I was supposed to say to that. Hell, I had no clue what to *think* about all of this.

“By the way, I think you're wrong about one thing.” His smile was small, sad. “You have found someone who loves you.”

I frowned at him. “What are you talking about?”

“Agent Kinney told me how the FBI found me, as well as the lengths your boyfriend went to trying to ensure I'd be okay.”

“I don't have a boyfriend,” I countered. “Erik's just...a friend.”

The look my dad gave me spoke volumes. “Honey, I may not know anything about your life, but I know men. And no man goes to the lengths your young man went to for just a friend. I know I don't deserve your trust on much – on anything really – but on this...trust me. I don't care what he calls it, but shelling out seventy thousand dollars and calling in all those favors, that's love.”

My heart gave an unsteady thump.

Was it?

I stood in front of Erik's door and reminded myself that if I never put myself out there, I'd never know whether or not my dad was right. If I walked away,

I'd lose Erik. If I knocked on that door, maybe he'd tell me that he'd only been helping out a friend...but maybe I could finally have something more.

I raised my hand, but the door opened before I could knock. Erik's smile almost knocked the breath out of me.

“Come in.”

He stepped aside, and I let him lead me into the living room. We sat next to each other on the couch, close enough for me to want to touch him, but far enough that we weren't.

“Your dad's okay?”

I nodded. “I needed to see him. That's the only reason I left—”

“I understood.” He put his hand on mine, fingers curling around in a gesture that felt so natural that it gave me a burst of boldness.

“My dad said something...about you.”

His eyebrows went up. “You talked about me?”

“Not exactly.” I licked my lips, trying to decide how to say this. “Your friend, Agent Kinney, told him what you did for me.”

“It was nothing.” Erik's fingers flexed around my hand.

“Was it?” The question slipped out, and I refused to call it back. “Here's the thing, Erik, I don't take risks. I'm not impulsive. But when I'm with you...I know you said that it was just sex between us, but what you did for me...”

His lips brushed against mine, the light touch stopping whatever I was going to say next.

“I'm sorry,” he said as he slid his hands up my arms. “I never should have said anything like that.”

My heart squeezed. “We never said what we were doing was anything else,” I reminded him.

He leaned closer until his forehead rested on mine. “And I was a fool not to claim you the moment you sat down at my table. Hell, the second you walked into that restaurant, I knew I wanted you, and that I didn't want anyone else to have you.”

I grabbed the front of his shirt to stop my hands from shaking. He was saying all the right things, and I desperately wanted to believe him.

“Do you still want to...*claim* me?” I couldn't look at him as I asked the question.

He cupped my chin, raised my head until his eyes locked with mine. “Fuck. Yes.”

I smiled, my heart swelling. “You do?”



This kiss was brief, but fierce. “You're mine, sweetheart. For as long as you'll have me.” He ran his fingers through my hair, the touch as possessive as the words.

“I hope you mean that,” I said, putting my hand on his jaw. “Because I intend to hold on to you for a long time.”

“I mean it.” His eyes blazed blue fire. “You're my muse, and I'm not giving you up.”

As he kissed me, I could feel that he meant every word. He would never hurt me. I was his. And he was mine.

## *Chapter Thirty*

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## ERIK

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*I* still couldn't believe that this was my life.

*Heat of the Sun* was a huge hit. The movie rights had sold just weeks after its premiere, and it was in the last stages of post-production right now, with a release date of Valentine's Day. My second book, *The Muse*, had spent five weeks at number one on the *New York Times* Bestseller List and was still in the top twenty after all these months. I was currently in final talks for it to be made into a movie as well. It would've been sold already if I hadn't been pushing for a bit more creative control than I'd had over *Heat of the Sun*. I loved my first book, but *The Muse* was so much more personal that I didn't want to take the chance they'd fuck it up.

Tanya made a sound in her sleep and burrowed closer to my side. I tightened my embrace, fingers moving in soothing circles between her shoulder blades in a gesture that had become automatic, though no less sincere. We'd been together more than a year and a half, and there were times I felt like I needed to pinch myself because this exquisite woman couldn't possibly be mine.

I glanced at the clock on the bedside table but didn't feel any need to rush. We were on Christmas vacation, and we'd both agreed that we'd relax. The need to get away from everything was part of the reason we were spending two full weeks at the vacation home in Aspen that I shared with my friends. They'd be coming up for New Year's Eve, but for the next few days, it was just the two of us.

A lock of hair had escaped the braid she always wore to bed to prevent her hair from being a snarled mess. I tucked the hair behind her ear and

brushed my knuckles across her cheek. We'd spent the night with each other often, but we'd only been living together for the past nine months, so waking up every morning with her in my arms was still a novelty.

I had a feeling it would be the same fifty years from now because she was the only one I pictured in my future. Her relationship with her father was on the mend, but I knew there was a part of her that continued to struggle with her fear of abandonment. One of the things I hoped for this vacation was to take away some of that. And then I'd spend the rest of my life showing her that I'd never leave her.

Her hand slid across my stomach, and my muscles tensed, body automatically responding to her touch. Her lips curved up as she shifted, and I knew she was waking up. I kissed her forehead and waited. I'd yet to be able to find the right words to describe everything I felt every morning when I was reminded that she'd chosen me.

"I like it here," she murmured as she opened her eyes. Sleep lingered in the dark depths, but it wouldn't last long.

"I do too," I said. "It was Alix's idea. Our families spent one Christmas break up here a couple years before my dad passed, and it's probably one of the best childhood memories either of us has."

"Did your sisters go too?" Tanya asked as she shifted with me so that we were more sitting than laying.

I nodded. "I think that's why it's my favorite holiday memory. Katie and Eddie came with all their kids, and Chelsea was pregnant with her youngest, so the house was nearly bursting at the seams, but no one complained." I smiled. "I was so used to things being quiet, so to suddenly have all that noise...it was nearly overwhelming, but I wouldn't have traded it for anything."

"We should have everyone here for Thanksgiving or Christmas next year," Tanya said. "I'd love to meet your sisters and their families."

"That's probably a good idea," I agreed. "Though I was thinking we could take a trip this spring to see them. They won't forgive me if I make them wait that long."

The puzzled expression on her face was my cue. I reached over to the table on my side of the bed and opened the top drawer. I knew exactly where the box was. I'd been staring at it since we'd arrived. She sucked in a breath as I pulled it out and flipped it open with my thumb.

Her eyes were wide as I looked down at her, her cheeks flushed.

“Tanya, you are my friend, my lover, and my muse. Now I want to know if you'll be my wife as well.”

My heart thudded against my ribcage as I waited for her answer.

Instead of reaching for the ring, she put her hand on my cheek, her thumb brushing against the corner of my mouth.

“Yes.”

And with that one little word, she made my entire world fall into place. Then she raised herself up to kiss me, and the world didn't matter. She was mine. Forever. And I was hers, just like I had been from the moment I laid eyes on her.

My muse.

*The End*

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M.S. PARKER  
CASSIE WILD

**MARRIED**  
*a*  
**Stripper**

PART ONE

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## BOOK DESCRIPTION

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Senator's daughter, Piety Van Allen, wakes up in Las Vegas with no memory of the previous night's escapes. Not only does she find a naked stranger in her bed, but when she learns that she's now married to the handsome Australian stripper from *Flames Down Under*, panic erupts.

However, her best friend, Astra, comes up with a plan that could solve everything...or cause even more problems.

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# **PART ONE**

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# *Chapter One*

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## PIETY

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*M*y head.

*Shit...my head.*

I had a concussion once, but it hadn't hurt like this. Moaning, I pulled a pillow over my head and prayed for oblivion. Or death. Right now, I was willing to take either one.

The pounding inside my skull only got worse, and as the bed shifted under me, my belly started to slosh around, making me feel nauseated too. That was just *lovely*.

The bed shifted again, and I snapped, "Would you be still?"

"Sorry," a rough voice muttered.

A rough, deep sexy voice.

Somehow, that fact managed to penetrate the fog of pain and exhaustion, and I tugged the pillow an inch lower. It didn't help. It actually made things worse because some moron – probably me – had forgotten to close the curtains last night and now the piercing bright light of a Las Vegas morning was trying to singe my retinas. But I needed to know why I'd just heard a *man's* voice in my room.

No, in my *bed*.

There shouldn't *be* a man's voice in my room.

Or anywhere in my vicinity.

I tugged the pillow lower.

Nope.

A little lower.

A disgruntled grumble came from my left, and I turned my head.

Blond hair, sun-streaked and ruffled, hid half his face, but there was no denying one simple fact.

There was most definitely a naked man just inches beside me.

And I sure as hell didn't know him.

Yelping, I half jumped out of the bed, but fell on my ass as the blankets refused to come with me. They were tangled around his body, hanging on him for long moments before finally coming free.

I scrambled backward and clambered to my feet just as he shoved upward onto his elbows, looking around with a surly snarl.

Oh. Wow.

He was...oh. Wow.

And naked.

Oh. Wow.

"Who the hell are you?" I blurted, my hangover momentarily forgotten as I found myself staring into a pair of beautiful, pale blue eyes.

He blinked, the irritation in his eyes fading, replaced by the same confusion I felt. "I..." Thick lashes, black and dusted with gold on the tips, fell over those amazing eyes, but even that couldn't hide one plain and simple fact – he was checking me out the same way I'd just checked him out.

Immediately, my nipples tightened, stabbing into the sheet I held clutched to my breasts.

"Ah, the name's Kaleb," he said softly and thrust a hand through his unruly hair.

A shiver raced down my spine as he spoke. An accent. I was such a sucker for an accent. "You..." I swallowed and told myself to get a grip. "You're Australian. Sydney?"

A thick blond brow shot up. "Good ear. Most Yanks wouldn't recognize the difference between somebody from Sydney versus somebody from Perth. Spent much time there?"

"Um, no." With a weak smile, I shrugged. "My...family travels a lot. Or they used to." I shrugged, not wanting to get into any of that. Besides, I had other things on my mind. Like why he was in my room. Although *that* was obvious. He was naked. I was naked. I reached up to push my hair back. Sunlight glinted off something, and I froze.

"Oh." Swallowing nervously, I stared at the gaudy thing on my left hand. "Oh, *shit*."

I glared at him, only to see him standing by the side of the bed, staring

down at something I didn't think was his toes.

What in the hell was he doing? Admiring himself?

He reached down and understanding dawned, mostly because I saw the empty condom wrapper on the nightstand. Blood rushed to my face, and my head started to spin.

No. Oh, no.

"A dream," I whispered. "This is all a crazy dream."

I waited for the sexy Aussie to tell me otherwise or maybe come over and pick me up, kiss me...something that would convince me that maybe this *was* a dream. He was too busy walking toward the bathroom, treating me to an excellent view of his perfect ass – not an image I could easily look away from.

"Not happening," I said and pinched myself hard enough to hurt. Things were looking more and more insane by the minute.

In desperation, I rushed for the door that opened into the adjoining suite.

The lights were still off, and it was thankfully dim in there. Astra, my best friend, must have remembered to close the blinds, the wench.

I fumbled through the dark living room area and found my way into the bedroom. The blinds were pulled there too. I was tempted to just lay down and curl up next to her, but I needed to know what was going on.

She was snoring softly, and when I shook her, she swatted at my hand. "Not today, baby," she mumbled.

"Wake up, Astra. It's me."

She swatted at me again. "Oomph."

"Astra!" I shook her harder. When that brought no response, I went to the windows and grabbed a handful of curtains, jerking them open. She screeched behind me.

"Bitch! Close those damn curtains!"

"Wake up and talk to me," I said, ignoring her. If I could handle the marching band in my skull, she could handle the light.

She cracked an eye open, bloodshot and tired. Okay, she probably had a marching band of her own.

But unlike *me*, Astra didn't get totally wasted and forget things when she got drunk. "What happened last night?" I asked, holding up my hand, wiggling my fingers to give her something to focus on.

A wide smile curled her lips, and it even went to her eyes, bloodshot and tired as they were. "What do you mean, what happened? Forgotten already,

sweetcheeks?”

“Astra,” I said slowly, praying for patience. “I’m going to kill you, chop you into tiny pieces, and toss the remains out all over the desert. You’ll be eaten by scavengers before your family even knows you’re missing.”

“Oh...savage.” She looked unfazed and sat up, lazily stretching her arms over her chest. The skinny strapped silk nightshirt she wore barely managed to cover her considerable...assets.

I wouldn’t have had so much trouble. But then again, her breasts were probably the only thing holding the shirt up, with its deep vee neckline and high cut sides. Astra had one hell of a body.

That nightshirt would've gaped down to my belly button. My body was strong and firm in all the right places, but an abundance of cleavage was one thing God had not blessed me with. I was smart, attractive. Confident too. I also had ridiculously wealthy parents who tried to control my life, but no excessive boobs in sight.

The man upstairs had also seen fit to give me a best friend who was ridiculously insane. She sat on the edge of the bed, grinning at me even though I suspected she was every bit as hungover as I was.

That was bad.

Very bad.

If I got too drunk, things got a bit hazy for me – okay, a *lot* hazy – but Astra could pack it away like a sailor and not forget a thing.

“What are you grinning at?” I waved my hand in her face, making light flash off the cheap plastic ring with its gaudy fake diamond. “And what the hell is this?”

“Isn’t it fantastic? I had to spend like five bucks getting it out of that stupid bubble gum machine after I conned some guy into selling me the quarters. I had to flash him a look down my shirt.”

She leaned backed on the bed, her weight braced on her hands. I stared at her. “What are you–?”

I didn’t get to finish because she blathered on. “I’ll tell you what, those things are rigged. They’re even worse than the slot machines. I got so many stupid tattoos. I don’t know what I’m going to do with them.” She shrugged. “I guess I’ll give them to my cousin. Or maybe one of the kids down at the shelter back home.”

I shoved my hand through my hair. “Forget the tattoos!” I waved my hand at her again, the ring flashing at me mockingly. “This! Explain.”

“Wow. You really don’t remember anything?” She laughed and got up. Wearing nothing but the nightshirt and a skimpy pair of low cut panties, she came over to me and looped an arm around my neck. “Sweetheart, that handsome hunk of man flesh from Down Under...”

She paused dramatically, arching her brows as she waited.

“What?” I demanded, ready to shake her.

“He’s your husband.” She winked at me and spun away, pausing to stretch before she picked up a robe and tossed it at me. “Here. Put this on. Toga parties are so...college.”

The robe hit my chest and fell to the floor.

Gaping at her, I sank down on the edge of the bed while my brain struggled to process her words.

*Husband.*

That was the word she used. I’d heard her correctly, I think. But...maybe not. “Astra, what did you just say?” My voice came out in a weak whisper, not quite the calm and steady tone I’d been shooting for.

“You got married, girl!” She laughed, sounded delighted. “It’s crazy, the things that can happen in Vegas. Man, I love this city.”

This was a joke. It had to be a joke. But my heart was racing, and my face felt strangely hot. Pinpricks seemed to dance all up and down my spine, and my head was spinning, but it had nothing to do with a hangover.

“You can’t be serious. You’re joking, right?” I gave her a look of sheer, hopeful desperation. She had to be joking. Had to.

Astra smiled, and this time, it was a little less Mad Hatter and a bit more reassuring. “Piety, babe, it was your idea.”

“No.” Shaking my head emphatically, I said, “No. No, no, no...I get a little reckless, sure, but this has *Astra Traore* written all over it.”

“Okay...well.” She poked out her lower lip and shrugged. “Maybe you made a joke, and I thought it was funny, and we got to talking about it. But you were all in!”

“Why would I go *all in* about marrying a stranger!” I wanted to scream. Or maybe laugh hysterically. My belly revolted, and another thought occurred to me. I just might be sick. Where was the damn bathroom? I knew where it was on my side of the suite, but in here? Thinking was just too damn hard right now, but I didn’t want to walk back to my room.

*He was in there.*

That beautiful, gorgeous – what had Astra called him? – hunk of man

flesh. A beautiful piece of man flesh. Too beautiful.

Frazzled, I stared at the floor. The robe caught my eye, and I picked it up, pulling it on before twisting the sheet into a ball. Then I looked up at my best friend. “Since you seem to have a clear grasp of the situation, why don’t you tell me why I supposedly married this guy?”

“There’s no supposedly about it.” She shrugged and sat down next to me. “You married him. We’ve got it on video, and we’re going to upload it onto YouTube.”

YouTube...

“You’re nuts. You’re *crazy*. My parents will freak out. Hell, this might kill my dad.” Silas Van Allen just might have a heart attack. His precious daughter getting married to some stranger in Las Vegas? I laughed shakily. “Well, we *did* talk about finding a way to get him off my ass about *settling down*.”

“Exactly!” Astra beamed at me.

Rising to my feet, I pointed a finger at her. “Don’t give me this crap about it being my idea. Maybe I made a joke, but how drunk was I? And how drunk were you?”

Astra looked hurt. “What? Don’t you think you’re capable of something this dastardly and brilliant?”

“How about *insane*?” I flung a hand toward the other suite of rooms. “That’s a human being over there. Apparently, we went and decided to do something just to screw with my dad, and we’re dragging him into it. You know what my dad is like!”

“Oh, chill out, PS.”

I made a face at the nickname. “Don’t tell me to chill out. I *can’t*. I’m *freaking* out.” Hearing movement next door, I looked at Astra helplessly. “What do I do?” I whispered.

“Oh, honey.” She came toward me and wrapped an arm around my shoulders. “Relax. Kaleb was all in with the idea once we explained how tight-assed your daddy is.” She stood up and held out a hand. “Come on.”

I stared at her waving fingers, wondering what she wanted me to do.

“What?”

“We should go talk to him.” She smiled again and took my hand, trying to pull me after her.

Shaking my head, I remained where I was. “What kind of idiot Justice of the Peace would marry two people who are obviously drunk? Considering

how my head feels, I must have been walking into walls.”

“Not quite.” She gave me a smile of sympathy. “You maintained *really* well. And as to the JP? You flashed enough money. You do that, most people will bend the rules a little bit, especially for a Congressman's daughter.”

Groaning, I dropped my face into my hands. “Great. Just great.” I turned into a lush after two days in Las Vegas and had also lost touch with my inner moral compass – *bribing* a Justice of the Peace? “I’m turning into my parents. Oh, shit. What if I’m turning into my *mother*?”



## *Chapter Two*

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## KALEB

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“Would you be still?”

The voice was husky and soft, straight out of a porn flick, and I rolled toward it, seeking out the warmth and scent of a woman. Sexy and sweet, it went straight to my dick, which was already doing its morning salute.

“Sorry,” I muttered.

I was about ready to reach for her when a high-pitched yelp had me jerking up in bed. “What’s—?”

The *wrong* got caught in my throat at the sight of her. I don’t think she even heard me anyway. She was too busy wrapping herself in a sheet and gaping at me. After a second, she snapped her jaw shut. I clenched mine so it wouldn’t fall open.

“Who the hell are you?” She stared at me, her big, dark blue eyes wide and startled.

“Ah, the name’s Kaleb.”

“You...you’re Australian. Sydney?”

“Good ear.” *Talk. Act human. Don’t stare at her damn tits.* “Most Yanks wouldn’t recognize the difference between somebody from Sydney versus somebody from Perth. Spent much time there?”

“Um, no. My...family travels a lot. Or they used to.”

I wasn’t having much luck not staring at those perfect, perky breasts, so I climbed out of bed and looked around. My head was still cloudy, and it hurt like hell. What happened last night? What time was it?

A thousand sticky thoughts pushed through my head, but I couldn’t

untangle them.

I could do one thing – use the damn bathroom.

“Fuck,” I muttered.

I didn't think she heard. She was swearing about something too, but I didn't think it had anything to do with the rubber that was in a rather precarious position on my semi-erect penis.

Grabbing it, I looked up and caught sight of her staring at me.

“A dream.” She closed her eyes as she whispered it. “This is all a crazy dream.”

Not likely. If it was a dream, I would have been balls-deep inside her, not standing there with a bloody headache and a crumpled up condom in my fist.

I stalked into the bathroom, desperate to get away from the woman for a minute. I had to think.

I just needed a minute.

Once I was in the bathroom, I shut the door and leaned back. “What the fuck happened?” I muttered.

Spying a waste bin, I tossed the rubber into it and tended to business.

The nagging sense that I'd forgotten something – something important – tugged at my brain as I moved to the sink to wash up, but my mind stayed annoyingly blank, and I finally had to admit that it wouldn't do any good to just stand in this bathroom while that raven-haired beauty stayed out there, probably getting more and more frustrated.

As I washed my hands, I stared at my reflection in the mirror. I looked hung over and pretty damn shitty. That wouldn't go over well with the new boss.

New boss.

“Fuck.”

I grabbed a towel and wrapped it around my waist before leaving the room. Clock! Where was a damn clock? The woman, along with another, came through the adjoining suite's door at the same time.

I still didn't see a clock. “What time is it?” I said.

“We...um...” The girl from the bed looked at her friend, a shorter, cute thing with curls, curves and a wide smile. “We need to talk.”

“I can't,” I barked. “I'm going to miss my bus if I haven't already. What time is it?”

I couldn't lose this job. There was too much depending on it.

Spying my clothes in a tangle on the floor, I grabbed them and almost

took them into the bathroom, but for right now, modesty be damned. Without another thought, I dropped the towel and grabbed my jeans, jabbing one foot then the other into the legs as the women gaped at me. *Yeah, commando, ladies.*

“Look, you need to slow it down,” she said, giving her friend a desperate look.

“I *can't*, sweetheart.” I grabbed my shirt, and something thudded onto the floor. My phone. When I grabbed it, the screen lit up, showing the time.

“Dammit! I’ll barely make it.”

“Wait,” she cried out, cutting in front of me when I would have sat down to put my shoes on.

She looked as desperate as I felt. Maybe she had a job riding on the next few minutes too.

I had doubts about that though. The room we were in was the kind I’d expect to see given to a princess – or a queen. That was what she made me think of – royalty, even wearing that robe and a worried expression. It was in the way she carried herself, so haughty and above it all.

And I didn’t have time to think about how *proper* she might be. “Anyway, I hate to dash, but I have to go.” I cut around her and sat down, shoving my feet into my shoes. I grabbed my shirt and pulled it on as I stood up.

She was right there, not two inches away when my head cleared the material.

“You need to be quiet and listen.” She poked me in the chest with her index finger.

A gaudy, fake ring glinted up at me.

“Nice taste in jewelry, love.”

“I’m so glad you think so,” she said, giving me a sarcastic smile. She held her hand up and waved it back and forth in front of my face. “It’s a damn *wedding* ring.”

“Wedding...” I blinked. “Fuck me, are you *married*?”

If she was, she needed a better man. One who’d put a real ring on her finger and not that horrible piece of junk.

She blinked at me, shaking her head. “You’re beautiful, but maybe you’re not too bright,” she said slowly.

I stiffened instinctively at the insult before reminding myself it didn’t matter what some prima donna American babydoll thought of me. I had

enough to deal with anyway.

“Aw, my feelings are hurt,” I said, forcing out a mock sigh. “Anyway, I’ve got to run. I’ve got a new job I’m starting, and if I’m late, I’m screwed. You can...look, I’m sorry. I was drunk, and I didn’t know you were married. Doubt it will make much difference, but tell your husband I’m sorry.”

“Fine,” she said to my back. “The man I slept with last night wants me to tell you he’s sorry.”

I froze. One hand on the door knob, I stared at the pale, gleaming oak and tried to make sense of those words. *The man I slept with...*

Slowly, I turned around and stared at her. “Is that supposed to be a joke?”

She had crossed her arms over her chest as stood there, glaring at me, her chin in the air. “Do I *look* like I’m laughing?”

No. She looked like she was torn between crying and hitting something. I could sympathize with the feeling.

“You...” I looked back at the ring, then at her. “Are you telling me...?”

Her lip curled into a snarl. “We got hitched last night, *sweetheart*.”

“That’s not possible,” I said, shaking my head. “I don’t even know your name.”

“That’s what I said. But my friend assures me the wedding *did* happen. She recorded it. We’ve got a license...somewhere. As to our names...” She came toward me, her right hand outstretched.

Good, if I had to look at the awful plastic trinket another moment...

Slowly, I took her hand, staring into those gorgeous eyes.

“I’m Piety,” she murmured.

“Kaleb.” Then I laughed, feeling like the entire world had flipped upside down. “Look, I’m sorry, but I...I still have to go. If I lose this job, I’m screwed.”

## *Chapter Three*

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## PIETY

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*I* finally convinced him that we're married, and he's worried about losing his job.

I could have rolled my eyes, but then I reminded myself I wasn't someone who'd ever had to worry about money before. When you didn't have to do that, it was easy to dismiss things that seemed relatively simple.

"We have to figure this out," I said. "I mean, your boss will understand, right?"

He gave me a tight look and shot another glance at his phone – checking the time. He swore and shoved it into his pocket. "Too late now. The bus leaves in two minutes. I'll never make it." A scowl twisted his features and he spun away, swearing under his breath.

I took a step forward, only to stop myself. I'd been about to comfort him.

I didn't even *know* this guy, and I wanted to make him feel better.

"How in the hell did this happen?" he demanded, still facing away from us.

"Well..." Astra laughed a little, as she gave him a nervous look.

I had a bad feeling we might have just messed up his life even more than mine. Judging by the look she gave me, Astra was thinking the same thing.

"It's pretty funny, really. We were all drinking. You were at the bar, and you were cute, so I dragged Piety over to sit down and talk with you. We all got to talking, and we told you about how Piety's parents are *serious* control freaks and that they're pushing her toward this guy who is *so* fucking lame. He gets excited talking about spreadsheets." She paused as the stranger –

Kaleb, I reminded myself – turned around. “Spreadsheets!”

“I’m still waiting to hear how talking about spreadsheets got two strangers married.”

“Yeah. Me too.” I rubbed a hand over my belly because I was still feeling seriously nauseated and my head was spinning. Feeling his eyes on me, I glanced his way and stopped rubbing, reaching up to clutch at the neck of my robe instead. He wasn’t gawking at me or anything, but there was something about the way he watched me that was unsettling at best. “Seriously, I don’t get how I could have thought this was a good idea, drunk or not.”

“But you *did*.” Astra grabbed my shoulders and shook me a little. I groaned, batting her hands away.

“Stop it.” I sat down on the edge of the couch and glanced from him to her. “Explain why I thought this was a good idea.”

“I did–”

“Astra.” Giving her a hard look, I waited.

“Fine.” She huffed out a breath and then gave the hottie from Down Under a brilliant smile. “See, her parents are the *most* uptight people you’ve ever met, and they are constantly pushing her toward somebody who could be a clone of her dad. In character, not physically, because that could be gross. But he is a stuffed shirt and so uptight. They keep nagging her–”

Kaleb held up a hand, and Astra went politely quiet. She beamed at him, and he returned the smile, although his was a lot less...excited. “Look, this is all fascinating, and I assume I should know something about my...wife’s family. But none of this is answering anything.”

“It *is*,” Astra said emphatically. “Just give me a moment. “See, that’s why we’re here. They were driving her crazy, and after they tried to set her up on some sort of crazy couples thing with this killjoy, we knew we had to get away for a while.”

“And we came here,” I said, sighing. “Astra, you’re not exactly explaining.” I took a deep breath. “I remember going down to the bar for drinks. Then...nothing until this morning when I opened my eyes and saw this ring. So explain *this* part of things.”

“You thought it would be funny.” Astra sighed and moved over to sit beside me. She took my hand and then looked over to Kaleb. “You were on the stool next to us. There was a woman...she was flirting with you and pushing really hard. Piety could tell you weren’t into it, so she told her to lay off.”



Kaleb shook his head as if trying to shake the memory back into it. “What happened next?”

“Well, the woman got pissy and asked her what the problem was. Piety said you were her fiancé. You laughed about it. When she got up and stormed off, we asked you to join us.” Astra shrugged. “We got to talking and...well, Piety said it was too bad her dad hadn’t been there. If he’d heard her telling some chick that you two were engaged, even though it was just a joke, he’d have a heart attack. And I told you guys you should do it – marry him. I’d videotape it, and we could upload it to YouTube.”

I rubbed my forehead, feeling a pounding headache that had nothing to do with alcohol.

“Why, oh, why would I think this was a good idea?” I muttered.

“Because we were drunk and stupid, and you were pissed off.” Astra looked over at Kaleb. “You were pissed off about something too. I don’t know what because you wouldn’t say. But you loosened up a bit, and we all got to laughing and having a good time.”

Kaleb raised an eyebrow. “A good time still doesn’t equal getting married.”

“I...” I grimaced and then looked at Astra before meeting Kaleb’s eyes again. “My dad is a senator. Silas Van Allan from Philadelphia. He’s planning on running for president, and my mom...well, she’s already mentally redecorating the White House. They’ve got ideas for how their lives will be, and they’re doing everything they can to make sure *I* do everything *I* can to help expedite his career and improve his image.”

“Come on, they can’t be all that bad,” he said, crooking a smile at me.

My belly flipped at the sight of it. A dimple, one that deepened into a wider groove as his smile grew, caused my heart to stutter a few beats. Dimples. That smile. That accent. Well, if I was going to go and marry a stranger, I sure as hell picked a hot one.

Then my brain locked in on what he said.

“Oh, they’re worse.” Heaving out a sigh, I looked over toward the window, not seeing anything around me but the life they were trying to force me into. “They hate my job, hate the things I enjoy. Sometimes I think they only had me because they thought about all the photo ops I’d present them with. That and everybody *knows* that a family man is much more trustworthy.”

Rolling my eyes, I managed to smile at him.

“And that’s it. Somehow my shitty mood translated into *hey, let’s do something stupid*. We’re in Vegas, after all. Right, Kaleb?” I hesitated before asking, “It is Kaleb?”

He gave me a short nod, still looking distracted. He pulled out his phone again, checked it.

“Look, this job...I’ll call you a cab, pay for it. We can discuss this again later?” I hated how much he was stressing over this job. And I could tell he was. He’d only checked his phone like...oh, ten times in the past five minutes.

“No such luck, Piety.” His accent gave my name a sharper sound, but I liked it. His smile was sharp too, full of edges that might cut. “The bus I needed to catch was leaving the city. They’re gone by now.”

“Oh.” My belly dropped a little more, and I rubbed my temple. “Okay, I’ll find some other way to get you where you need to go. We’ll rent a car or something. Just what is it you do?”

“I’m with Flames Down Under.” He said it calmly, staring me straight in the face, but there was a daring glint in his eye.

I couldn’t understand why. That meant nothing to me. “And just what is Flames Down Under?”

“Oh...oh!” Astra squealed and started to laugh, clapping. “This is *perfect*. Piety, it’s *perfect*. Really!”

She laughed even harder, all but bent over now.

“What’s so funny?” I glared at her while Kaleb moved over to the window and stared outside. Probably searching for his bus.

“Flames Down Under. Honey, he’s a stripper! Flames Down Under is kinda...well, they are almost like the Chippendales, but from Australia...and way hotter, if you ask me.”

Oh, shit.

My face went hot, and I shoved upright, glaring at Astra. “You think this is funny? My dad is going to *freak*. Dammit, Astra, stop laughing! I married a stripper! My parents are going to kill me!”

## *Chapter Four*

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## PIETY

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The second the words left my mouth, I wanted to take them back.

Appalled at myself, I looked over at him and said, “I’m so sorry. I mean, not that I really...it’s just...”

“It’s fine.” He made an absent, clearly distracted motion with his hand, his gaze once more returning to the window, his jaw locked tight.

“I really am sorry. I imagine you work pretty damn hard and I—”

“It’s *fine*,” he said, his accent doing nothing to soften the word, and this time, he looked at me. His jaw was tight, but there was something about the way his eyes met mine that made me think he had other things on his mind besides my unintended insult.

“Are you...um...well...I know you’re worried about the job, but I swear, I’ll get you wherever you need to be.”

He shook his head, his expression pinched. “I need that fucking job. I need the *money*. It’s...never mind.”

Something flashed in his pale eyes, a mix of fury and helplessness, and my belly twisted into a hundred ugly little knots. Something was going on. I didn’t know what it was, but I had a feeling it was bad. And I wanted to help him. Stranger, husband, it didn’t matter. No one deserved to look like that.

“Hey!” Astra clapped her hands, drawing our attention to her. “I’ve got an idea. Kaleb, this could really help you out.”

The look in her eyes was sly, and her smile had that devious slant to it that I knew all too well. Shit.

I almost told her I didn’t want to hear it, but sometimes her ideas *did* have

merit. Still, I was more than a little suspicious as I studied her. She was practically rubbing her hands together in glee, she looked so pleased with herself, and that was never good.

“Just what is this...idea?” I asked warily.

“Hire him.” Astra moved a little closer, standing between us like a referee as she looked from me to him.

Kaleb and I stared at each other blankly.

“Hire me?”

“Hire him?”

We spoke at the same time, and the inanity of it left us both smiling awkwardly at each other. He gestured to me, and I cocked an eyebrow at my best friend. “Don’t take this wrong, Astra, but I’m not exactly the sort of woman who wants her own personal exotic dancer.”

“That’s not what I meant.” She rolled her eyes. “But for the record – you’re nuts. Why *wouldn’t* you want your own private exotic dancer?”

“Just because you want your own personal pool boy, your own masseuse, a personal shopper, your own driver...”

I rolled my eyes at her, although I was teasing. She had none of those things. She joked about it, but while we’d both been born with the proverbial silver spoon, neither of us liked being waited on or catered to non-stop. Each of us had a personal assistant, but that was simply because we couldn’t keep things straight thanks to everything our parents were constantly expecting us to keep up with.

“Look, this has all been fun, but I need to figure out how to get to my gig,” Kaleb interjected.

“We’ve already figured that out.” Astra folded her arms across her chest, looking determined. “Just at least hear me out. If you don’t want to do it, I’ll rent a car and chase down the bus myself.” She wagged her eyebrows. “I wouldn’t mind seeing *Flames Down Under* all up close and personal.”

“But–”

“Five minutes!” She moved, placing herself in front of the door, spreading her hands against it. She tossed in a bright smile and then looked at me. “Trust me, PS. It’s *way* better than just uploading the video to YouTube. You can prove to your parents that you’re done letting them dictate your life. *And* we can help Kaleb out since we went and screwed up his job.”

“As fascinating as this is, whatever you’re planning, I don’t think you can pay me what I’d be making with *Flames*,” Kaleb said, looking more and more

pissed off by the minute. “I’m the new boy and I’m still learning, but I made fifteen hundred dollars last week – American – and that doesn’t include the tips.”

I didn’t blame him for being pissed. Fifteen hundred dollars was a decent amount of money to a lot of people. Except I could do better. I didn’t know what pushed me to say anything, but to my surprise, I was the one to speak before Astra could pipe in. “I can pay more than that.”

He swung his head around, a startled expression on his face.

“I can.” I lifted a shoulder. “Granted, I don’t know just what Astra has in mind, but I can pay more than fifteen hundred a week. My assistant makes almost that.”

He started to say something else, but he stopped abruptly, shaking his head. “It doesn’t matter how much your assistant makes, unless you plan on hiring me to take her place. Look, I really need to be going.”

“Just listen.” Astra placed herself between him and the door. “Just listen to me for five minutes, and within the next half hour, Piety will *pay* you fifteen hundred, *and* we’ll make sure you get a ride to wherever your bus is heading if you decide you don’t want to do things my way.”

That caught him off guard.

Me too.

I mean, it wasn’t like I couldn’t afford it, but it was irritating when other people got free and loose with my money. From behind him, I gave Astra a dark look, then wiped it off my face before I moved to sit down on the couch.

“It’s a fair deal,” I said, keeping my voice neutral. “After all, we messed things up. We can at least rectify the situation.”

“Absolutely.”

Kaleb looked from me to her and then back. Then he shook his head. “The two of you are insane. You know that, right?”

## *Chapter Five*

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## KALEB

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*I*nsane.  
It didn't even come close.  
And I wasn't any better.

Hands braced against the shower wall, I stared down at the floor. Water dripped into my face and eyes, ran down my cheekbones and chin, then along my nose before falling to my feet.

Water pounded into me from five different angles, the pressure so high, I almost felt like I was getting a top rate massage.

There was one thing to be said for this set-up so far – the shower was top-notch.

I could stay in here for another week.

Or at least another hour or so. If I could do that, maybe things would start making sense.

Somehow between last night and now, I'd gotten married to one of the most elegant, beautiful women I'd ever met. Not to mention, she was funny and determined. And that was just from the little bit of time I'd spent with her.

And her shower...

Groaning, I angled my back so that one of the jets hit it full on, pounding away stress that felt like it had been building for years.

I needed to make some phone calls. I had to call my boss for one. Even though the bus had already left, I owed it to him – and the rest of the guys – to let them know I wouldn't be in. Not today, not any other day in the near future.



I felt like a piece of shit leaving them hanging, but even if I could get to the next tour stop, the bottom line was that Piety was offering more money. A heck of a lot more money. Once I'd heard her friend out, Piety had disappeared, and in less than twenty minutes, she'd returned with cash as promised.

But it hadn't been fifteen hundred.

It was two thousand, and she said if I helped her out, she'd pay me five *times* that.

Ten grand. The exact amount I needed.

While she was gone, I'd looked her up on my phone. It wasn't hard to find information about her. She was indeed a senator's daughter and a bit of a do-gooder. Her parents looked like they had a pair of matching sticks shoved up their asses. If they were as bad as she was letting on...

But even as doubt formed in my mind, I pushed it away. My parents were gone. It was hard to think about doing something just to piss them off although I knew I'd done it a time or two. This, well this was a bit more extreme than anything I could've thought up. Still...

Shoving away from the wall, I reached for the shampoo. I couldn't stay in here forever, as much as I was tempted. Even the toiletries smelled like money and the scent hit me hard. It reminded me of how her hair smelled.

Just that tease was enough to have my prick going hard, and I groaned, squeezing my eyes shut. I didn't need to be thinking about how damn sexy she was.

*It can't hurt...you're married.*

I ignored the taunting voice and focused on scrubbing my hair.

Piety and I were *not* married – not really. Whatever bogus marriage that had been performed between us was a sham, one that would be annulled once Piety had done whatever she needed to do to convince her parents to leave her alone.

Moving under the spray, I rinsed my hair, still trying to pretend I wasn't acutely aware of how it seemed like the scent of her surrounded me. She smelled so damn good.

*Don't think about it.*

Hard not to though. She smelled good, felt good. I bet she tasted even better.

I was already doing a cockstand, and with a vicious swear, I turned the water to cold as I finished scrubbing up. I was shivering by the time I

climbed out of the shower, but at least I wasn't about to walk out of there looking like I was ready to jump...Piety.

*My wife* had come to mind first.

"Focus, Kaleb."

Eyes closed, I pushed aside thoughts of the tempting Piety Van Allan and thought about what I needed to get done. Get my stuff from the hotel, call my boss, check in. It didn't really seem like all that much, but I still felt like the world was spinning around me.

"One thing at a time."

Once I was dressed, I reached for my phone and leaned against the marble countertop, staring at the shower stall in front of me.

I'd call my boss – or should I say *former* boss – first.

He would be pissed off, probably argumentative. And still, it was the easier call.

Another stab of guilt rose up, but I grabbed it and throttled it, shoving it deep inside a dark closet. I excelled at that. Guilt had been my best friend for a while now – a very one-sided friendship. He visited me daily, and I ignored him, pretending the little shit didn't exist and everything was fine.

On the other side of the bathroom door, I heard a bright, happy spate of laughter. That would be Astra. It suited her, that wild laugh, the name. Piety's laugh was calmer, more subtle. No reason for such a smooth, easy sound to hit me right in the gut, but it did.

Looking around the bathroom, I figured I had as much privacy now as I was going to get, so I dialed the number and waited.

"You tell me one good reason I shouldn't fire your ass," Jim Romo snapped, his smoke-roughened voice harsher than normal. He paused, taking yet another drag of his cigarette. Cancer would bypass his mean ass, looking for more fertile ground. "Come on, I'm waiting."

"I can't," I said calmly. There was no point in beating around the bush and leaving him hanging. "Something's come up, and it will be pretty much impossible for me to keep the job."

There was a faint pause, followed by a not so faint explosion. "What in the hell do you mean you're quitting? This is the thanks I get after giving you this gig?" He paused to suck in a breath. "You ungrateful piece of shit. You had no *talent*, no *skill*, but I took you on anyway. Now you're leaving me hanging."

"I'm sorry." Reaching up, I pinched the bridge of my nose. "I can't say

anything more than that. I didn't plan to leave you hanging, but there's nothing I can do. Something's come up."

I wasn't about to tell him the truth. I was already coming off like an ass. I didn't need to make it worse by telling him it'd been a bad combination of alcohol and a woman.

"Fine," he bit off. "You do whatever the hell you want, pretty boy. But don't think you can come back. I'm done with you."

The phone went dead. Lowering it, I closed my eyes. That had gone about as well as I'd expected, and I'd deserved every bit of it. Still, it was nothing compared to what I had to do next.

Eying the phone narrowly, I picked it up and swallowed the bile that had been rising up my throat ever since I woke up – and not all of it because of the hangover.

"Just get it over with," I muttered to myself.

I dialed the number and waited. One ring. Two. Three.

It went to voicemail, and I gritted my teeth, swearing silently as her voice came on the line.

*"This is Camry. You know the drill!"*

I didn't bother leaving a message.

She hadn't called back the last few times I'd left one, and I didn't really have anything new to say.

A wild hoot of laughter came from beyond the door, drawing my attention to the women waiting in the main part of the suite. Despite myself, I was drawn to the levity between the two of them. Drawn to *her*. I'd like to hear her laugh, and maybe see her smile again – not that caustic one that had flashed across her face when she spoke about her parents.

I wanted to see a real smile.

And damn what I would've given to have met her under different circumstances. Shoving away from the counter, I moved to the door and opened it. *Time to face the music...*

Silence fell, the conversation between them falling to a complete stop.

Two gorgeous women looked over at me, and I had another fleeting thought about how crazy my life had become. Not just in the past twelve hours, but in the past few weeks, the past few months.

A year ago, it had been almost boring. I surfed. I went swimming. I worked at the shop. A nice, boring routine.

That was it.

Now, I was staring at a woman I had somehow *married*, and I decided this was about as awkward as it had been the first time I'd gone out on stage. Well, maybe not quite that bad. But it was damn close.

"So..." I shoved my hands into the front pockets of my worn, faded jeans. "What do we do now?"

Piety got to her feet, her wide, sexy mouth curled into a smile that made me wish I could remember anything from last night. "Today, we're going to have fun."

"Fun?" I repeated. Running my tongue across my teeth, I debated whether or not I should say anything, but then I decided what the hell. "You've already paid me two thousand dollars. You're paying me another eight--"

"Actually, another ten. I said I'd give you five times that. That's ten."

She'd changed and showered, her hair a little damp. Her pale blue sundress showed off her long legs, and offered just enough cleavage to be tempting but not enough to be scandalous. She looked tired, but I'd be hard pressed to tell that she was suffering the same hangover I was. If I hadn't seen her earlier, I never would have guessed she'd been black-out drunk less than twelve hours ago.

Distracted by everything about her, it took me a moment to catch up with what she said. "Wait – what? You're paying me *twelve-thousand dollars*?"

"Yes." She lifted an eyebrow. "Is that a problem?"

"Yes!" Without realizing it, I'd half-yelled and lowered my voice. "No. It's just...why in the hell does this matter so much to you?"

"Wait until you meet my parents, and you'll get it." She glanced over at Astra before moving toward me. "Anyway, I figure you have clothes to pick up. You need to check out of your hotel, right?"

"Yes."

"Okay." She was dressed similarly to me, in jeans and a t-shirt, her amazing subtle curves making my cock take notice. "Then we'll take care of that, spend the day getting to know each other before we leave."

"We're leaving?" I rubbed my neck, the headache that had been threatening edging closer and closer. "Where are we going?"

"Philadelphia. My family reunion." She pushed her hair back from her face and shrugged. "I've already bought your plane ticket – hope you don't mind. I...um...well, I checked your wallet while you were showering and took care of the arrangements."

"Oh. Okay." Wow. She was...efficient. Efficient. Confident. Capable.

Sexy. Man, was she sexy. I realized I was staring at her mouth and jerked my attention back to her eyes. “Okay, so let’s go to...well, my hotel first, right?”

She nodded, and we moved to the door.

Behind us, Astra called out. “Have fun, you two! Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do, PS!”

“Yeah.” Piety snorted. “That probably covers murder and dismemberment. I don’t think there’s much else.”

I was smiling as we left. Once the door closed behind us, I looked over at her. “PS? Why'd she say that?”

“Because she’s weird.” Piety rolled her eyes. “My middle name is Sabine. The whole name is a mouthful – Piety Sabine Van Allan. PS. Also, I told her more than once that I think my folks had me as an afterthought to help my dad’s career. Afterthought...PS.”

She glanced up at me and shrugged. If I hadn't been staring at her, I probably would've missed the flash of pain that moved across her eyes, then disappeared. I didn't need to know much about her to understand what had prompted that look.

I shook my head. “I don’t see how anybody could think of you as an afterthought, Piety Van Allen.”

## *Chapter Six*

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## PIETY

---

Those words tugged at my heart, and as we stood out in the hall, I found myself reaching up to touch his cheek, wanting that contact. His eyes widened a little, and it was that alone that made me realize what I was doing.

I forced a smile. It was fake, but I knew from experience it would come off as real enough. One thing a politician's daughter learned how to do at a young age was how to offer a sincere-looking false smile.

"Sorry...you've just got..." I pretended to brush something off his cheek. "There. All better. Come on, let's get going."

I started down the hall, my face flaming as he caught up with me.

What had I been getting ready to do?

Oh, man.

What was I doing, *period*?

Paying him twelve thousand dollars to be my pretend husband so I could get my parents to leave me alone?

*Except it's not pretend*, my conscience whispered. *You did marry him.*

He was quiet as I pushed the elevator button, and I glanced up to find him studying me. The elevator door slid open, and we stepped inside, but my wish to have company to keep the conversation at a minimum went ungranted.

"Do you want to do this?" he asked softly. "Or did your mate talk you into it?"

I didn't blink twice at the word *mate*. I'd spent one of the best summers of my life in Sydney the year after I graduated high school. He'd dropped a lot of the terms I would have expected somebody from fresh out of Oz to use,

and I found myself smiling a little at the language.

“Astra and I have been friends a long time. She can nag me into a lot of things,” I admitted, “but she can’t push me into doing anything I don’t really want to do.” I met his eyes and smiled. “This isn’t a bad idea.”

*Oh, yes, it was.*

“You don’t sound too convinced of that.”

I blinked, wondering if he was guessing or if I’d lost some of my skill at masking what I was thinking.

“What makes you say that?” I asked as the elevator doors slid open.

“Something in your eyes. You look...nervous.” He shrugged as we came to a stop in the middle the lobby. All cream and gold, it was understated elegance in the middle of one of the glitziest cities in the world.

Not too far away lay one of the many entrances to the casino. I reached over and took his hand. “Come on.”

He followed along, but when he saw where we were going, his brows went together. “If you want to gamble, I’ll probably just stand at your shoulder.”

“That’s fine.” I slanted him a glance over my shoulder. “Or you could let me spot you a hundred dollars. If you don’t do much with it, fine. And if you win anything...it’s yours.”

“I...” He scowled even harder and I wondered if he ever let himself have a little fun. I would’ve thought a stripper would’ve been a little more daring.

“Come on.” I winked at him. “It’s Vegas. You gotta live a *little* bit while you’re here.”

“I’m living plenty, thanks.” He flashed me a wry smile, one that managed to set my heart to racing. “I ended up with a beautiful bride, didn’t I?”

That prompted a real smile even as I rolled my eyes at him. “I...well, I don’t think that counts. We were drunk off our asses.”

I continued to tug him along with me as I sought out one of the cashiers. After getting some cash, I pushed a hundred into his hand. “Know how to play Texas Hold’Em?”

“Yes.” He shook his head as he gave me a wry grin. “I guess you don’t know how to take no very well, do you?”

“Sure I do.” I nudged him with my elbow as we made our way over to the gaming tables. “The problem is...you haven’t exactly said *no*. Come on. One hand, and if you don’t have fun, I’ll leave you alone.”



“One more hand.”

“No.” I glared at him and his ever-growing pile of chips, although I wasn’t really mad. He’d taken that hundred I’d given him and somehow turned it into over seven. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were a card shark.”

The dealer laughed.

So did Kaleb.

“It’s just luck.” He winked at me and a couple of others chuckled.

“The little lady’s a sore loser,” a heavysset man next to me said, leaning close enough that I could smell the remnants of his breakfast on his breath – onions and sausage.

*Pleasant.*

“Not really. I’m just a better winner.” I gave him a bland smile and got up to take the seat that had been vacated next to Kaleb. “I’m done though. I’m going to find a slot machine and engage in something a little less strenuous on my poor little female brain.”

He half-choked on the water he’d requested from the server when I fluttered my lashes at the man across from us, who blinked at me, clearly wondering if I’d somehow insulted him.

The dealer was holding back a smile.

I left her a tip and gestured to Kaleb where I’d be. He could see me from the table, and I could see him. We’d exchanged phone numbers earlier, and since he was enjoying himself – and kicking ass – I figured it was as good a time as any to move onto something I didn’t totally suck at.

Plus, I could get away from sausage and onion breath.

At least that was the plan.

I’d only been at my chosen slot machine for ten minutes when the one next to me opened up. When Sausage and Onion sat down, I mentally groaned but ignored him, focusing on the machine in front of me. All the luck I was lacking in Poker today, I was making in spades on my shiny slot machine. I was up to almost twelve hundred dollars, and I’d started out with a hundred.

“Well now, looks like you found your groove, sweetheart.”

I didn’t respond.

Sometimes if a girl ignored the creepers, they went away.

And...sometimes they didn’t. When he patted my shoulder, I glanced over as if just now noticing him. “Oh, hi. Bored with poker, I see.”

“Yeah. That Australian shit is cheating or something, I kid you not.” He smirked over toward the table and then smiled at me. “Maybe you and I could go hit up another game...or something.”

“No, thanks.” I focused back on the machine, then laughed when three 7s lit up on the play line and music began to jingle.

“You’re doing pretty well there,” he said, admiration a little too thick in his voice.

I made a low noise in my throat that could have been a thanks – or anything else.

“How about I buy you a drink?”

Geez. The man wasn’t getting it. Looking over at him, I said, “I’ve got one. I’m not interested, okay?”

“Hey, I’m just being friendly.” He leaned a little closer. “Seeing as how you aren’t here with anybody–”

“Piety.”

Kaleb’s voice was entirely too welcome. I didn’t let myself smile or show any other response as I glanced over my shoulder at him. I just nodded before looking back at Sausage and Onion. “Actually, I *am* here with somebody. My husband is that Australian shit you were insulting.”

Face going a florid shade of red, the man glared at me before looking over my shoulder at Kaleb. “Hey...I didn’t...look, buddy, I wasn’t meaning nothing. We were just talking.”

“Of course you were. Now you’re done.” Kaleb’s voice was cold.

I smiled into my coffee as the seat next to me quickly became vacant. Kaleb sat down, placing a fresh coffee down in the empty space between the machines. “Was he bothering you?”

“Yes.” Looking over at him, I offered a smile of gratitude. “I was handling him, but he had a head like a rock. Getting through would probably take a sledgehammer.” I paused, head cocked as I considered. “No. Just the right amount of testosterone. Some men only respond to that.”

He skimmed his fingers along my shoulder. It was a light, friendly touch, almost platonic. “Makes me want to apologize for my gender as a whole.”

“No need.” I traded out my nearly empty coffee cup for the one he’d brought over. “Is this mine?”

“Yes. You seem to inhale it.”

“It’s my addiction.” I sighed lustily and took a sip before focusing back on the machine. “You’re a sweetheart, you know that, Kaleb?”

“A nice quality to have in a temporary husband, I suppose.”

“Well, I think it’s a nice quality to have, period.” Before I could get too wrapped up in my pretend spouse, I pulled the lever on the machine and watched the numbers spin.

“No.” I looked at the ride in front of me. The damn thing looked like it couldn’t decide if it wanted to be a roller coaster or a giant see-saw. Nerves jangled in my belly, and I stared at it a minute longer before shaking my head and backing away. I ended up backing right into Kaleb and almost, *almost*, stayed there. Laughing nervously, I turned to look at him. “Sorry. And um... no. *Hell*, no.”

“Oh, come on. It’ll be fun.” He moved in a little closer and the scent of him flooded my head.

Flooded my head and threatened my senses too. It was mid-afternoon, and with every passing hour, I had to remind myself more often that we weren’t on any sort of *date*.

This was...well, it was *business*.

Kind of.

Sorta.

Business that had brought us to the infamous roller coaster located on top of one of the tallest hotels in Vegas – the one that went speeding over the edge of the hotel itself. And he looked *excited* about getting on it.

“Look, I’m all fine and dandy with *regular* roller coasters,” I said. “If you want to ride Space Mountain or something like that...” Inspiration struck. “Hey, I know! We can go to Disneyland. Maybe skip my family reunion and go to Disney, and I’ll send them a postcard. *Sorry we missed it. Honeymooning at Disney with my new husband.*”

He cocked an eyebrow at me. “Now you’re just trying to distract me. Okay. If you really don’t want to ride, do you mind if I do anyway?”

“Um...” I glanced at the ride again. “Sure.”

“Awesome.” He squeezed my arms and moved around me, heading toward the ride.

He got maybe ten feet away, and I swore, telling myself that if I went plummeting off the side, I’d at least die a relatively painless death. He shot me a look when I caught up with him. “Change your mind?”

“You’re up here because of me,” I said sourly. “If that thing breaks down

and you plunge to your death, you shouldn't do it alone."

To my surprise, he broke out into a deep, sexy laugh.

The sound of it sent shivers down my spine, my nipples tightening in response. Thoughts whirled through my brain as I tried to remember something, *anything* about last night. I was so distracted by that, I didn't realize how little of a line there was until he came to a stop just a few feet away from the gate and announced, "Looks like we'll get to be on the next one."

"Great...wait, the next one?" I looked around, panicked.

"Hey, look at me." His voice, low and cajoling, had me doing just that, and I sucked in a breath when my eyes met his. He'd dipped his head, and we were practically eye to eye. "It's just like any other roller coaster. Anchored with steel into concrete. It's safety checked just like any coaster."

"It's hundreds of feet in the air," I said weakly.

"If you don't want to ride, don't ride." He crooked a grin at me. "I won't plunge to my death, I promise. Wouldn't want to make you a widow, after all."

I almost got out of the line, but for some reason, I couldn't walk away. Not from him. "I...no, I'm riding."

"Then look at me. Don't look around you. Don't think about it being on a building." He brushed my hair back from my face and his thumb came in contact with my skin.

Rough, calloused...different from what I was used to. In my social circle, I typically only met a certain type of guy. It sort of limited my dating to *that* certain type of guy. Most of them had manicures about as often as I did.

What would it feel like to have a man with calloused hands touching me in more *intimate* places?

My breathing hitched, and I tightened my hand around his wrist. I didn't even realize I'd reached up to grab him until I felt his pulse beating against my fingers.

"You're scared," he said grimly. "Come on. Let's forget this."

"No." I startled myself with the strength of my response. "I'm...well, yes, I'm scared. But..."

"Tickets, please."

I backed away from him, swallowing nervously. What would he think if he knew the reason I'd grabbed him, that the reason I was breathing hard had nothing to do with the coaster and everything to do with him?

“We’re getting out of line,” Kaleb said.

But before he could take action to echo his words, I grabbed the tickets from his hand and shoved them at the ride attendant. Blindly staring at Kaleb, I said, “No, we’re not. Come on, hubby. It’s kind of our honeymoon, right? Let’s live a little.”

“But...”

I pulled his arm. “Let’s do it before I lose my courage!”

He chuckled and started to walk with me. “You’ve got more courage than a lot of people I know.”

Once we were sitting and had to deal with the restraints, I squeezed my eyes closed. He must have noticed because he took over helping me with the safety harness when I fumbled. When he took my hand in his, my heart flipped a little.

“You’re going to love it, Piety.”

“Yeah...right. Just like dinner with Mom and Dad,” I said glibly. I opened one eye a fraction. Oh, no...

In my head, I was screaming, trying to figure out what was wrong with me. I’d hit my head and was suffering massive personality changes. I’d hit my head and was delusional. I’d hit my head and lost my free will. I was having a nightmare. *Something...*

Then he squeezed my hand. “It’s almost ready to go.”

No...no dream. He was rubbing his thumb up and down the inside of my wrist. It was a slow rhythm, probably meant to be soothing. But I felt each stroke in places that had nothing to do with my wrist – or my arm. My nipples had contracted to hard little points, and my pussy throbbed. If I could have moved, I might have been squirming in my seat.

*What is wrong with me...?*

“Here we go...”

The rest of his voice was drowned out by the shouts of others and the roar of metal on metal.

I opened my eyes. “I changed my mind! Let me off!” I shouted desperately as the lights of the city began to rush closer. We were going to fly right off this damn thing.

Then we were being pulled right back.

“Oh, shit. I don’t...”

He squeezed my hand again.

We plummeted forward. The lights whirled, and Kaleb’s knee pressed

into mine.

Oh...

I didn't know when I started to laugh, but I was still laughing when he helped me out of the car, and I collapsed against him, feeling almost delirious from adrenaline...and want.

"It looks like you had fun." He brushed my hair back. The wind had blown it all over the place.

I returned the favor, still giggling even as the feel of his soft hair sent a wave of heat through me. "I didn't. I hated it. I think it's..." Another snort of laughter escaped me. "I think it's stress giggling."

"Is that a thing?"

We started to walk, and I elbowed him in the side. "Don't make fun."

"Want to ride again?"

I shot the coaster a look. "No!" But the thought of having him holding my hand, feeling the hard length of his thigh against mine...Shit. "I don't know. There are other rides in Vegas. Or we could go get dinner."

To my surprise, he pulled me against him for a hug, and this time, *he* was the one laughing. "You did have fun, see? You almost thought about getting back on, didn't you?"

"Yeah." I blushed and caught his hand, tugging him along with me so he wouldn't notice. I wasn't quite ready to tell him the only reason I was even tempted was because *he* would be on there with me. I felt like I was in ninth grade all over again, crushing over the cute boy who had helped me with advanced algebra two.

"What time should I meet you in the morning?"

Kaleb had walked me back to my room, and now that he'd retrieved his bag, he looked like he was about ready to take off again.

"I don't know. Where's your..." I stopped, feeling like an idiot. "Son of a bitch. You don't have a hotel now, do you?"

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Well, no. I don't see why you're calling me a SOB for it though."

"I wasn't..."

He grinned at me, and I realized he was joking. "Ha, ha." Rolling my eyes at him, I gestured at the bag. "What were you going to do? Wander the strip until you found a place? Go down to the desk and see if they had

anything here?”

“The idea occurred to me.” He shrugged, looking unconcerned.

“Oh, for crying out loud.” I passed my key in front of the door, and as the electronic lock slid open, I said, “You can stay here. The couch has a fold-out.”

My cheeks went red, but I continued talking as though we hadn’t already shared a bed the night before. What we’d done while we were drunk was different. We were stone cold sober now, and while I was seriously attracted to him, we didn’t know each other.

That small fact couldn’t be overlooked.

“That’s not necessary.” He backed away a step.

I caught the handle of his duffel. “No, it’s not, but it makes more sense than you trying to find a room. If it takes you an hour or so, then you might not get much sleep, and we’ll have to make an extra stop on our way to the airport. Why *not* stay here? We can order up a pizza, a few beers...”

“You know how to tempt a man.” He blew out a breath, staring off down the hallway. Slowly, almost reluctantly, he nodded. “I’ve got to make a call though.”

“Sure.” A giddy sort of excitement unfurled through me as he followed me into the room. “No problem. Use the one in the bedroom suite if you want. Totally private.”

He nodded and left his bag on the floor in the entryway, tucked neatly against the wall.

As he walked off, I leaned my back against the door and watched him walk away.

How crazy was it that part of me almost wished this *was* real?

I’d had more fun with him today than I’d had in a long, long time.

If only I’d...

*No. Don’t go thinking about kissing him, Piety. He’s a stranger.*

Yes, that was the voice of common sense. I wanted to stuff a sock in its sensible mouth.

## *Chapter Seven*



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## KALEB

---

*O*f course she's going to make me sleep on the couch.

Various parts of me – from my dick to my bruised ego – were arguing that I hadn't spent *last* night on the couch.

But last night we'd been drunk and stupid.

Today we were sober, but I was clearly still stupid because I still wanted to get naked with a woman I barely knew. My cock was trying to lead me around, and I couldn't let it. I had too many things going on. No, I actually only had *one* thing going on. One thing because I'd pretty much given up everything else for this. For *her*.

Camry.

She still hadn't called back.

I couldn't keep letting myself get distracted over Piety, even as... distractible as she was.

Like now. She bent over the table, putting something down, and my eyes strayed over the curve of her ass. I could see myself moving up behind her and cupping her hips, moving against her. She had a nice ass, round and tight and her legs were long, strong, and muscled. She'd mentioned a few things off and on during the day that made me think she was probably as physical active as I was – or as active as I *had* been before everything went to shit.

Brooding, I turned away and carried my duffel over to the couch, staring at it for a long moment as I thought about Camry, the money I had to make – the money Piety was going to pay me. If this didn't work...

"What do you think?"

I whipped my head around. "What?"

Piety had moved up next to me, and I hadn't even noticed. Staring down at her, I found myself wanting a taste of her mouth – one that I remembered.

All I had in my head were disconnected bits and pieces, and it wasn't nearly enough.

She grinned. "You're a little distracted there."

"Yeah. Thinking." I focused back on the bag in front of me and unzipped it, as though something in there would be terribly fascinating.

I had a feeling the woman next to me was on to me though. She knew I was preoccupying myself so I wouldn't look at the *real* thing that fascinated me – her.

"I was just wondering if you had anything specific you wanted on your pizza."

"No. I'm easy." Then I paused. "Unless you're going to get really crazy and put fish or fruit on it."

She laughed softly. "Okay. No anchovies and no pineapple. Maybe a supreme? I'm craving a big, messy pizza."

"Yeah. Fine." From the corner of my eye, I glanced at her, hoping she'd leave. Hoping.

But she still stood there.

Straightening, I met her eyes. "Did you want to go out and get it or are we ordering in?"

"Oh, ordering in. Definitely." She grimaced and dropped down on the couch, kicking off her bright yellow sneakers. "I'm worn out, and my feet are killing me. I just...well, I wanted to say thanks. I know this is an odd kind of job."

I laughed. "*Odd?* You think this is *odd?*"

It felt weird to stand there, practically looming over her, so I sat down, careful to keep a few inches between us.

"Okay, if you want, we can call it outright *insane*." She sniffed primly, crossing her legs, and folding her hands in her lap. She gave me a look of mock affront, but I could see the humor dancing in her eyes.

Already some of the worry and fear were melting away, and I struggled to hold onto them. I couldn't forget why I was doing this. Slowly, I sat down on the huge slab of wood that served as a coffee table in this decadent hotel room. My flat back in Sydney hadn't been this nice. Not even close.

"I should be the one thanking you, really," I said, meeting her eyes.

"Why?" She laughed. "You've always wanted to get hooked up to a crazy

chick with parental issues, and then get dragged to a family reunion where you'll be the object of stares and awkward questions about a baby that doesn't exist? That's what will happen, you know. They'll assume you got me knocked up and we had to get married."

"They do realize it's not exactly 1955. That isn't how things go anymore." I meant it jokingly.

But Piety wasn't smiling when she looked back at me. "They do in my world. You'll see when you meet them. And trust me, by the time this is all over, you'll think you're getting ripped off."

"No, I won't." The sadness in her voice tugged at me, so I did something stupid. I touched her.

She looked up at me, and I felt myself drawn even closer. Instead of moving back, I brushed her hair away from her face, then skimmed my fingers along her jawline. She had silky, soft skin. And she smelled so good – so damn good.

"It won't be all that bad. You'll be around, right?"

She laughed weakly. "That's not much of a bonus, Kaleb. I'm the one who got you into this mess to begin with."

"See, I *should* be the one thanking you."

"You're sweet." Her gaze dropped, and it hit me straight in the chest when I figured out just where she was looking.

Straight at my mouth.

I'd been careful not to spend too much time checking her out today, although I was probably wasting my time, trying to hide the fact that I found her attractive. We'd already ended up in bed – and married. But this...

The tension between us began to simmer, and when she laid her hand on my cheek, I decided that I was overthinking this. Why bother being cautious about this of all things?

I was just about to kiss her when she leaned forward and pressed her mouth to mine, taking the debate out of my hands.

Her taste...

I groaned and reached for her waist, pulling her toward me even as I went to my knees in front of the couch.

She came willingly, and I wrapped one arm around her, pushing the fingers of my other hand into her hair. Her breasts went flat against me, and in the back of my mind, an image flashed, my hands on those pretty little tits, her tongue stroking out to dampen her lower lip.

Then it was gone – and so was she.

“Damn. I’m sorry,” she said, breathing hard as she backed away from me.

“You’re sorry?” Catching my lower lip, I sucked it into my mouth, savoring the faint taste of her as it faded. “I don’t think you need to be apologizing, Piety.”

“I...look.” She blushed, and it was so adorable, I wanted to grab her, pull her against me, and never let go.

But then she turned away, her shoulders hunching protectively, and that was when it clicked – something wasn’t right.

“Look, I’m not paying you to sleep with me,” she blurted out, bolting upright just as the last word escaped her lips.

For a minute, I didn’t quite get what she meant. When I did, I tried to hide my laugh by turning it into a cough. It didn’t quite work.

She glared at me as I stood.

“I’m sorry,” I said, shaking my head, and holding up a hand as she took a step toward me, looking like she wanted to throttle me. “I’m just...look, that never crossed my mind. When a beautiful woman kisses me, do you think I’ve got my mind on anything other than her mouth on mine? Or...”

I didn’t intentionally drop my gaze, but...well, I had other thoughts in my head besides her kissing me, or me kissing her. And all of them involved us naked and touching each other. None of them involved money.

That was foolish, because right now, everything I did should involve thinking about money, whether I was taking a piss, eating or trying to figure out how to stretch five dollars into twenty.

But Piety shut my brain off.

And I loved it.

Her chest hitched.

If I hadn’t been staring at just that portion of her anatomy, I might have missed it, but her breasts rose and fell in an erratic rhythm several times over, and I didn’t let myself think about the steps I was taking to close the distance between us until I’d already done it.

And then I was only thinking about it because there was still too much space between us even though, unless I had her naked and under me, we couldn’t get much closer.

Right. Clothes. I wanted those off right now.

Her hands twisted in my hair while I reached for the zipper at the back of her sundress. It was surprisingly difficult to concentrate on something so

simple as a zipper when her tongue was stroking across mine. My fingertips brushed her shoulders as I pushed her dress off, and a zing of electricity went through me.

I needed to feel her skin. All of it. I needed it more than I needed anything else in my life.

Her bra went next and I couldn't stop myself from shifting enough to get my hands between us. She moaned the moment I cupped her breasts, and I made a similar sound when I felt her nipples harden against my palms. I'd never given much thought to whether I had particular type when it came to women, but I couldn't imagine a set of breasts more perfect than the ones I was touching right now.

Her hands were at my waist, tugging at my shirt, so I tore my mouth away to deal with it. I wouldn't have done anything more than that, but as I lost the heat of her body, it suddenly occurred to me that I needed to find protection before things got even more heated.

*Where in the hell had I put my condoms?*

I knew I had a pack. Somewhere.

“Kaleb?”

The uncertainty in her voice had me looking up, and the sight of her perfect, porcelain skin, those high, firm breasts...she took my breath away.

“Just being safe, sweetheart.” I tore my eyes away from her as I dug through my pack until I found what I was looking for.

In the two minutes it took me to find them, Piety had plastered her front to my back, and I could feel the soft, silken smoothness of her curves, the hard, pebbled flesh of her nipples. I had to close my eyes. Her hands slid across my stomach, and my muscles twitched beneath her palms. Her touch was light as she toyed with the button on my jeans. In short, she was going out of her way to drive me out of my mind.

And she was damn good at it.

Turning back to face her, I caught her in my arms and guided us onto the wide couch. She laughed breathlessly, the sound fading as I put her under me. I allowed myself another moment to appreciate the sight of her body, bare except for a pair of tiny white lace panties.

If I would have known she was wearing those under that bloody dress of hers, I would've been hard pressed to resist as long as I had.

“You drive me insane, you know that?” I caught her lower lip between my teeth and tugged.

“Stop talking and kiss me.” She put action to words and pulled my head closer, licking at my mouth until I kissed her.

Sliding her hands between us, she reached for the button, freed it. Then she dragged the zipper down, and I groaned the second she shoved her hand inside and wrapped her fingers around my cock. Her teeth scraped against my lip, and I tightened my hold on her hip.

Thrusting into her touch, I ground down against her hand, pleasure coursing through me at her touch.

She laughed, the sound wild and hungry. “You better not enjoy that too much. Wouldn't want you to miss out on the main event.”

“We couldn't have that,” I agreed.

Shoving up onto my knees, I hooked my fingers in the elastic of her panties and pulled them off, her eyes locking with mine as she raised her hips and let me pull them off. Her legs settled on either side of me, revealed dark curls and pink flesh.

Fuck.

I fumbled the condom out of my pocket and tore it open. As much as I wanted to taste her, I needed to be inside her more. Without another word, I settled in the cradle of her hips. The heat was unreal, and when I brushed against her, we both shuddered.

Hooking one of her knees up over my arm, I drove into her, listening to her cry bouncing off the walls as I slid home. My head fell forward as her wet sheath gripped me tight. She moaned, low in her throat, and I pressed my lips to the satiny skin just above her pulse.

She reached for my shoulders, sinking her nails into me. The sweet little bites of pain went tripping down my spine as I rocked back, then thrust deeper still. Her pussy contracted around me, squeezing me like a fist. She opened her eyes, and we stared at each other.

This was too good.

Too perfect.

The pleasure so acute I couldn't even process it.

I gave up trying and just let it go. Let my body sink into hers, move with hers. Each stroke sent another ripple of pleasure through me, each breath rubbing her nipples against my chest. Unlike women I'd slept with in the past, she was tall enough that I managed to bend my head down to capture one pale pink nipple between my lips without missing a single thrust.

She arched her back, nails scratching at my scalp even as she pressed my

head closer to her breast. Not that I had any intention of releasing my prize. Her sounds of pleasure were almost enough to send me over the edge, and I knew I'd want to hear them again. And again. And again.

Piety was hot and sweet, her cunt rippling around me with sensations that became tighter and tighter as she moved closer to climax. She writhed and moaned and twisted under me, her nails scratching against my back and chest until my skin stung.

Neither of us spoke, and for that I was grateful. I didn't want to lie to her, to say things in the heat of the moment that I couldn't keep to later. Better to show her how attracted I was to her, how much I enjoyed being with her. I couldn't make her promises, but I could make her feel good.

I buried my hand in that thick, soft hair and used it to tilt her head back, baring her throat to me. I could feel her trembling around me, beneath me, and knew she was close. I pulled her leg up high, her ankle on my shoulder, and leaned down, opening her wider. As I pushed in deep, I bit down on her soft flesh, worrying at her skin with teeth and tongue until she exploded. The sound she made was something so primal, so real, that I came, unable to hold back any longer.

Fuck.

Dropping my head down so that my forehead rested between her breasts, I closed my eyes. Her arms and legs were still wrapped around me, holding me to her, as if she was worried I would run away.

She...this...all of it.

Dammit!

Why couldn't I have met her some other time?

Some other place?

## *Chapter Eight*



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## PIETY

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“*T*his family reunion, is it something your family does every year?” Kaleb asked.

His fingers drew small circles on my side as we lay on the bed. We might've moved from the couch to my bedroom, but we still hadn't gotten around to ordering pizza. We would have to get something eventually, because my belly was growling, but I wasn't in any hurry. I didn't think he was either.

I was entirely too comfortable with him. I hadn't been with too many other guys, but I couldn't think of a single one who had been so easy to just *be* with.

It was nice.

“Every two years. And that's about five years too often.” Grinning, I reached up to run my hand through his hair.

He caught my hand. “That math doesn't add up.”

“I know. It's not that I don't love my family, but they're not the easiest people to be around en masse.”

“Why not?” he asked, rubbing his thumb over my inner wrist.

I bit my lip, considering how to answer. He watched me, not pushing, not judging, and I answered as honestly as I could. “Have you ever had anybody who expected certain things of you? I mean like all the time?”

He started to shake his head, then stopped and shrugged. “In a way. I don't think it's quite the same thing you're putting up with.” He kissed my hand. “But I think I get it. It can be exhausting.”

“You nailed it.” I curled in closer to him, enjoying his warmth. “Thank

you. I know you don't want to hear it, but thanks for helping me."

"I've already told you, I should be thanking you. The money...well, I need it, so you're helping me." As he spoke, a dull flush rose to stain his cheeks, and the tips of his ears turned red. It was oddly charming.

"Family stuff?"

He gave me a lopsided grin, but offered no real answer. His eyes shifted away, distancing himself even if his body stayed close.

Understanding the need for privacy, I rested my head on his shoulder so he didn't have to feel like he was avoiding looking at me.

"You know, twenty-four hours ago, I was brooding and pissed off. I had no idea I was going to be doing this today. I had no idea I would be meeting you." I laughed a little. "All in all, I'm pretty pleased with how the day is going. Granted, last night..." I exhaled a long breath. "My mind is still kind of blown. I wish I could remember everything that happened."

"According to Astra, we got hitched." He said it in a tone dry enough to make me laugh again.

"That's not what I meant." I nudged him. "Well, not entirely. I'm talking about..." Now was my turn to blush and avoid his gaze. "I mean, last night. We slept together, but I don't remember anything. Considering how amazing what we just did was, I sort of wish I could."

He cleared his throat. "I kinda have an answer about that I think."

I pushed up and turned around, facing him. "What do you mean? You know what happened?" He wouldn't meet my eyes directly, and he didn't answer right away, so I prodded him, poking him in the side. He flinched a bit, and I tucked that into the back of my head. *Ticklish...* "Come on, tell me."

Kaleb sat up, scooting until his back was against the headboard. "I don't think anything happened."

"But this morning..." I stared at him. "There was a condom wrapper on the nightstand, and you were..." I cleared my throat. "You had a condom on."

"Yeah, about that." He flushed bright red. "It...ah...well, it wasn't used."

"But..." I couldn't think of a single response to that.

"Maybe we were just both too drunk. I don't know."

Baffled – and oddly disappointed – I stared at him for the longest time, uncertain of what I wanted to say. I couldn't think of a single thing, although there were a hundred stops and starts inside my head.

“Mystery solved, right?”

“Yeah.” I managed a weak smile. “Mystery solved.” I leaned against him and snuggled in closer, tucking my head into the hollow between his neck and shoulder.

His arm came around me, and it fit – we fit. We felt...perfect together.

Why did I feel so disappointed that we hadn't had sex last night? I didn't understand it, but there was this strange hollow feeling inside me.

“Are you okay?” Kaleb stroked his hand up and down my back.

“Oh, I'm fine. Just thinking.” I was careful not to let my voice reveal anything. I'd become all too good at that. That was a skill you picked up early, being a politician's daughter. Certain things, a girl just didn't let show.

From where my head rested against his chest, I could feel the steady beat of his heart, and it was oddly soothing, comforting. My hand was on his stomach, moving up and down with each breath, and in that moment, it made a deep, gurgling noise. With a little laugh, I straightened. Before I could tease him about it, my belly rumbled in agreement. “I guess we should get around to ordering that pizza. What do you think?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

I kicked my legs over the edge of the bed and grabbed the first thing that came to hand. It happened to be his t-shirt, but I pulled it on without a second thought. It came to mid-thigh, and the scent of him wrapping around my body made me shiver a little.

“Hey.” His voice had a low sexy rumble to it that made my pussy throb.

I glanced back at him.

“Did I say you could borrow that?” The glint in his eye said he was teasing me.

Two could play at that game.

“Well...” I reached for the hem.

“Don't.” He groaned and looked away. “Keep it on or we'll never eat, and I'm starving.”

I laughed and blew him a kiss. As I moved over to the phone, though, I could feel his eyes on me, and when I glanced back at him, he was watching me with heavy-lidded eyes.

Heat swept through me, and I averted my gaze as a voice came on the line. By the time I finished ordering the food, I could hear water coming on in the bathroom, and I thought about joining him. We had half an hour.

Might as well enjoy the time...and it would conserve water too.

Between the two of us, we pretty much demolished an entire extra-large pie and several beers.

Now, belly full and pleasantly buzzed, I stretched back out on the bed, studying him.

“I’ve been thinking,” I announced. He'd pulled a pair of jeans on after we'd gotten out of the shower, and while I was kind of sorry to see him wearing any kind of clothing, at the same time, it'd been a good idea. When he was all naked and beautiful in front of me, I lost track of important things...like breathing.

He glanced at me over his shoulder, a golden brow arched. “Just what have you been thinking about, Miss Piety?”

“I’ve been thinking...” I said slowly. I rolled to my hands and knees and crawled to the edge of the bed as I grinned at him. “That you and I need to be able to convince my parents and the rest of my family that we're comfortable together, that we fell head over heels in love...or at least in lust with each other.”

“Well, that is what you’re paying me for,” he said, turning to face me. Eyes locked on mine, he reached out and traced a bold finger down my cheek, my collarbone, then dropped his hand down to cup my breast through his shirt. “Are you saying I haven’t I done a good job of proving there’s a fair amount of lust on my side?”

I was having a difficult time concentrating as his thumb moved across my nipple. “I think...it’s safe to say there’s a fair amount of lust on both sides.”

He lightly pinched my nipple and I moaned, fighting the urge to wrap myself around him and tell him to just do me.

It took a supreme effort of will to continue.

“We have to convince them. We should...” I cleared my throat, heat rushing up to stain my cheeks red as he dipped his head and raked his teeth down my neck. He'd already left one mark, but I wanted him to leave another. But first I had to finish my thought. “We should be comfortable together.”

He pushed his knee between mine as he wrapped his hand around the back of my neck. “I don’t feel comfortable right now. Maybe after I’ve had you wrapped around my cock for a little while longer, after I’ve made you scream my name and I've emptied myself inside you...then I’ll be comfortable.”

Fuck me. Every cell in my entire body was practically vibrating.

“That’s not what I...meant.”

He grinned down at me, ice-blue eyes blazing hot. “What did you mean?”

“We should start sleeping together.”

“Haven’t we done that?” He caught the hem of my shirt – his t-shirt – and started to drag it up, letting his fingertips trail across my skin as he went. “Let me refresh your memory.”

“Again, not what I meant.” But I wasn’t going to complain. Not when I could still feel what it was like to have him inside me

“Oh.” He let the shirt go. “You meant...share your bed.”

“Yes.”

He looked thoughtful.

My body burned as I waited.

Then he nodded. “I’m fine with that.”

He turned away from me and my stomach dropped.

“Wait! What are you...?”

He looked back at me. “We’re sleeping together, right? I’m tired, so I’m going to get ready for bed.”

“But...” Glaring at him, I folded my arms over my chest, knowing my nipples would be clearly visible.

He slowly shifted back around to face me, his gaze flicking down and then back up. “Is there a problem?”

“You started something. Aren’t you going to finish it?”

He came toward me, a loose-limbed prowling gait that was unbearably sexy. “So...sex *and* sleeping together. This is getting complicated, Piety.”

There was a teasing glint in his eye, though, one that made me want to smile, want to tease.

Smoothing my hand down the front of my borrowed shirt, I hitched up a shoulder. “Not so complicated. Don’t you need to get your shirt back so you can pack it? Be ready for tomorrow.”

He caught my hips, and the feel of his rough hands against my smooth skin sent a shiver through me.

“You sound like you’re a big believer in being prepared.”

He said the words against my lips.

Before I could respond, he was kissing me.

No...no, I really wasn’t a big believer in being prepared. I just would’ve said anything to get him to touch me again. What did it matter anyway? No amount of preparation could have ever gotten me ready for him.

## *Chapter Nine*

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## KALEB

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Waking up felt strange.

For a minute, I didn't entirely understand why.

I lay there a few more minutes, trying to process. That didn't take too long, but even after I'd figured out why things felt different, I didn't move.

If I did that, it might break the spell.

It had been years since I'd woken up with a woman.

I couldn't really count yesterday. We'd been hung over and irritated, and I'd been in a stupor for several minutes even after Piety had rolled out of the bed.

This though...

This.

It had been years since I'd had this.

I hadn't realized I'd missed it. There'd been no time for a relationship, not really. Even the few I'd had when I was younger...hell. Nothing had felt as easy and right as this.

That in and of itself was just insane, because *this* wasn't real.

Piety was paying me.

Not to sleep with her, but she was paying me money to stay with her, and if it hadn't been for the money, I wouldn't have been around for any of this. And that bothered me more than I wanted to admit.

I couldn't lose sight of the reason I was doing this. I couldn't afford to. And I couldn't afford to have feelings for this woman, even though it would be damn easy *to* have feelings for her. She was...funny. Sweet, but in a subtle

way. There was a sharp, sarcastic side to her that hid that softness. I liked all of it, and suspected the more I was around her, the more I'd like it. Like *her*.

Which meant if I was smart, I'd get away and stay away.

Rising from the bed, I moved over to the window and stared outside. Under my feet, the carpet was plush and thick, feeling as foreign to me as the rest of the room, as strange and different as the woman lying on the bed behind me.

I didn't fit in here.

Brooding, I looked back at Piety, but that only made me want to climb back into bed with her.

The temptation was so strong, I jerked my gaze away and headed for the small pile of clothes at the end of the bed. Grabbing my jeans, I headed for the bathroom.

I didn't bother putting them on until the door was closed behind me. Once I was lost in the relative privacy, I checked my phone to see if there had been any calls.

No.

Not that too many people *would* call.

But Camry should have.

But, of course she hadn't. I squeezed my phone around the casing, hard enough that the plastic cracked a little. Then, slowly, I lowered it and punched in her number. She didn't answer. Big surprise.

I waited till the voicemail started and once it beeped, I left a message.

"Hey, Camry. It's me. Listen...something's come up, and I've got to leave the city for a little bit. When I get back, I'll have money. I'll have everything I need to make all of this right again. It's going to be okay."

*Make it right again...*

I wanted to laugh at my own stupidity.

Instead, I disconnected the call and shoved my phone in the pocket of my jeans.

How could I make things *right*? How could I possibly hope to do that?

Frustrated, I wrenched the door open, half thinking I'd go for a walk or something.

And I came to a dead stop at the sight of Piety lying stretched across the bed, taking up two-thirds of it. She had the sheets wrapped and twisted around her, her face turned toward me, a faint smile on her lips.

The sight of her was like a blow straight to my chest, and without



thinking – without *letting* myself think – I went to her and laid down, curling around her. I tucked my face against her hair and breathed in the scent of her.

In a few days, a few weeks, this would be over.

I'd go back to my life.

She'd go back to hers.

She'd probably forget this whole interlude. All she wanted was for her parents to get the idea that she was her own person. She was a grown woman. A fact that the body pressed to mine made abundantly clear.

Me, though...I'd go back to my life and do what? Do what I'd been doing for years?

This was my escape. *My* escape, brief as it was. I was doing what I needed to do, yeah. I couldn't deny that. But I *wanted* to do it. I hadn't wanted to walk away from Piety yet. From the moment I'd first seen her, I'd wanted her. And then I'd wanted to know her.

When it was all over, I'd go back to a life I was just now recognizing as completely empty.

Yes, I was going to try to fix things with Camry.

How could I not?

But nothing was going to be *okay*.

Things hadn't been *okay* in a long time.

*So I might as well enjoy this for as long as it lasts.*

Piety made a low, humming sound and stretched.

I slid my hand down her hip, and she covered it with her own. The cool metal of the new ring she'd bought brushed against the matching ring I now wore. She'd insisted on it – her parents would never buy that she'd gotten married without an appropriate ring – for both of us.

It hadn't felt right letting a woman buy something so...personal for me.

But when she'd grinned at me so playfully, then slid it on my finger, I realized how *personal* things between us already felt. She'd told me that once this was done, I could keep the ring – sell it or do whatever.

I would keep it. I already knew that. Even after we annulled this farce of a marriage, I'd keep it. A little piece of her.

She stretched again, wiggling her ass against my cock. I closed my eyes as blood rushed south. When she did it again, I realized she was holding her breath a little. Little minx.

“Something tells me you're doing that on purpose.”

She broke out in a laugh. “It took you long enough.” She did it again.

I rolled onto my knees, dragging her along so that her back was flush against me. She gasped as I slid a hand around and down, pushing my fingers between her thighs. She was already wet, the slick heat making my cock even harder. She moaned as I rubbed my fingers against her clit until she swore. Her head fell back against my shoulder as she rode my hand, rocking back against my cock, until I thought I just might embarrass myself.

“Come for me, sweetheart,” I spoke through gritted teeth just before I pressed against that little bundle of nerves. She cried out, her body jerking as she came.

Damn, she was beautiful like that.

I eased her down onto the bed before I eased away and tore open one of the last remaining condoms on the nightstand. We’d need more. Had to remember that. No matter how much I loved the idea of sliding into her bare. I would do at least one thing smart here.

I rolled the condom down, as I trailed my eyes up along the curve of her spine. As I watched, she lifted up on her hands and knees, threw her hair back, and turned her head to smile at me over her shoulder.

It was a sweet, wicked little grin that made my heart flip over and my stomach clench.

Groaning, I grabbed her hip with one hand and held her steady, wrapping my other hand around my cock. “I think you want to drive me mad.”

“No, I just want *you*.”

Such simple words, but the things they made me feel...

Swearing, I buried myself balls-deep inside her pussy with one thrust. We both cried out, our voices mixing together even as our bodies joined. I gave us both a moment to gain control before I started to draw back. She clamped down tighter around me, like she was trying to keep me trapped inside her. I wouldn’t mind staying like this, wrapped inside her, where I belonged.

My balls went tight as I eased back, then slid forward. Slowly at first, then building in speed, I drove into her. Each time, she tightened around me, friction and pressure forcing me higher. I could feel my orgasm coiling in my stomach, fighting to break free. But I wasn't going to give in, not until she came first.

Bracing my hands against her hips, I bent over her, sweat blooming on my skin, need knotting in my gut. I slid one hand under her and rolled her nipple between my fingers. She moaned and arched her back.

“Touch yourself,” I ordered. “Rub your clit and come for me again. Let

me feel that hot little pussy of yours squeeze me.”

I pinched her nipple, then tugged it as I felt her shift. She shivered as her fingers began to move over her clit. I pulled her nipple again, twisted it, and she called out my name, the sound one of pure pleasure.

Fuck. I wanted to hear that again.

“Say my name, sweetheart.” I could feel her body trembling around me. “Say it and come.”

I grabbed her hair and yanked her back against me. She came apart as she yelled my name and I didn’t fight my release any longer.

I started to climax, curses pouring from my mouth alongside her name. But the only thing that really mattered was her name.

“You were cussing me out.”

Her words broke the silence that had fallen as we’d recovered, and I felt my face going red as I looked over at her.

Piety was propped on her elbow, staring down at me, a curious look on her face. “Well?”

“Well, what?” I asked.

“I’m just...well, it’s not like I’ve slept with a lot of people or anything, but there’ve been a couple of guys.” She flushed. “And I’ve never had a guy swear at me when he came before.”

Shit. Throwing my forearm over my eyes, I tried to explain. “It wasn’t you. It was...”

Unable to find the words, I lowered my arm and stared at her. After a moment, I caught her and rolled until I had her under me. She wasn’t upset. I could see it in her eyes now. She was actually smiling. She always seemed to be smiling, even when it wasn’t quite genuine.

“You know the cartoons you see in the paper? Or online where one of the characters stubs his toe or something, and all he says are exclamation marks and such? It’s because cartoons don’t cuss...but sometimes it’s more effective, even though silence can say more than words at times. But then, there are times when swearing says more than words.”

Her face softened as she reached up, cupping my cheek.

I covered her hand with mine. “I’ve been caught in a shit storm for a while, and now there’s you. You’re like an oasis.” Balancing on one elbow, I slid a hand down her belly and cupped her between her thighs. “Just being

with you would be sweet. But having you moan out my name, fucking you and knowing you want everything I can do to you – that you want to do the same things to me...”

“So, fucking me is like stubbing your toe. You can’t express yourself in any way other than cursing?” She cocked an eyebrow even as she closed her thighs, rocking up against my hand.

“Yes.” I offered her a weak grin. “It’s just...well, in a good way. Almost like hitting your funny bone or...well, you get the point.”

She pushed against my shoulders until I went to my back. She grabbed the last condom from the bedside table, then threw a leg over my waist.

“Let’s see if we can hit that funny bone again.”

## *Chapter Ten*

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## PIETY

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Walking around the airport in Las Vegas wasn't too different than walking around outside in the city itself or in one of the casinos. Okay, it was definitely cooler in the airport than in the city, but you got the same sense of excitement and desperation from many of the tourists.

There was such a wide variety of people, and I loved people watching. It always baffled my parents when we'd traveled, although I got better about getting caught watching as I'd gotten older. Mom had never approved.

*Piety, sit still...stop gawking. It's so unseemly.*

A stern look from Dad had been enough to communicate the same message, but it hadn't stopped my...*gawking* either. I'd just learned to be more subtle about it.

Now I didn't need to be subtle, but I'd learned it was more...well, polite not to so openly stare.

I wasn't trying to be *nosy* exactly.

People just fascinated me. All of them.

Of course, some of them pissed me off, like the mom who was yelling at a baby who couldn't be more than six months old, telling the poor thing to quit crying.

Just as the thought went through my mind, Astra noticed as well.

"Like yelling at her is really going to make the baby stop crying," Astra said, sarcasm thick in her voice – and she wasn't quiet about it either.

The slim blonde heard and whipped her head around, glaring at us.

But Astra was already talking to Kaleb. "I mean, don't *you* find it

soothing when somebody yells at you? Especially when you're in a loud, noisy unfamiliar place and you're probably tired? That's exactly what makes you feel better, isn't it, Kaleb?"

The look on his face made it plain as day that he didn't know if he wanted to laugh or hide behind the menu. Taking pity on him, I laid a hand on his arm. "Half the time, being in an airport is enough to make most people want to cry – or yell."

I gave the mom a smile and hoped she'd take the out, and give her baby one too. We all got stressed after all, but the baby shouldn't suffer for it.

After a moment, her eyes fell away, and she started to bounce the little girl, patting her on the butt as she rocked her back and forth. A moment later, the pitiful wails subsided and the baby shoved her fist into her mouth.

"I'm *starving*," Astra announced, studying the menu. "Why did we get on such a late flight? I could have sworn we were flying out earlier."

"We were." I glanced at her over the top of mine. "We changed it to a later one so we could all three fly first class."

"You didn't have to..." Kaleb went quiet at my look, miming that he was sealing his lips shut and tossing away a key. He'd already lost that argument.

Laughing, I patted his arm. "Figure out what you want to eat, okay?" A small market across the way caught my eye, reminding me. "Hey, I forgot my ear plugs back at the hotel, so I'm going to go grab some."

It wasn't the only thing I needed, but I definitely needed those, and gum. Hopping off the stool, I looked at Astra. "Order me an omelet and some bacon. I want something messy and fattening before I head to the reunion. I'll be eating canapes and the rest of that crap that looks pretty and tastes like cardboard."

"You got it. Don't worry, PS. I'll stay here and keep Kaleb company." She gave me a serene smile.

Inside the small shop, I found a box of condoms and the ear plugs I needed for the trip. My ears always killed me when I flew. I also saw a book from one of my favorite authors and grabbed it. On impulse, I picked up an action thriller for Kaleb. I had no idea if he liked to read. If he didn't...well, I wouldn't hold it against him *too* much. After all, Astra and I were best friends, and I only nagged her about her lack of love for reading every now and then. Like once or twice a week.

As I made my way to the cashier, a voice caught my attention. Plaintive, young...almost desperate. "Please, can you try again? It's the last credit card

I have, and I'm out of diapers.”

“Ma’am, I’ve already tried twice, and I’ve got other customers.”

The young mom.

My gaze locked on her as she stood there, rocking her baby, and holding her credit card out to the cashier while a couple of other customers shifted restlessly behind her.

One of them, an older businessman behind her, said, “Can you move? I have a plane to catch.”

My temper snapped. Striding forward, I pulled out my wallet. “Here you go, sis.”

Heads whipped my way as I nudged the businessman aside, just as he had been trying to do to the young mom. I swiped my card, smiling serenely at the cashier and ignoring the surprise on the girl’s face. She really was just a girl. Nineteen, maybe twenty. “I need cash too. What’s the max?”

“Excuse me,” the dude in the suit snapped. “You weren’t next.”

I glanced at him. “Oh, I know. My *sister* was. The girl you were being so rude to? We’ll be done in a second.”

I withdrew the maximum amount I could, then stepped out of line, holding out the diapers to the girl who was standing there, staring at me, still rocking the baby.

She didn’t take them. “What’s this?”

“Diapers, sweetie.” Nudging her out of the line, I continued to hold the package out to her.

“I...” She firmed her jaw. “I don’t need charity from some rich bitch.”

“It’s not charity.” I didn’t let the barb get to me. I was rich. I could be a bitch. And so could pride. I understood pride really well. “It’s called kindness...and help. Sometimes everybody needs a little.”

Her cheeks flushed hot and red. “I don’t—”

“Doesn’t your baby?” I kept my voice soft.

She deflated and reached out, slowly taking the diapers. “We’re going to meet her dad. He’s in the army, stationed out in Virginia, and I...” Her eyes filled with tears. “We’re getting married. I’m moving out there. All my stuff is already on the way, but it took all my money, and I’m about broke. My parents won’t help me.”

She looked like she wanted to just break down and cry.

“Then your parents kind of suck,” I said with a sympathetic smile. Gently, I turned her around and pushed the diapers into the bag hanging from



one narrow shoulder.

Then I turned her back around to face me. “Here.” I started to give her the money I’d withdrawn, but then I stopped and pulled out my wallet, taking the rest of my cash. It added up to nearly three hundred dollars. Nothing I’d miss, and it’d make a difference to her. “Make sure you both have food and formula before you get on the plane. And put the rest of the money somewhere safe. The diaper bag is too easy for people to steal from.”

She gaped at me, dark eyes wide. “Why...why are you doing this?”

“Because I can. Because you need it.” I brushed a wispy lock of hair back from the baby’s forehead and then smiled at her. “Go on...I think she needs her diaper changed.”

I headed back into the store and almost walked into the businessman as he headed out. He glared from the girl to me. “Square things up with your sister?”

“Yep.” Breezily, I edged around him and took my place in line.

“That was nice of you.”

I jolted at the sound of Kaleb’s voice coming from just over my shoulder.

Whipping around, I met his eyes. “What...where did you come from?”

“Same place you did. I put my order in then came over here. I needed... something.” His gaze slid down and lingered on the box in my hands, his lips twitching in amusement. “Looks like great minds think alike.”

I flushed. “Well, I’m taking care of it. You can go back to the restaurant.”

“I don’t think one box will be enough,” he said easily, gaze heated. “Again, that was nice of you.”

We shuffled forward as the customers in front of us each paid and went on their way. It was down to the last one before he spoke again.

“Nothing to say?”

Huffing out a sigh, I said, “What’s to say? She needed a break. I gave her one.”

“Just like I needed one.” He didn’t sound angry, but he wasn’t happy either.

“No, you’re doing *me* a favor,” I said quickly, shaking my head.

“I’m the one getting paid to—”

Spinning around, I clapped my hand over his mouth. “Shh...” I didn’t give a quick look around, although I was tempted. “Be quiet, you...” Huffing, I dropped my hand and turned back to the counter just as the last person in front of me moved off. “Just hush,” I said grouchily.

I dumped my stuff down in front of the cashier, hoping she hadn't noticed the interaction between Kaleb and me.

I suspected she had though.

If for no other reason than the fact that she was gaping at him.

He seemed to inspire that reaction quite a bit, not that I blamed any of them. He was *gorgeous*.

And for a while, he was mine.

Instead of making me smile, though, the thought made me a little sad.

He was mine...but only for a while.

"You can't do that," I said, focusing on my irritation instead of the thought that had been circling through my head since we'd left the store.

Astra had wandered off to check out some purses in the store we'd just passed, giving me the chance to finally talk to Kaleb about what'd happened.

We still had an hour to wait until boarding, and Astra couldn't sit still for that long, especially not with a plane ride ahead of us. I didn't want to talk to him in front of her, not when I knew she'd see more than I wanted her to.

"I can't do what?"

Kaleb was wearing a pair of sunglasses now, and I wanted to tug them off, look into his eyes.

"Say things about me paying you." Self-consciously, I glanced around and then met his eyes. At least I assumed I was meeting his eyes. The lenses of his glasses were opaque. "I get recognized sometimes. Not as often out here, but if a person is a journalist, especially on the political beat, it's not a stretch. I can't have anybody hearing that I'm *paying* you. It will get back to my dad, and this is all for nothing."

"And they might assume you're paying me for something else." He wagged his eyebrows.

I laughed even as blood rushed up to heat my cheeks. "My father would have a heart attack." I was only half-joking about that. Offering him a smile, I said, "Just...don't do it, okay?"

"No problem." He slung his arm around my neck. "Shall we find our gate, my darling wife?"

"We shall." I pasted a smile on my face, hoping it would hide the hollow ache settling inside.

It was the shortest flight ever.

Or it felt that way.

As we collected our luggage, Astra watched me with gleaming eyes, and I had to poke her in the side and give her a death glare to keep her from saying something.

I didn't know what she wanted to say, but I had no doubt it would be something embarrassing. When Kaleb made a quick stop by the restroom, I found out.

"You two almost look like this is...*real*," she said, her voice low.

"That's the idea." I managed a non-committal shrug.

"Except there's no reason to play it so well right now. And I don't think you're *playing*." She tapped a bright pink fingertip against equally pink lips. "You like him. I mean, *really* like him."

"Well, yeah." I kept my eyes on the restroom. "What's not to like? We get along. He's funny and sweet. He's *not* into me because of my parents or my money."

"All good things," she agreed. "But this is just a temporary thing, remember? You don't really know him. So why does it seem so *not* temporary?"

"You're imagining things." I waved it off and started to add something, but a tall, blond figure caught my eyes, and I gave her a quelling look to keep her from pursuing it.

She arched an eyebrow, but lapsed into silence.

A moment later, Kaleb joined us and took his luggage, a single duffel bag which he hefted over his shoulder with ease. He also took my suitcase and Astra's, leaving us with our carry-ons and purses.

"It's so nice having a big, strong man around the house," Astra said, sighing lavishly.

"Stop it." I smacked her on the arm and moved to his side, gesturing toward the exit. "Our car is on the way. Won't take long."

"Your car?" he asked.

"We always have a town car pick us up," Astra said, checking her phone. "It's so much easier than trying to deal with parking and lugging our own luggage around. Of course, if you asked Piety's daddy, he'd insist that we take a limo."

I rolled my eyes. "Astra, stop. Your dad isn't much better."

“Oh, I know. Sometimes, he’s worse.” She flashed a sunny grin our way. “That’s why we never tell anybody when we’re going out of town. Then we don’t have to worry about unexpected chauffeurs showing up at our loft.”

We moved past the crush at luggage pick up and got outside just as the driver texted that he was there. “Perfect timing,” I said, gesturing to the car. “It’s Roy.”

We had a favorite, a guy we usually requested and most of the time, we got him. His worn, friendly face creased in a smile as we waved him down, and he studied Kaleb with curiosity as he held the door for us. Kaleb hesitated, eying the bags.

“I’ll get them, sir,” Roy assured him.

“Come on,” I said, tugging on Kaleb's hand.

After another moment, Kaleb climbed in after me, sinking back onto soft leather, but looking uncomfortable. “He’s...”

“If you let Roy hear you calling him old, he’ll have your heart on a platter,” I said, keeping my voice low. “He thinks he’s still thirty-two. Besides, he likes his job. He does this so he can help with his granddaughter’s college. Doesn’t have to. He retired from the military, but he wants to help.”

“Sounds like you know him.”

I nodded, but I didn’t go into any detail as Roy slammed the trunk shut and came around to the driver’s seat.

Kaleb still looked like he wanted to say something, but when I took his hand, he twined our fingers and slowly relaxed.

“So...are you ready for this?”

He stared out of the window as we pulled away from the airport, the Philadelphia city skyline slowly revealing itself. “Ready as I’ll ever be, I guess.”

“Welcome home!” Astra threw back the door and stepped into the loft we shared.

I still stood next to Kaleb, holding his hand.

The doorman was taking care of the luggage, yet another thing Kaleb was clearly not used to.

My life must seem so strange to him.

I didn’t mind carrying my own luggage. I was usually the one carrying it

down when I left – Astra too. But when we got back, the staff in our building, like Roy, made us feel like we were doing them injury if we didn't let them handle it. Granted, I think they appreciated the tips, and I had a feeling we tipped better than most of the people here, so maybe that was part of it.

But Kaleb was clearly not used to having his luggage handled for him or doors opened, and the expression on his face made me re-evaluate every little thing, even though I always told myself not to take anything I had for granted.

I didn't think I did. Many of the people Astra and I knew growing up didn't know what to make of us. While they'd been partying and shopping and heading off to Cancun for vacations in high school and college, we'd wanted to get involved with Habitat for Humanity. We hadn't been able to in high school, no matter how much we begged, so we'd done it in college, never even telling our parents.

Over the summers, we backpacked through Europe, staying at hostels instead of the lavish hotels our parents had pushed on us.

I knew I was a little spoiled, but I didn't want to live my entire life never seeing beyond the silver spoon.

Astra and I got along so well because we both felt the same way.

Now, though, I felt like I was seeing my life through somebody else's eyes and it was...weird.

I wasn't sure I liked it.

Shaking off the feeling, I pulled at Kaleb's hand. "Come on. Astra can wait for the luggage. I want to show you around."

"Ah...yeah. Yeah, sure." He looked a little dazed, eyes lingering on the huge windows that dominated one wall, facing out over the city, the river sparkling off to the east.

"We moved in the year before we graduated from college, handled all the designing, picking out the furniture." We walked into the large, wide-open living room space. "Our mothers kept insisting we let somebody from their circle recommend a decorator. But we didn't want a designer space. We wanted something comfortable."

"It's gorgeous," he said. Then he smiled a little. "And comfortable. I could sleep on that couch for a month, I bet."

"I've tried." Then I laughed.

I took him through the entire place, room by room, although I only gestured toward Astra's rooms. "She's a bit of a messy roommate, and the

lady who cleans for us has been on vacation in Puerto Vallarta this week. You don't want to look in there."

"It can't be any worse than..." He stopped, trailing off and shaking his head. "Never mind. I'll take your word for it."

I paused by another door and opened it. "One of the guest rooms. We have three. Sometimes we have a party here, and we'll let a guest stay over in case..." I rolled my eyes and mimed drinking from a bottle.

"You're a good mate."

"And this is my room." I bit my lip as I led him inside, still holding onto his hand.

It wasn't as large as my childhood room, but it was *mine* – decorated by me and only me. A rainbow of colors that shouldn't have worked erupted around us, cheerful and chaotic and wonderful. Orange and red and pink, blended with the colorful carpet I'd bought from a street vendor on one of my trips out of the country with my parents. It had appalled my mother, which made me love it even more.

The silk comforter on my bed was pink and orange, and it might have been too much for some, but I loved it. The walls were the only thing lacking in color. They were a pure, soft white, but there were bits and pieces of art, pictures, silk wall hangings that echoed the color design.

"I feel like I've fallen into a flower," he said, smiling as he turned to look at me.

"Is that a bad thing?"

"No." He smiled. "I like it. It's kind of like...you. Crazy and wild and... soft."

"Oh." Something I didn't want to think about made my throat close up. "Well, I think I like that."

"Good." He cleared his throat and ran a hand through his hair. "Well, should I...um. Any particular guest room I should take or can I just pick?"

I moved closer.

His pupils spiked, getting a little larger as I reached past him and nudged the door closed.

"I was kind of thinking that you could just stay with me."

## *Chapter Eleven*

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## KALEB

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*S*tay with me.

Her words lingered with me all through that night, clear into the next morning.

Standing under the hot, pulsating spray of the shower, I braced my hands against the wall and told myself to quit thinking about it – about *her*.

I needed to be thinking about my problems, of which there were many. I still hadn't heard back from Camry.

I'd left more than a couple of messages. She should have called by now. I didn't know if I wanted to be pissed or scared. I was a little of both, but I couldn't do anything about it here. And I couldn't leave until the bloody money was in my hand.

It was quiet, not even a whisper, but the brush of chilled air against my skin let me know that the shower door had been opened. I turned just as Piety pressed flat against me, her breasts warm and soft – *everything* about her was warm...and soft enough. She definitely had an athletic build. She had the look that made me think she could take a run down the beach and maybe even join me when I went out surfing.

It made me wonder if she'd ever gone surfing herself.

If not, I could teach her.

She pressed her mouth to my neck, and I reached out, gripping her hips. "If you need the shower, I can let you have it in a few minutes," I said, head falling to the side as she bit down.

*Fuck.*

"Hmmm. But I climbed in here because you're here." She eased back,



blinking the water out of her eyes. She pressed her hands against my chest and let them slide down, the path made slicker by water. "I was thinking we could engage in some...water conservation."

She slid her hand down to my cock.

"That's...an important issue," I said, the words rough.

She tightened her grip as she neared the tip, rotated her wrist as she moved closer to the base. It was enough to drive me to madness.

"Isn't it?" She licked water from where it ran down the midline of my chest, then she sank lower, giving me a view that I knew men would kill for.

Then she closed her mouth around my cock.

"Oh, shit."

She chuckled, and the reverberation had me slamming a hand against the wall. When she leaned forward, I eased my weight completely against the tile and threaded my fingers through her hair, shaking the water out of my eyes as I watched her swallowing my cock. I'd had her more than once since we'd met, but we'd both been too eager to take the time for this.

When the water clouded my vision again, I fumbled for the faucet and turned the spray off, shuddering out a groan as she paused a moment to lick the water away from my belly and left thigh.

"Didn't want to waste that water, since we're trying to conserve and all?" she asked, giving me a sly smile.

"Can't have that."

I grabbed her hair and tugged her mouth back. I clenched my teeth as she took me back inside, the wet heat almost enough to undo me. This time, she sucked on me with a fervor, not letting go until I was panting and half-mad. When she finally did, my cock slid from between her lips with a little *pop* before she stood up in front of me, raising onto her toes until our lips were pressed together.

The brush of her belly was damp against my cock, and I swore. I needed her again.

Spinning her around, I bent her over the built-in bench seat and drove inside.

She was even more wet and soft than usual, slick like satin.

And *naked*...

No.

"Shit. Condom," I said, groaning.

I started to pull away.

“Don’t stop.” It was a weak whisper, and I told myself to ignore it. To do the smart thing.

Then she reached down and closed her fingers around my balls. My eyes crossed and hot licks of pleasure-pain went shooting straight up my spine. Talk about having someone by the balls.

“Shit, Piety, I...fuck, we need a rubber.”

“I brought one. But...” She wiggled her ass back against me. “Do we really need it? You feel so good. I’m...safe. Protected.”

I rolled my hips against her, told myself again to pull out.

“Please, Kaleb. You feel so good like this.”

She looked over her shoulder, her eyes deepened to indigo.

How the hell was I supposed to say no to her?

“Yes,” I muttered, knowing I was doing something incredibly stupid. But if I was going to be stupid about something, I might as well be stupid for her.

And maybe for myself...a little. This once.

She squeezed my sack again, and I thrust against her again. I could only withdraw so far with her holding onto me, but the friction was perfect, sweet and tight. And then I heard her cry out and knew that I'd found her sweet spot.

“Fuck me, Kaleb.” She released me, using both hands to balance herself.

She didn't have to tell me twice, not when I finally knew what it felt like to be skin to skin with her. I doubted I could ever have it another way after this. I reached underneath us and found her clit, stroking it as I thrust into her, long, deep strokes that would get us to our climax quickly.

I planned on having her again in her bed, and then I'd take my time.

As I felt her clench around me, heard her gasp out my name, I wondered if I'd be able to let her go when the time came. I pushed the thought from my mind as I let my own orgasm roll over me. I pressed my mouth against her shoulder, murmuring her name as I emptied myself inside her.

I wouldn't think about the future. Not now. I'd enjoy what time I had with her. All of it.

“Think of a happy place.”

Glancing at Piety, I asked, “Are you telling me or yourself?”

“Myself.” She sighed glumly as she parked her car, a sexy little McLaren that had almost given me a hard-on just climbing inside. Riding next to her

had done the rest.

I'd almost asked if I could drive, but I thought that might be pushing it.

"I think this car is a damn happy place." I thought a moment, then smiled. "And the shower. That's a very happy place. Between your legs, that's a favorite. Should I continue?"

"Thinking about me crawling between my own legs isn't exactly making me nice and calm." But she smiled over at me.

"Oh, it's not making me *calm*." I took her hand, threading our fingers together. "It's giving me nice thoughts. Or dirty thoughts. Some might not consider those so nice, but whatever. Why do you look so nervous? This was your idea."

"Actually, it was Astra's." She rested her head on the padded headrest.

I did the same, enjoying the luxurious leather. These were moments I'd remember the rest of my life, and not just because I was sitting in a supercar that would make most men weep from the sheer beauty of it. It was the beauty *in* it. Piety was turning me inside out and we barely knew each other.

"She manages to talk me into the craziest shit. Always has. This wasn't any different. Hell, I think this was the easiest of all." She rolled her head on the seat and looked at me. "Because of you. You're incredibly easy to say yes to, you know that, Kaleb?"

"Am I?" I lifted her hand to my lips and kissed it. "I'd say the same of you. I'd say yes to just about anything you asked at this moment."

"Hold on to that thought," she muttered. She turned her gaze back toward the house. "You might not think so in a bit."

"Come on. They can't be that bad, can they?" I'd said something along those lines before. They'd raised Piety, after all.

But she gave me that grimace again. "Just remember...go to your happy place."

"I can't *believe* you did this."

I stood off to the side, remaining silent for the most part while Piety stood in front of her parents, looking like a queen. Her parents viewed themselves as royalty at least, no denying that.

Her father, one Senator Silas Van Allen had taken one look at me and dismissed me with barely a flicker of his lashes, right up until Piety had pressed a kiss to my cheek, and said, "Daddy, meet Kaleb Hastings. My

husband.”

Her mother had gasped in outrage, and looking from me to Piety and back like she expected us to tell her it was all some big prank.

“What are you going to tell Windsor?” her mother asked, her voice low, as if I wouldn’t hear them.

Of course, I was standing right there, and she damn well knew it.

“What do you mean, what am I going to tell Windsor?” Piety asked calmly. “I’m not going to tell him anything. Well, unless I run into him at a fundraiser or something. We hardly know each other.”

“You’ve been dating,” Silas said, his voice just as neutral as his daughter’s. But his eyes were...cold.

How could these two have created somebody like Piety?

She was so warm. So alive.

And they were like a couple of wooden dolls, complete with sticks up their respective arses.

“No, Daddy. You *wanted* us to date. I went out with him once or twice to get you off my back.” She lifted a shoulder and turned away, moving over to a long table stretched against the wall.

“Is that what this...this farce is about?” Silas demanded.

I tensed. I really didn’t like the way they were talking to their daughter.

His eyes came to mine. “Is that it...what did you say your name was?”

I didn’t respond. If he was smart enough to handle the political claptrap, he was smart enough to remember my name. He just wanted me to feel like I wasn’t important enough.

Fuck that.

“Kaleb,” he said slowly. “It *is* Kaleb, correct?”

“Yep, sure is, mate.” I exaggerated my accent and gave him a glib smile. If Piety wanted to piss him off, I might as well give her – and him – her money’s worth. “I’m a bit of a bastard, really, going and stealing Piety away like I did, marrying her without so much as inviting you. But we just couldn’t wait, could we, sweetheart?”

Piety was back at my side now, and some of the stress had melted from her eyes as she leaned against me. “No. We couldn’t.” Head resting against my arm, she gave her mom a dazzling smile. “Maybe we can plan a real ceremony here in a few months...something we can invite *everybody* to. The drive-in Vegas chapel thing was so...lame.”

“You got married...” her mother paused, a hand pressed to her chest,

“you went through one of those *drive-through* chapels?”

Piety waved a hand, forgoing the answer, which was probably a good idea since neither of us actually had any idea how the ceremony had gone. “It was just making things official. Kaleb and I knew what we wanted.”

Damn, she was good at this.

Sliding a hand down her back, I glanced at her father.

He was still skewering me with his eyes.

“Just what do you do, Kaleb?”

“Right now? Not much of anything.” I shrugged and turned my head into Piety’s hair, nuzzling her neck. “I had to quit my job so I could be with Piety.”

She gave me a smile so warm and sweet that my heart ached a little. Then it ached more as I reminded myself that this wasn’t real. None of it was. We enjoyed being with each other, but that was as far as it went.

“How...thoughtful of you,” Silas said. I could hear the fury pulsing in his voice. “And what was it you did before you quit?”

“Well, I didn’t hold the job long. I’d only taken it mainly to get some money and get over here to the States.” I had a feeling that would piss him off – and it did. His mouth tightened, and I could see the redness slowly creeping up his neck. He looked like he wanted to punch me already. And I hadn’t even gotten to the good part. “Back in Australia, I did a bit of this, bit of that. Planned on opening up my own surf shop, but that didn’t pan out. Anyway, I came over here after *Flames Down Under* took me on.”

“*Flames...*” It was her mother who said it. Amara’s face went white, and she looked from me to Piety before covering her mouth with her hand.

I bit back a smile. Her mother knew what *Flames Down Under* was. I’d have to point that out to Piety later if she hadn’t caught it already.

“You’ll have to help me out there, Kaleb.” His jaw was tight, yet he managed to sound calm, casual even as he continued. “I’m not familiar with *Flames Down Under*. Is it a restaurant?”

“No. It’s a dance troupe...of sorts.” I paused and then added, “We’re – well, it’s not *we* anymore since I quit – but *Flames* are kind of like the Aussie version of the *Chippendales*. Strippers.”

I added the last part in even though it wasn’t necessary. He’d figured it out.

“You married a *stripper*,” he said, finally giving up the pretense and whirling on Piety with rage stamped all over his features.

“I married *Kaleb*.” She lifted her chin and stared him down. “I’m hardly a child, Dad.”

“That’s hardly evident!” He flung a hand in my direction. “He just outright admitted that he came over here for money, shakes his ass...*for money*, and you went and married him. You don’t even know him!”

“I know what I need to know.” Piety looked over at me and the smile on her face did little to calm the anger that had started to burn in me.

The anger had nothing to do with what her father was saying about me – I didn’t give a damn about that – but he had no right to talk to her like that.

Bastard.

“And just what is that?” Silas held up a hand. “Never mind. I don’t want that answer. This is insane, Piety. I won’t stand for it.”

After a moment, he turned on his heel and moved to pick up a phone. He spoke quietly into it and then replaced it before looking at me, eyes hard and cold as steel. “I’m having a car brought around. The driver can take you... wherever. But I need to speak with my—”

“I’m not going anywhere without my wife.” I took Piety’s hand. “Not unless she wants me to.”

“This is my house, you son of a bitch,” Silas said, voice choked.

“And he’s my husband.” Piety tightened her hand around mine. “If he’s not welcome...well.” She glanced up at me. “Come on, Kaleb. Let’s go.”

“Piety, wait.” Amara rose as she spoke for the first time in several minutes.

“I won’t stand here and have Dad talk to me like I’m an infant.” Piety lifted her chin.

“Then stop acting like a child!”

I turned on the senator then. “Exactly what is your problem?”

He blinked, clearly caught off-guard by the *stripper* daring to talk to him.

Next to me, Piety tensed.

I continued, “I couldn’t understand it, the whole way here. Piety has been so...well, she’s amazing. I’ve seen her give her heart to people. She laughs, and she makes me laugh. She’s kind and sweet and funny and confident. And then on the way here, all that changes. Now I get it – she was worried about dealing with *you*.”

He opened his mouth, but at that moment, a towering man appeared in the doorway, his bald head gleaming as if it had been polished with wax. The thought made me chuckle, and I shook my head, amused at the absurdity of it

all.

“You think this is *funny*?” Silas asked, the words grinding between his clenched teeth.

“Sir, how may I be of assistance?” The giant eyed me narrowly.

“You aren’t needed, Timothy,” Piety said. “Dad was trying to make my husband leave, but if he can’t stay, neither can I. We’re both going.”

“Your husband...” Timothy – the giant – studied us for a moment, then nodded at Piety. “Congratulations.” Then he nodded at the elder Van Allans and left.

“She makes me happy,” I said without thinking. For a minute, this wasn’t a scam, wasn’t anything I was doing for money. I was just seeing the rage, the disappointment, all the negative emotions in the older man’s eyes – emotions directed at Piety – and it pissed me off. “And I think I make her happy. If you love her, I don’t understand what your problem is. Unless, of course, you’re more worried about your life than hers, and that makes you the son of a bitch here.”

A soft gasp escaped Piety at my words, and I decided I needed to stop before I said something stupid – or more stupid. Taking her hand, I lifted it to my lips. “Come on, love. Let’s go.”

“Thank you.”

We’d been driving in relative silence for the past ten minutes, and the soft words were loud.

I looked over at Piety. “You’re not mad?”

She laughed. “No. I...hell, Kaleb. There have been so many times I’ve almost said those exact same words to him.”

“Not being related to the uptight bastard makes it easier.” Grimacing, I added, “Sorry. He just...I don’t like how he talked to you.”

“It’s okay.” She smiled, her gaze locked on the road. “My parents love me, Kaleb. I know that. They just don’t understand me. Anyway...it went about as well as we could hope. Now we just...well, we’ve got the family reunion. Then you and I will have some massive blow-up, and we’ll call this quits so you can go on your way. I’ve got the money I promised you – half of it now, the rest after the family reunion. Okay?”

I swallowed hard. “Sounds good.”

“Oh, by the way...” She glanced at me. “Astra’s cousin is a lawyer. I

don't know if you're wanting to stay over here or go back to Oz, but we can talk to him. He can help you figure things out."

"Brilliant."

But I wasn't paying that much attention.

In a few more days, this would all be over.

I should have been relieved. I could focus on what really mattered. I could deal with Camry. Do what I'd come here to do.

Yet I wasn't relieved.

And even though she was sitting right there next to me, I was already missing my wife.



## *Chapter Twelve*

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## PIETY

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I checked the time.  
Again.

It was only ten minutes later than when I'd checked the last time.

Sighing, I dropped down onto the couch, determined to find some way to fill my mind.

Something underneath my butt managed to preoccupy my thoughts...for maybe two seconds.

I frowned as I pulled out a cell phone. Not mine.

"Kaleb's."

Had to be.

I rubbed my finger along the surface of it for a moment, nibbling my lower lip. Then I put the phone down and dropped my head back to the couch. He wasn't here, and I was slowly going out of my mind.

Astra had indeed worked her magic and gotten him a meeting with her cousin Samuel. Whether or not anything solid would happen today, I wasn't betting on it, but at least they could start the ball rolling.

I'd feel better if I was with him, but Kaleb had told me there was no need for me to go. Something told me that he wanted to go alone.

So I stayed home.

I wasn't *hurt* or anything. It wasn't like he needed me to hold his hand, and our marriage wasn't about a green card for him. Besides, I could use a little more downtime and relaxation before heading back to work next week. I certainly wasn't going to be getting any over the weekend.

I snorted at the thought and tried to picture how things would go when my dad already looked like he wanted to explode just thinking about Kaleb.

Dad had tried calling, but I'd ignored him.

He'd even broken down and texted even though he'd always insisted that texts were so impersonal. He didn't like emails, either, but understood they were how people communicated these days.

But texts?

Senator Silas Van Allen didn't *text*.

But he had sent me one earlier.

*You need to stop acting like a child and talk to me. Please join your mother and I for dinner.*

I'd responded with a simple question. *And Kaleb?*

*We haven't been able to spend time with you in several weeks. We need time to catch up. He can join us some other time.*

I'd given him a simple answer.

*No thank you.*

That had set him off, and Mom had taken over from there, but I was ignoring her too.

It was weird how freeing this was. Granted, it was all a farce, and I needed to think through how things would be after this, but for the first time, both my mother *and* my father had stopped trying to talk *through* me, stopped *looking* through me.

Yes, they were angry, but I could handle that.

I couldn't keep handling how they spent more time worrying about how *my* life was going to affect *theirs*.

If they were that hung up on it, they should have had a poodle instead of a daughter.

I checked the time again without any conscious thought, then groaned. It was going to be another hour, maybe two, before he was done with Samuel.

I was about to go out of my mind...

The phone next to me buzzed again and I looked down at it automatically.

A pretty girl's picture flashed up across the screen, along with the notification that he'd gotten a message.

"Don't do it, Piety," I muttered to myself.

He was a good-looking guy. He probably got messages from a *lot* of girls. Of course, he hadn't told me that he was involved. I hadn't asked.

But...

I'd married him, and we were having sex. It wasn't just about me, since I knew where we stood with each other. I didn't want to be the other woman. At least that was the excuse I gave myself as I swiped my thumb across the phone to unlock it.

Her name was Camry.

That was the first thing I noticed.

She was also flashing a wide, open grin into the camera.

She looked...happy. Sweet and young and happy.

Who was she?

The phone jolted in my hand as another message came through.

*Are you there, K? Come on...I need to know. Things are getting desperate here. You got the money or not?*

A strange, heavy sensation settled in my gut, and I closed the messages, putting the phone down.

I knew Kaleb needed money. He'd been honest about that from the beginning. Or had he?

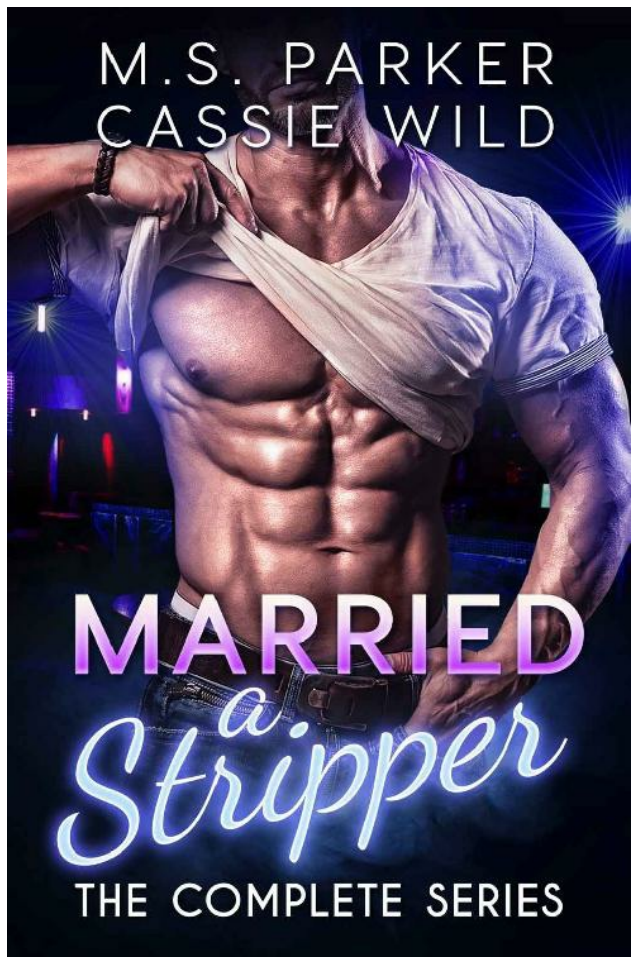
Had he known who I was from moment one? Astra said she remembered how things had gone the night Kaleb and I had gotten married, but how reliable was her memory.

Had Kaleb been playing me this whole time?

And just who the hell was Camry?

***Married A Stripper* continues in Part 2 and Part 3. [CLICK HERE](#) to download the complete 300-page story.**

M.S. PARKER  
CASSIE WILD

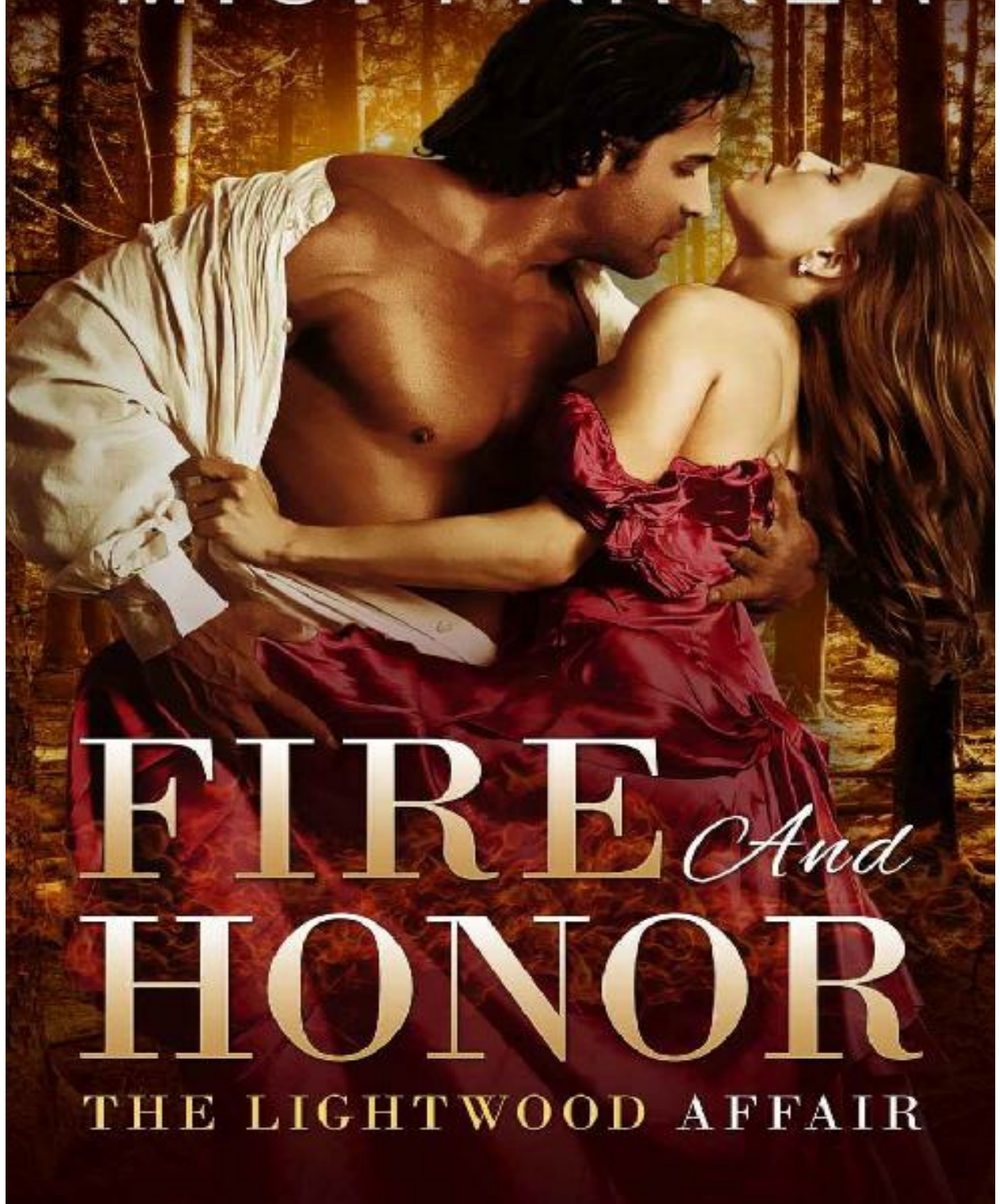


**MARRIED**  
*a*  
**Stripper**

THE COMPLETE SERIES

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

M. S. PARKER



FIRE *And* HONOR

THE LIGHTWOOD AFFAIR

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## BOOK DESCRIPTION

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When twenty-four-year-old Honor Daviot returns to the States after her latest tour overseas as an army medic, she's ready to settle down with her fiancé, and open her own pediatric clinic. A nice, quiet life, away from violence and war.

But fate intervenes when she crashes her car...and wakes up to find a handsome stranger watching her. His name is Gracen Lightwood, and he is unlike any man she's ever met before. Hot and sexy and...too bad he's also delusional. Not only is he wearing clothes that look like something out of a museum, he insists that the year is 1775.

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## CHAPTER ONE

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The bullet grazed my shoulder seconds before I realized what was happening, burning a path across my skin.

The noise around me was deafening. Automatic gunfire mixing with shouts in English and whatever dialect of Arabic our assailants were using. A hand pushed my head down, and my entire body slipped into the front floorboard as bullets slammed against the SUV's shell.

Shit!

"Get us out of here!" I snapped the order even as my brain was still registering the fact that what should've been a simple mission had turned into a shit-storm.

I looked up at Wilkins as he slammed on the gas, throwing all of us backwards. I tried to push myself up, already reaching for my weapon, but he shoved me down again. I glared at him but didn't try to move. He needed both his hands to drive, and I'd only be a distraction.

"Chew my ass out all you want when we get back to base, but for now, stay the hell down," he yelled, maneuvering the vehicle expertly as shots ricocheted off the SUV.

I didn't get up, but I did turn so I could see the rest of my team. Rogers was in the backseat, his hand on his side as I watched the blood stain his shirt. Instincts to serve and protect over-rode natural self-preservation, and I started to push myself up.

"Dammit, Honor, get your sexy ass down!" Wilkins shouted. "You can't help him if you're dead. I need ten minutes."

"He doesn't have ten minutes!" I shot back, shoving gauze against my



own flesh wound. It wasn't the first time Wilkins felt the need to protect me just because I was a woman. I can take on this war just as good as any man.

Wilkins quickly glanced behind him, cursed under his breath, and pushed down harder on the gas. Rogers groaned in pain as we hit a speed bump, but he shook his head at me when I leaned forward. Damn him and his ability to read what I was thinking. I gritted my teeth, my impatience making my fear secondary even though gunshots were still ringing around us.

As we moved out of range, Wilkins didn't slow, but he did gesture for me to move. I quickly jumped into the back seat, grabbing for my medic kit as I went. I picked up a pair of scissors and cut the hole in Rogers' shirt so I could get a better look at his wound. Working quickly, I caught Wilkins' eyes in the rearview mirror and glared at him before turning back to Rogers.

"Will he be okay?" Wilkins asked as he took another hairpin turn.

I ignored the question, keeping my mind on the task at hand as the SUV bumped from side to side on what passed for a road here.

"That was a little unexpected," Wilkins ventured.

I shot him another look, and this time, I couldn't keep my mouth shut. "This was the stupidest thing I've ever seen you do, Wilkins!"

"That's saying something," Rogers gasped out. His face was pale, and I had a feeling he was distracting himself.

"It was recon," Wilkins argued.

"It was miles away from where we should have been," I shot back. "I'm okay with dying for my country, but I don't want it to be because my driver was off doing his own thing."

Rogers put a hand on mine and managed a grin. "No one's dying here, corporal."

I could see how much pain he was in, but the fact that he could smile and was taking the time to reassure me helped me relax. Or, at least as much as I could relax over here.

I hardly ever slept.

It wasn't insomnia, per say, just the combination of adrenaline and my thoughts, which I had come to learn was never a good thing. Still, there was some consolation in being the only one up at an hour when everyone around was fast asleep. Things usually seemed clearer then, thoughts more discernible, and sometimes, I eventually got a couple hours of sleep.

Iraq was taking its toll on me. Hell, it took its toll on everyone, but I thought being a military brat had helped me be prepared. It hadn't. But I'd

done my duty. Six years in the army, having enlisted right out of high school, and I started to think I was ready to go home. Ready to be a civilian. The thought of opening my own pediatric practice was the only thing that seemed to make me smile these days. Still, I knew that I'd done the right thing by enlisting.

I kept pressure on Rogers' side until we pulled into the base camp, then yelled for some help. I was tall and strong enough to pass the physical part of being an army medic with flying colors. Rogers, however, was a giant and I doubted most men would be able to carry him without assistance. Less than two minutes later, we were in the infirmary and Rogers was getting the attention he needed.

I made my way down the dim hall, automatically blocking out the chaotic noise coming at me from all sides. I'd gotten used to the military atmosphere early on, my dad bringing home a small part of the army with him even after he retired. He ran the house like his own little unit, and to me, it had always been like I was part of something bigger than just my immediate family.

I recalled late nights on the couch with my brother while our father sat in his favorite chair, telling us stories about the army, our eyes wide with awe. Ennis had enlisted too, of course. It was how our family had put themselves through college for years. I'd never doubted that I'd do the same.

I stopped at Captain Riley Nolan's office, knocking lightly, and walking in when the call came for me to enter. I saluted and stood at attention.

"At ease, corporal," Nolan said, his pen dancing across the sheet of paper in front of him as he worked.

I watched the man work for another few minutes, admiring how easy it was for him to simply forget everyone around him and focus on one task after the other. I'd never come across Nolan and found him sitting around gazing at the sky, lost in his thoughts, pondering the meaning of the universe. If there was one man on earth who could pound a soldier into the ground with assignments, it was Nolan, and his ruthlessness matched his work ethics.

He reminded me of my dad.

"I hear you had a small run-in this afternoon," Nolan said as he sat back in his seat, his blue eyes boring into mine.

"We ran across some militia," I explained. "Nothing serious."

"I heard Rogers got shot," Nolan said. "You too. That seems pretty

serious to me.”

I hesitated, wondering just how much the captain had already heard, and how much he expected me to tell him. Wilkins had gone off route, and that wouldn't be easy to explain. I was stuck between not wanting to sell out Wilkins, and needing to tell my captain the truth.

Loyalty seemed like a simple enough concept until things went sideways.

“Mine was only a graze, and Rogers is patched up, ready to go, sir,” I said, choosing to go with Nolan's most recent comment rather than what I knew he wanted to hear.

I let out a slow breath and eased when the captain nodded and sat up straight in his chair, his hands fluttering through pages on his desk as he looked for something. I waited, wondering if that would be all when he held up a paper and handed it to me.

“You're going home, corporal,” he said as I reached out and took the order. “The entire unit, two weeks. Let them know.”

I nodded, trying my best to hide my smile and saluted again. I turned to leave when he spoke. “Tell Wilkins to get some good rest on leave, Daviot. We don't want him stressed and incapable of following orders.”

“Will do, sir,” I answered before walking out.

“So, will Bruce be waiting at the airport for you?” Rogers asked. He wagged his eyebrows. “Gonna get him some lovin'...”

I smacked him, then immediately regretted it when he groaned in pain.

“Sorry,” I chuckled. “Are you alright?”

“You're not sorry,” Rogers said, laughing as he pushed me away. He got up and stretched, feeling at his stitches as I went back to packing my bags.

Wilkins threw me a look. “You didn't answer his question.”

“I left Bruce a message,” I said, trying to hide the fact that my fiancé's inability to answer his cell phone was starting to get on my nerves. It wasn't like we had that much free time out here that we could pick and choose when we wanted to chat.

“A message,” Wilkins repeated, glancing at Rogers. “Do you hear that, Rogers? She left lover boy a message.”

I shot Wilkins a dangerous look. He laughed and raised his hands in surrender.

“Hey, don't get me wrong, but if it was my fiancée calling after months

apart, I'd as sure as hell answer that call on the first ring," he said, laughing.

"Mind your own business," I shot back, a half-smile creeping onto my face. "At least he's not trying to get me killed."

Wilkins had the decency to look embarrassed.

Rogers sat down on my bed and stretched his legs in front of him. He seemed quite spry, despite the fact that he had just been shot and had a big ass bullet yanked out. It always impressed me how much of a beating he could take and still keep going.

"I'm looking forward to steak dinners," he said, changing the subject as he looked up at the ceiling with a smile.

"A good old Mickey D's burger, that's what I want," Wilkins chimed in. "I don't care what poison they've got in that thing, I'm going to eat enough of them to last through my next deployment."

I thought back to my mom's roast, the dinner table set up so the entire family could enjoy the meal. Being away made the little things more precious, made me realize how much I'd taken for granted growing up.

"How about you, Daviot? What's the first thing you want to eat when you get home?"

I thought about it for a minute and couldn't really narrow things down to one preference. I just wanted to get home. I had two months left before I had to decide whether or not I planned to re-enlist, and I'd been debating about it for the past couple weeks. I wanted to get married, finish my degree, open my own pediatric practice and leave the war behind me. I was done fighting, or at least I thought I was, the uncertainty in my mind like a dark cloud of what-ifs and maybes. No matter how many times I tried to make a decision, I was always overwhelmed with the responsibility of making the *right* choice.

My mother had started a tradition when I was in the seventh grade. After dinner, we'd all share our problems, dilemmas, basically anything that bothered us. We talked things over, weighed pros and cons, asked for advice. Granted, we didn't always share things we considered embarrassing, but we'd always done our best to try to help with whatever issue was presented.

Going home might actually make things easier, even if I had a feeling my father would want me to stay in the army.

"Not sure," I finally said. "A good drink, maybe?"

Wilkins smiled. "Ah, girls' night out. Maybe I should come to Boston with you."

"Well, it wouldn't be a girls' night without you, would it?" I shot at him.

“There will come a day, Daviot, when you’ll realize that I’m the only man in the world for you,” Wilkins teased.

I gave him the finger and then smiled as Rogers fell back and laughed, each one punctuated with wincing of pain.

“I never really understood long distance relationships,” Wilkins went on. “Why not just have an open thing so you could hook up with whoever you wanted. Come to think of it, I should get one of those. Maybe even two or three.”

“You’re disgusting, you know that?” I shot at him, smiling despite myself.

“Come on, Daviot, you know I’m right.” Wilkins shrugged. “Long distance relationships never work out.”

I glared at him as I zipped my carry-on shut. We had an early flight out, so I wanted to get some shut eye. If I could.

Turns out, I could. I slept that night, and I dreamed.

I hadn’t dreamed in years, or at least none that I could remember. I was usually too tired that when I finally did sleep, my body shut completely down when it couldn’t take being awake any longer. Insomnia trumped all. There was rarely time for dreams.

Tonight was different though. I was in a field, a large one, somewhere I didn’t recognize, dressed in clothes I’d never worn, running between men with muskets as mounds of earth blew up into the air. I could feel the adrenaline coursing through me, the urgency in my step.

I glanced back at the men running behind me, each muddy and clearly tired, though pushing on with dogged ferocity. My entire body shivered with excitement, and I pressed on with them.

In my dream, something exploded beside me, throwing me to the ground even as it woke me.

I looked around, sweating, shivering, and squinting as I tried to calm the pounding in my chest, the breaths that were coming in gasps. I barely registered the sleeping bodies of my unit, squinting in the darkness as I tried to wrap my head around what I’d just experienced. It had been so vivid, so real.

I laid back down and covered my eyes with my arm. I needed sleep, but I wasn’t sure if I’d get anymore tonight.

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## CHAPTER TWO

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I touched down at Logan Airport with a genuine smile on my face. The idea of finally being home had truly hit me when we'd crossed into Massachusetts. I was home. As the captain announced our descent, he added that it was a beautiful June afternoon, and then thanked the service men and women who were on board. The heat was still in my cheeks as I exited the plane. I liked knowing that my service was appreciated, but I'd never really liked being put on the spot.

I was looking forward to seeing my parents and brother, but at the moment, just being on home soil was enough. It'd been almost a year since the last time I was stateside, and if I decided not to re-enlist, I'd most likely never experience this again.

One of the best things about being part of a military family was that I knew they understood how I felt. I called my brother to tell him the good news, and it was nice not to have to try to explain things like I would have if Bruce had picked up his phone.

Ennis also never edged around the tough questions, but rather asked flat-out if I'd made a decision about joining civilian life. He also understood how difficult the decision was. Two years older than me, he'd taken the plunge first, deciding to pursue his doctorate in education with a focus in American history. Our dad had taken it better than Ennis and I thought he would. Now, it was my turn, and I was glad to know that my brother had my back.

I just wished my fiancé was as understanding.

I called Bruce two more times, both times leaving a voice message about my leave because he hadn't picked up. It was hurtful, I had to admit, that he

didn't go out of his way to answer my calls. We'd known each other for so long, had dated on and off since junior high. We'd been friends even before that. It was hard enough that he never supported my tours without him completely ignoring my calls.

Wilkins had told me more than once that Bruce was a lost cause, and lately, I'd begun to believe it. We'd been exclusive to each other since we were sixteen, engaged by nineteen. He'd been the only one for me, but since I'd enlisted, I had a feeling that things were one-sided on that account. I'd never confronted him about it, but recently, I had to admit that part of the reason I'd stayed quiet was because I didn't want to hear the answer. I just couldn't deal with that kind of a discussion and still function optimally in battle.

I could almost hear the excuses he'd make if I did ask. He made them about other things often enough.

*You're never around. You're off playing hero. I have my needs.*

It always made my blood boil to hear him talk like that, but I couldn't deny that strengthening my relationship with Bruce was one of the reasons I was thinking of not re-enlisting. I kept telling myself that things would be better when I was home full time.

My seatmate kept up a steady stream of chatter as we stepped out into the main concourse where she was smothered by a man double my size. I smiled at them, watching various other passengers share welcomes with those waiting for them. I looked around for Bruce but couldn't find him in the crowd.

I frowned as I looked at my phone again, wondering if I'd missed his call. Nope. Nothing there. I double-checked to make sure I'd turned off airplane mode, then scowled as I wondered if he'd forgotten about the flight, even though I'd sent him a text message to remind him of the time and gate number. What was the point of having a cell phone if he didn't answer?

When it came to being there for me, Bruce needed to step up his game. I didn't really feel like spending the rest of my life with someone who could so easily forget that I even existed. Not showing up at the airport was just one more time he'd let me down.

I decided to step back a bit, giving him the benefit of the doubt, already feeling the fatigue setting in. At some point, I'd have to trust that he would come through. I was just waiting for the day for that to actually happen.

By the time Bruce finally answered my call, I was sitting in the airport

coffee shop with my bags and a hot cup of cappuccino in front of me, regretting not taking up my brother's offer to have him skip his classes and pick me up.

When I heard Bruce slur his greeting, as if he was just now waking up, I forced myself to swallow my anger.

“Hey, it’s me.”

“Honor?”

“Yeah,” I said, taking a sip from my coffee, savoring the flavor. “Where are you?”

“I’m in bed,” Bruce coughed. “Why?”

Annoyance flared. What the hell? It was the middle of the afternoon. “You didn’t get my messages? Any of them?”

“What messages?”

I gritted my teeth. “I’m at the airport, Bruce, waiting for you to pick me up.”

“You’re what?” He suddenly seemed wide awake. “When did you get there?”

“*There?*” I asked, ignoring the question. “What do you mean by *there*? Where are you?”

He hesitated before answering, “I’m in Vegas, Honor. I took some vacation time and flew out yesterday. I’m sure I told you.”

It took every ounce of energy and willpower to keep my voice level. “You can’t be serious?! I have leave for two weeks, and you’re in Vegas? I called you three times in the past two days. Why didn’t you pick up?”

“Damn, take it easy, babe. I didn’t see them.” He sounded more annoyed than I thought he had the right to be. “But, hey, since you’re still in the airport, just hop on a plane and come here. You’d love the room.”

I sighed heavily, trying to calm myself down. “I just got in, Bruce. I’m not about to jump on another plane.”

“Why not? You’re already jet lagged. You could catch a few hours of sleep on the trip.”

I closed my eyes. I shouldn't have to explain this to him. “I’ve already been in the air for more than twelve hours. I’m not getting on a six-hour flight to Vegas just because you forgot about me.”

Hot tears pricked at my eyelids, and I took a shaking breath in an effort to keep them back. Fatigue and frustration were doing a number on my usual composure.



“Listen, I’m sorry, I really am,” he said, his voice turning sexy and low. “I had no idea. Please, just get on a plane and come here. Spend your leave with me. We can get married in Vegas, baby. Isn’t that what you always wanted? An exotic wedding?”

“Having Elvis marry us isn’t my idea of exotic, Bruce.” My head was starting to pound.

There were times when arguing with Bruce was completely useless. I blamed it on the fact that, for the past seven years, we’d spent ninety percent of our time together in different states. Sometimes different continents.

I remember Rogers once telling me that he admired how well we were keeping a long distance relationship going. It was times like this that I wondered how functional that relationship even was.

“Okay, seriously, give me a break already.” Bruce broke into my thoughts. “I thought you wanted to get married. Isn’t that why we’re engaged in the first place?”

I bristled. “We’re getting married because we want to, not because you’re trying to make it up to me.”

“Make what up to you?” Bruce shot back. “I had no idea you were coming back today, Honor. Let it go.”

“I called you three times!” My frayed temper boiled over, and I knew I was talking too loud. “Left three messages and half a dozen texts. You couldn’t bother to check your phone?”

“I was busy,” he argued, his voice full of anger.

“You’re in Vegas! What the hell is keeping you busy?”

“Stop shouting,” he snapped. “I don’t need this right now.”

*He didn't need this?*

“I just got back from Iraq, Bruce. Iraq. You’re an investment banker in Boston who’s on vacation in Vegas. I’m the one who doesn’t need this. All I wanted was to come home to my family and spend some quality time with my fiancé before I had to hop on a plane back to hell!”

“You’re going back?”

I was suddenly glad that he wasn’t here, because if he’d said that to my face, I probably would have hit him. I struggled to lower my voice. “Have you not listened to a single word I’ve said?”

There was an awkward silence that lasted forever as each one of us waited for the other to speak. When it was apparent that neither of us would break the silence, I hung up before I would say something I regretted.

For the first time since I'd known him, I hated Bruce.

My hands shook as I stared into my coffee and tried to get my temper under control. I had no idea how much more of this I was willing to take. Long distance relationships were hard enough, and I didn't need the extra stress of a fiancé who couldn't care enough to work at it.

The phone in my hand rang, and I didn't need to look at the caller ID to know it was Bruce. He'd probably come up with a dozen other ways of how this was my fault. Enlisting when he'd made it clear that wasn't what he wanted made everything since that moment my fault. I let it go to voicemail and tried my best to compose myself. I didn't want to break down completely. Not here. I needed to pull my shit together myself enough to decide if I wanted to wait for Ennis to be done with his classes, call my parents, or rent a car. Right now though, I couldn't think.

The third time he called, I answered just so he wouldn't keep calling.

"Come to Vegas," he said without any preamble. "Come to Vegas and let's get married."

He really didn't get it. He thought asking me to fly out to see him and change our status from engaged to married would fix what was broken between us.

"I can't, Bruce." The fatigue I felt before settled even deeper into my bones. "I need to think about a lot of things. I need to rest. I need to go home and see my family. Talk to them about what I want to do."

I didn't mention talking to him about decisions influencing my future. *My* future. I sighed. I didn't even think of it as *our* future.

"Just get on a plane, babe," he said. "I'll pay for it."

"It's not the mon—" I started but realized that whatever I said right now, it would just go right over his head. I sighed. "I'll try and book a flight out on Saturday."

"Why wait until Saturday?" He sounded petulant, like a child rather than a twenty-five-year-old man. "You said it yourself. You could be here in six hours, not two days."

Ennis once said that Bruce was one of those people who thought the world revolved around them and didn't understand why anyone would want to do anything other than what he wanted. Over the past couple years, I'd seen that side of Bruce more than I cared to admit.

"I'll call you later tonight." I hung up before we started shouting at each other again.

It took me another hour to get up from my seat, mostly because it took that long for my brain to quiet down. I called my parents and let them know that I'd be renting a car and driving out. Neither of them seemed surprised that Bruce hadn't shown up. I didn't tell them about Vegas. They already weren't fond of my fiancé. I didn't need to add any additional fuel to that particular fire.

Now that I'd decided what to do about transportation, I quickly found the closest Budget Rental, filled out the paperwork and gave the man behind the counter my driver's license. He asked me about my trip, and when he found out I was stationed in Iraq, started bombarding me with questions. Apparently, his cousin was stationed there too. I didn't recognize the name but let him carry on a one-sided conversation while he entered my information into the computer.

I took the keys and made my way outside, led by the man as he started to talk about why he couldn't enlist, as if he owed me some kind of explanation. By the time I was behind the wheel and driving away, the throbbing in my temples had turned into a full-blown headache.

I needed real food and sleep. Like two days' worth of both.

My parents had a small house outside the city, a suburban haven where my father felt he was farthest away from the noise. After a childhood of moving from base to base, I'd been thrilled when we'd moved into a permanent residence.

I'd often talked to Bruce about buying our own place in the same neighborhood, but he'd always shot the idea down. He'd grown up three houses down the street, but he now said he needed the life of the city to thrive. It was funny that how, only now, I was starting to clearly see the things I'd ignored about him before.

It wasn't like me to keep my head in the sand, to refuse to address what was right in front of me. I pressed my fingers to my temple. Why now? Why him? Was I so desperate to achieve my happy ever after that I'd clung stubbornly to the one man I'd always thought would share it with me?

Every argument we ever had came rushing back. It was like my mind was re-playing everything for me, hinting at the fact that maybe, just maybe, it was about time to let this whole thing go. To let Bruce go. The thought of it made my stomach turn, but another part of me realized this was merely a prequel to the emotions I would feel if I actually went through with it.

Maybe him not being here was for the best. Besides, I needed to spend

time with my parents.

It was only when I was on McClellan Highway that I finally rolled the window down and breathed in the Boston air. The Chelsea River whispered at me from my left, and I let out every ounce of negative energy inside me, finally allowing myself to smile. Bruce could wait, I thought to myself. For now, it was just good to be home.

The screeching to my right yanked me from my pleasant thoughts, and I turned my head to see a blue sedan spin out of control. I slammed on the brakes and swerved, hoping to avoid a collision as I cut across the highway. I waited for the impact, but it never came. My car's front bumper barely missed the other car as it skidded and flipped.

Before I could swerve back, the loud screams of a horn told me the danger wasn't over. My turn had me right in the middle of oncoming traffic and drivers who were going too fast to stop. In front of me, a truck was trying to brake hard, but I knew there wasn't enough room.

I braced myself as the truck slammed into my car, the force bending the driver's side inwards, the window and windshield showering me with safety glass. I closed my eyes to protect them, my hands holding tight onto the steering wheel as the entire car turned. Before I knew what was happening, I was upside down, the truck's tires screaming behind me, my rental flipping once, twice, three times, until it slammed down on its wheels.

I heard more screeching, and somewhere in the distance, a crash that told me things weren't over yet. It was going to be a pileup, and the only thing I could think of as I sat strapped into my seat, unable to move, was that these people would need a doctor and that I was the first on the scene.

The world went fuzzy then, and I heard someone shouting in the distance. My eyes opened and closed as I tried to stay conscious. I felt a hand grab my shoulder, barely registering the man shouting at me, asking if I was okay. I looked at him, frowning as his face seemed to flicker and change. He tried to unlock my seatbelt, and for a second I saw the whole world around me shift, saw my car and the road disappear, morph into an empty, open field. And then things went back to the real world. Cars and blood and noise.

"Can you move your legs?" the man asked me.

I mumbled something incoherent, trying to tell him that he was working the wrong seat belt, when the entire world around me darkened, blurred. The last thing I felt were his hands under my shoulders, trying to pull me out of the car, and then...

Nothing at all.

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## CHAPTER THREE

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I was never much of a believer in anything supernatural or paranormal.

It had nothing to do with upbringing since my parents were both Catholics. They'd raised Ennis and me in the church, but it had mostly consisted of baptisms and holidays. They hadn't been overly religious, but if asked, they'd both have said they believe in God.

I never had, not really. Maybe once I'd believed in the concept of a general higher power. Then I went to Iraq. The deaths I saw, the sheer incomprehensible darkness that man had towards one another, well, it made what belief I'd possessed falter.

Maybe that was why I couldn't understand what was happening.

At one point, I thought I saw a bright light, something along the lines of a tunnel, like the kind of images people talked about when they died. Then, in a flash, it was gone, replaced by only darkness and flashing lights, different colors, each blinking long enough to capture my attention, making me turn my head towards it before being captivated by another.

"Honor?"

I turned my head towards the voice, the image of Bruce materializing out of the darkness. The smile he'd always used to win me over flashed across his face as he seemed to float towards me, hand outstretched, welcoming.

"Come to Vegas," Bruce said.

I frowned at him, and just like that, he disappeared. It was like his entire being broke apart into tiny particles that blew away as if he'd been made of pure dust that sparkled and shone as it flew around me in a whirlwind of tiny

colors.

“Who are you?”

Another voice, one I couldn't make out. Far away, yet close at the same time. I felt a pressure on my shoulders, and then it was gone. I was floating in an ocean of nothingness, my legs kicking out slowly. I remembered videos of astronauts in space and how they floated about their space stations in zero gravity and wondered if this was how they felt.

Was this what death was like? Was I in space?

“Honor?”

I looked around, swimming to adjust the rest of my body toward where the sound was coming from. I saw Bruce again, but he was younger now, the boy I'd first met before sixth grade. He was barely eleven then, with his ruffled hair, Pacman t-shirt, and high-tops, sitting on his BMX as he looked at me.

I smiled at him, but he didn't smile back. He was looking past me at someone else, and before I could turn my head to see who, a little girl ran past me. Dressed in jeans, and a ridiculous green shirt and braids, I instantly recognized my middle school self the first day I'd met Bruce.

“That is so cool,” she – *I* – squealed as she grabbed Bruce's bike. “Can I ride it?”

I smiled. I remembered the first day I tried the bike, Bruce running beside me as I raced down our street, the wind in my face, my eyes closed as I enjoyed the feeling of flying. We had spent the entire day together. The first of many days together.

I felt a small ache on the right side of my knee, and I looked down to see something glowing there, a reminder of a day Bruce and I had snuck out after dark and had tried to ride the bike down the hill behind our houses. I'd fallen, I remembered, scraping my knee against a rock, the blood coming from the wound scaring both of us, but not enough to run home and face our parents. Bruce had tried to stop the bleeding as best as he could, and I'd done everything I could not to scream bloody murder.

I smiled. We'd been so innocent then, the only worries in our lives being what our parents would do if they caught us outside when we weren't supposed to be.

“You should get one,” child-Bruce told the little girl by his side. “Then we can race!”

I grinned.

“Grow up, Bruce!”

I almost laughed as I heard the snarky tone that was my go-to voice for the first two years of high school. I saw the teenager I'd been then, my long hair tied back in a ponytail, kicking at Bruce as he tried to shoot at me with a water gun.

“Come on, Honor!” he teased. “Show me what you’re made of.”

I remembered how much I'd held back from hurting Bruce that day, my feelings for him mixed and perplexing. The boy who was sometimes charming and sometimes a complete ass. I'd fallen for him hard even though we'd both agreed to keep things casual for a while – so what we had didn't go against his “one-month policy.”

“One girl for one month,” Bruce had told me once. “That’s all the energy I have.”

I'd hated that about him, how he made me feel special while at the same time assuring me that he had no intentions of making something long-term work.

Then he'd made it official on my sixteenth birthday, moving us from a casual friendship to an exclusive couple.

Except now I wondered how much of his original attitude had always been beneath the surface, hovering in the background. How much of it was still there.

The teenagers disappeared, disintegrating in the same cloud of smoke that had taken him before, and for a few minutes, I was surrounded by nothing but darkness. I floated about uneasily, my eyes waiting for the next set of images, memories to fill in the blankness about me. I felt pressure on my shoulders again, as if someone was trying to shake me awake, and I shook it off. In the distance, I heard gunfire, loud and threatening, and a shiver ran through me. Something exploded farther away, and suddenly I felt hands grab me by the arms, pulling at me, my body moving through the empty space around me as if on their own.

“We need to find shelter,” I heard a man's voice say, and I quickly looked about to locate the source of the voice.

To my right, something flickered into view, hazy at first, a figure I couldn't recognize. A man. I squinted for a better look, but he quickly disappeared as the hands on my arms loosened.

I was floating again.

“Go slow.”



My voice this time.

I watched as my bedroom assembled itself around me. I watched the teenager in my bed, under the covers, with Bruce on top of me. I remembered that night clearly, the first time we'd slept together, a week before senior prom. My parents had been visiting my aunt in Connecticut, and Bruce had come over to spend the night.

Despite the awkwardness, despite the initial pain, it had been a good night. Many of my friends told me that the first time was never good, but my first time had been okay. The touch of his hand, the heat between us, the way his lips had caressed me. For the first time since we'd become a couple, I felt a true connection between the two of us. It made the wrong between us better.

“Marry me.”

He'd proposed the next morning, two high school kids sitting at the kitchen table in our underwear, sipping coffee as we smiled at each other. It had been a strange proposal, sudden, out of the blue, and we'd laughed it off as us being too young, but Bruce had continued to make comments about our future as if it'd been set. When he proposed for real a little over a year later, I'd accepted without a second thought.

My father had been against it, voicing his opinion about Bruce loud and clear – sometimes in front of Bruce – but eventually, I'd made him come around enough to at least be civil to my fiancé.

Not that I would've changed my mind. I could be stubborn when it suited me.

The scene from my past disintegrated, and I was left alone again with my thoughts, floating in my endless nothingness, wondering when it would end. There was more gunfire, another explosion, but this time, no hands pulled me.

Without warning, the darkness around me began to dissipate, replaced with bright colors of white and blue and yellow. I saw images I couldn't make out, flashing quickly, randomly, appearing and disappearing just as fast.

An old woman with grandchildren sitting in a circle around her as they smiled at her.

A man walked into a hospital room, and my heart fluttered.

Bruce standing by my side, his smile sad, his face aged.

The images became sensations. Sounds.

Someone held my hand and squeezed.

A sweet and gentle kiss.

A soft and loving touch.

A hug.

A scream.

A baby's cry.

A child's laugh.

It was all so sudden, so overwhelming that I could barely breathe.

The hands were on my shoulders again, pulling, this time, more desperately, and I lashed out. Hands grabbed my wrists and pinned my arms down. Someone hissed at me to calm down. I tried to move again, and the hands tightened.

I was being shoved, as if a force had taken my entire body and was pushing it toward something. I felt the friction of the air against my body as the force picked up speed, and then suddenly, it was like I was being catapulted through the darkness, unable to stop myself. I opened my mouth to scream, but nothing came out. Then, just as quickly as it started, it stopped.

I opened my eyes.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

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There's this place between sleep and fully awake where, as a child, I'd often found myself lost, my mind trying to decide whether it should come into focus or just slip back into slumber. I hadn't felt that feeling in a long time. Morning in the military didn't allow for that sort of reflection.

I felt it now though.

It took me a few minutes, long minutes that I relished in, but soon my mind made its decision and decided waking up was the best option. A part of me felt cheated out of some much needed rest, but I opened my eyes regardless.

When the world finally came into focus, the first thing I registered were the stars. There were millions of them shining in the sky above me, a tapestry of little lights that looked like a large connect-the-dots picture that was begging to be drawn. I'd never seen this many before, not even in the desert.

I remembered a time when my father had taken me and Ennis stargazing, something about being able to find our way if we ever got lost. I hadn't paid much attention then, being more concerned with the upcoming junior dance than I was with stars. I found myself wishing I'd paid better attention, because what I was seeing not only amazed me but brought back childhood memories that seemed a little incomplete.

*"One day, Honor," my father had said, "these little dots in the sky might be your salvation."*

He was always saying things like that, my father, and I had always scoffed at it. He was a philosophical man, a part about his personality I'd

never understood, especially with the military background. My mother said it was that part of him that had helped her see past the chiseled personality and no-bullshit attitude he usually carried around.

I loved the man, but to me, he would always be Peter Daviot, ex-army, the man who still scared the shit out of Bruce. After what Bruce had just pulled, maybe he deserved to be scared.

I blinked a few times as my eyes watered, the soft breeze around me picking up, brushing some hair into my eyes. My neck clenched when I tried to move it, the sharp pain shooting upwards and giving me an instant headache that made me groan. I felt the back of my head, my hand pressing softly on a bump there that pulsed at my touch. I winced, hoping the nasty thing didn't mean I had a concussion.

In an instant, it all came back to me. The drive down the highway, the sound of the Chelsea River, the accident, the skidding, the crashing. Images of it all flashed through my mind, and for several seconds, I panicked. I felt around me, my hands touching soft grass, wet with the night's dew...and then I wondered where everyone was.

There were no sirens nearby, no screaming or shouting, no hands on my head or under my body, trying to carry me to safety. It was like I'd been thrown out of the car and had landed where no one was looking. Was I thrown out of the car? I couldn't remember.

I tried to push myself up, but the headache mixed with dizziness and the world around me spun out of control. I closed my eyes and tried desperately to fight the vertigo as I laid back down, wondering just how much damage the accident had done. The bump on my head was definitely enough to make me think twice about immediately inspecting the rest of my body.

My mind went back to the accident, how the truck had slammed into my car, how I'd felt my car do somersaults before stopping dead. It was a miracle I was alive, really, but it still bothered me that I was lying out in the open with no help. I didn't remember being thrown, but it was the only thing that made sense. Except I couldn't hear any sirens or anything else for that matter. It was like the world had forgotten about me.

A muffled gunshot made my eyes snap open, and I was back in Iraq. I sat up immediately, ready for the worst. My entire body screamed in protest. My head, angered at the sudden movement, felt like I'd taken a jackhammer to my skull. No matter what happened with the car, my body was warning me that I was in no way ready to face whatever it was I was getting ready to face.

But, the adrenaline had kicked in, and the pain was slowly fading into the more manageable background.

I got up slowly, pushing first onto my knees before I attempted to stand straight. Severe pain shot through my leg, and I quickly found myself on the ground again, the fire in my ankle scorching as I shut my eyes in frustration.

Dammit!

“I am quite surprised you are able to stand.”

My head snapped around as I realized for the first time that I wasn't alone.

I couldn't see him clearly, and it was definitely a him. The voice was masculine, with a hint of some sort of accent I didn't recognize. It was dark despite the starlight, and the corner he sat in threw shadows across him that made it impossible for me to discern any features.

He shifted, one leg moving over the other as the coat he wore seemed to flutter about him. A hat covered his head, broad-brimmed and rolled up on one side. What looked like a cane protruded from under his coat, and I could see the tops of a pair of strange-looking boots.

He looked like he had been on his way to a costume party.

I rolled over so that I sat up in front of him, my eyes squinting as I tried to get a good look at him. He cocked his head and pointed at me.

“Quite an unusual choice of attire,” he said. “Where are you from?”

The accent was some kind of British and would have been exotically appealing if I hadn't started to feel the adrenaline ebb and the pain return.

“Are you the one on guard duty?” I asked, my voice so raspy I barely recognized myself. I wondered if he had volunteered to stay with me until the medics arrived. Maybe they hadn't wanted to move me just yet. Maybe I'd rolled down an embankment. My brain was still trying to make sense of it all.

“No,” he said, sounding amused. “I am simply waiting until morning.”

I frowned and coughed, my throat burning as I tried to speak. “Out here?”

“The safest place for now.”

Great, I thought. They left me with a complete lunatic.

I tried to get up again and groaned in pain, my ankle letting me know that moving about was not a good idea. I winced as I dragged myself to a nearby tree and leaned my head against the bark. I looked about, trying to discern which way the highway was but couldn't see anything in the dark. Where were the lights?

“You seem lost.”

I fought the urge to say something snarky in response.

“Do you need anything to drink?” he asked.

I hadn’t thought about it until he mentioned it, and I suddenly noticed that I was parched. I nodded, not trusting my voice again.

He stood slowly, then walked out into the dim light of the stars, allowing me to get a better look at him. Damn, he was good-looking. Pale curls brushed his shoulders as he handed me his flask, and I found myself staring into a pair of intelligent eyes whose color was undetectable in the darkness. He frowned at me, a look that was less than friendly, and I wondered how long he had been sitting there, waiting for me to wake up.

The man was definitely dressed for some sort of event, his overcoat falling well below the knees, two rows of buttons down the front, the lapels lying loose and barely hiding the breast coat labels below. He wore a pair of breeches over stockings that went up to his knees, the side buckles the loudest sound in the darkness.

I took a drink from the flask, instantly spitting it out when the strong taste hit my tongue. I'd never tasted anything like it.

“I don’t have a lot of that,” he said, sitting down again. “I would prefer to save a bit for the remainder of the night.”

I took another drink, winced as I swallowed, and then closed the flask again. I looked down as I felt something rough against the pads of my fingers. The initials carved into it were easy to read, even in the dim light.

“GL?” I rasped out.

“Gracen Lightwood,” he explained.

I wondered if the accent was real. I knew there were nuances to British accents that specified where people were from, but I'd never been able to tell the difference.

“And you?” he asked.

“Daviot,” I replied and began to cough again. My throat hurt like a bitch.

“That sounds French,” Gracen said.

I shrugged. “American, born and raised.”

“Born and raised?” He repeated the phrase back to me like he'd never heard it before.

Okay, maybe he wasn't as smart as I first thought.

“I was a military brat for the first few years of my life, so I was all over before my father decided to move us out to the suburbs after he retired,” I managed to say. “What about you?”

He was quiet for a minute, then leaned forward, his elbows resting near his breeches buckles as he tipped his hat up a bit.

“Is this how all natural born colonists speak?”

Wow, he was really going all out for this role.

I looked around me again, my eyes adjusting to the dark, the terrain unfamiliar to me. In the distance, I heard more gunfire, a few shots that echoed across the night sky, but there was something strange about them I couldn't quite place. I squinted and tried to make out where the highway was, but couldn't see anything.

“Where are we?” I asked, starting to get nervous.

“We are outside Boston,” he said. “I found you lying a bit off that way,” he pointed East, “in a most peculiar fashion, I might add. You took me quite by surprise.”

I frowned. So he wasn't babysitting me after all. Apparently, no one even knew I was here. A flash of fear went through me. I could handle myself, and I wasn't a small woman, but I estimated him to be at least six-four. And I was injured.

“Where's the highway?” I asked, perking my ears, hoping to hear the sounds of distant vehicles, something to give me an idea of where I was and how I could get away from the man sitting across from me.

“The highway?”

“Yes, the highway,” I said, my tone sharpening before another coughing fit silenced me for a moment. “I was in an accident, and I was probably thrown out of my car. I need to get back there.”

He was staring at me now like I was the one with a few screws loose.

“Oh, come on, drop the gimmick already, would you,” I rasped. “I'm beat up pretty bad, and I probably need medical attention.”

“I did not see any blood, nor did any limbs appear broken,” he said. “Aside from your ankle, I am sure you are in fine health.”

“Really?” I didn't bother to hide my skepticism.

“Before I pulled you here, I ensured nothing was broken.”

“You pulled me here?”

“I could not leave you out in the field like that, could I?”

“What field?”

“For God's sake, man, calm down,” he snapped. “Keep your voice down.”

That was the last thing I wanted to do. I wanted to scream at the top of

my lungs. No matter how friendly he appeared to be, something was off here. The hairs on the back of my neck, on my arms, were standing up. Electricity zinged across my nerves, crackled in the air.

“I appreciate your help, but if you'll just point me to the EMTs, they'll take care of me from here.”

“I can barely make sense of anything you are saying.” His voice was tinged with annoyance. “And quite honestly, your level of gratefulness borders on rudeness.”

*I was being rude?*

“Like I said, thanks for what you did, but I need to get home. My father's probably worried sick, and I don't even have my phone on me to call him. So, if you don't mind, just point me in the right direction, and I'll find a way to wobble over.”

Gracen chuckled softly, and I wondered if I'd run into some sort of serial killer.

“You are a quite amusing, young man,” he said. “I am quite unfamiliar to the linguistics of what you are saying, but I assure you, if your father is worried about you, being outside Boston right now is probably best.”

I hesitated, briefly wondering if I should be insulted that he was mistaking me for a man. My hair was down to my chin, but Gracen's hair was about the same length. While his was some light shade of blond, mine was the color of ebony. I'd been told I had unique eyes, an almost silvery gray color, and I'd always thought of myself as relatively attractive. Him mistaking me for a man put a bit of a hole in that belief, though, I supposed, my features were more androgynous than feminine, especially with all the dirt and sweat on my face. And my hoarse voice. I decided I'd take it. If this guy was some sort of serial killer, I didn't want to give him any new ideas.

A soft breeze picked up and blew into my clothes, causing me to shiver. I pulled up my legs and pressed my knees to my chest, wrapping my arms around them as I tried to stop the cold from doing more. He stood up and walked over, taking off his overcoat and handing it to me.

“It's quite a surprise you hadn't frozen to death out there,” he said, “what with the clothes you're wearing. The fashion is new to me.”

“How about you help me up, and we find somewhere warmer?” I asked.

“I told you, we're safer here,” he said.

The hair on my neck prickled again. “From what?”

“I could light a fire, but that would draw attention to us, and we don't



want that kind of attention.” He ignored my question. Sort of. “Not now. Not here.”

“What does that even mean?” I asked, incredibly annoyed.

“When was the last time you were in Boston?” he asked, frowning at me like I was from another planet.

“Six months ago,” I whispered.

He nodded, as if what I said cleared a few things up for him. “I think I understand better now. You must not have heard. The city has been under siege since April.”

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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When I finally found my voice, sort of, I asked what probably seemed like the most inane question ever. “What siege?”

Whatever game he was playing, I didn’t feel like playing along anymore. For someone who'd served in the military, joking about things like sieges wasn't funny.

But still...there were those gunshots I heard.

Something was going on, and I needed to find out what it was. I was proud to serve my country, but my family was still my first priority. If they were in danger, I needed to understand the enemy.

At this point, though, I wasn't sure if the enemy was out there somewhere, or here, sitting across from me.

“The English,” Gracen said. “They arrived in early April. The city’s been under siege since then.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked. “The British are our allies. Why would they attack us?”

He stood up and stretched, obviously impatient with my questions. “While the siege of Boston may perhaps be news, I can't imagine that there's a corner of the colonies that isn't aware of the rebellion.” He gave me a hard look. “Things will only get worse if you ask me. They named George Washington Commander in Chief. After Lexington and Concord, things will probably just get bloodier.”

The words threw me back in time...or was it forward?

*I was suddenly at home again, a high school teenager too bored to do anything useful with her time. Bruce had gone to Virginia Beach on spring*

*break with a couple of his cousins. He'd blown off my concerns, but that didn't stop me from worrying about what he'd do when I wasn't around to remind him that he had a girlfriend. I hadn't made too big of a deal about it though. I didn't want him to think that I didn't trust him.*

*Still, I needed to get my mind off of things, and the only way to do that was fill my time with something useful.*

*The only problem was, I had no idea what.*

*I walked into my brother's room. Ennis was resting his head on the palms of his hands, textbooks open around him as he studied for his upcoming finals. I strode in like I owned the place and plopped down on the bed, sighing loud enough to get his attention.*

*"Not now, Honor," Ennis said, flipping a page as he compared one text to the other.*

*"I'm bored," I whined, grabbing one of the many texts that were strewn all over his bed. "Give me something to do."*

*"Honor, seriously, I have work to do." His irritation was clear in his voice, but I didn't pay any attention to it.*

*It was an older brother's job to be annoyed by his little sister.*

*"What is this stuff, anyway?"*

*"It's called history, Honor. Maybe you should think about checking it out sometime. You know what they say about people who don't learn from it."*

*I scowled at him as I stood up and walked over to his desk. I peered over his shoulder. He had notes scribbled everywhere, the textbooks in front of him taking up half his working space. I squinted as I tried to read the small print, then quickly gave up. He wasn't wrong about my dislike of history. What the hell kind of major was that anyway? What did someone do with a history degree besides teach?*

*I knew for a fact that Dad felt the same way. The only reason he'd agreed to pay for a year of college before Ennis enlisted was because he hoped my brother would figure out the futility of what he was doing.*

*So far, it hadn't worked.*

*"If you want to make yourself useful, you can summarize this," Ennis said, pushing one of the textbooks aside and pointing at a passage he'd highlighted. "You do know how to do that, right?"*

*I glared at him. I wanted to be a pediatrician, and I had the grades to support my ambition. Math and science may have been my strong point, but I wasn't a complete idiot when it came to English.*

Except, as I tried to wade through the dense prose I was supposed to be summarizing, I wondered if maybe I was an idiot. I barely got to the end of one sentence before I forgot the beginning of it.

“Too much?”

“Who the hell writes these things, anyway?” I snapped as I set the book back down in front of him.

He chuckled and sat back, rubbing his eyes. “So, all you’ll ever know about American history is what you see on TV, huh?”

I shrugged. “Why bother? It’s over and done with. The past is the past.”

Ennis shook his head, wearing that condescending smile that drove me nuts. “That’s not why we learn history, Honor.”

“Enlighten me then, oh wise one.”

“If we know what we did wrong before, we can prevent it from happening again.”

I raised an eyebrow, a little skeptical. “And how have we been doing so far?”

“Terribly,” he admitted and gave me a sideways glance. “Probably because not many of us care to read about the past.”

I punched his shoulder before looking back down at the textbooks and frowning. “So, you think we’ll stop making mistakes if we study all this stuff?”

He shrugged. “Maybe.” He didn’t sound too convinced. “Maybe we’ll just understand the present and know how to better handle the future.”

“Sorry, but I’m not buying it.”

“Take this, for example,” Ennis said, turning a few pages back to find what he was looking for. “The Battle of Bunker Hill. The English charged up Breed’s Hill on June 17<sup>th</sup>, 1775 and defeated the colonial army there. In the process, they suffered so much loss that their initial plan of breaking out of Boston was lost. The battle resulted in a stalemate, but the fact that the colonial army had stood up to the British was enough to motivate Washington and keep the Revolution going.”

I frowned and shook my head. “We lost,” I said. “How was that a motivator?”

Ennis sighed and shook his head. “One day you’ll realize that numbers don’t matter, and sometimes even a win or loss of a battle doesn’t matter. A small loss can be seen as a major victory if you look at the grand scheme of things. I guess maybe that’s what I mean by learning from history. It’s the

*ability to see the big picture.”*

*I looked at Ennis, still skeptical, but I didn't want to ask for clarification. I didn't think he'd talk down to me, but I was pretty sure he'd bore me to death. He saw the look on my face and pushed at me, laughing as he did it. Closing the text book he'd read from, he tossed it at me.*

*“Read, Honor,” he said. “It might just save your life one day.”*

*“You don't need this?” I asked, wondering just how much time it would kill.*

*“Not now,” he said. “Give it to me after you've had a chance to learn something that isn't about numbers and theorems.”*

I read several chapters, I remembered, and had been pleasantly surprised by how interesting it had been when I looked at it the way Ennis had. If he did end up going into education, his students would be lucky to have him.

I sat silently, staring at Gracen as he walked around in small circles. This had to be some sort of mistake. A Revolutionary War re-enactment actor who hit his head during the accident.

Except it didn't explain the lack of city lights. The absence of my car and the highway. Before I could second guess myself, I forced the question I didn't want to consider.

“What's today's date?”

He thought a moment before he answered. “June sixteenth.”

That, at least, was right, but the sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach made me ask for clarification. “What year?”

He crouched down in front of me, his gaze fixing on me in a way that made me want to squirm. “That is an odd question to ask.”

“What year is it?” I asked again, unwilling to get into any unneeded arguments.

“I had heard that education in some parts of the colonies was lacking, but I hadn't realized how much so.”

I glared at him and ignored the insult. “The year,” I demanded.

He hesitated, eyeing me closely, as if he wasn't sure if he should be worried about me. “Seventeen seventy-five,” he finally said.

All the air left my lungs, and I leaned back.

Fuck me.

What the *hell* happened?

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## CHAPTER SIX

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I remember the first time I truly felt like I had no control over the world around me.

I'd been on my first tour, out on a reconnaissance mission that was supposed to go smoothly for a newbie medic like me. I'd been barely nineteen, freshly engaged, and still trying to wrap my head around where I was. I believed in what I was doing, and growing up in a military family, was aware of the risks.

Knowing something and then *knowing* it, however, were two totally different things.

Needless to say, my unit had been attacked in an area that we'd thought was safe. None of us had been prepared for the assault, and we'd lost two soldiers before I'd even had a chance to get to them.

It was my first time witnessing death firsthand, deaths that I knew weren't my fault, but that I still blamed myself for. Logically, I knew that if I would've gone after them, I'd most likely have been killed too, and even if I hadn't, I most likely couldn't have saved them anyway. It hadn't taken away my guilt though. I told myself that there was nothing I could've done, that the entire thing had been completely out of my control, and a part of me knew it, remembered how the chaos had felt.

That was one of those moments that had forever altered my way of thinking, my way of seeing the world, and I knew it wasn't only due to the deaths, but rather the stark realization that I had no control over any of it.

This was another of those times.

I leaned back against the tree, my mind caught in an endless spin as it

tried to make sense of my situation. A part of me still wanted to believe that it was all a show, the figments of a mad man's imagination. He was tricking me. It had to be that. It couldn't be anything else.

But it wasn't like I could actually prove him wrong. My ankle made it almost impossible to get up on my own, and at the moment, I wasn't even sure if it would help. If Gracen was as deranged as I knew he must be to expect me to believe his story, he would be on me before I managed to get more than a few steps. And based on what I'd seen, there wasn't anyone around who'd hear me if I yelled for help.

I looked over at him as he lay on the ground in the protection of the brush, his hat cocked over his eyes as he snored. He'd fallen asleep for about an hour before but had already woken twice at the slightest sounds. Between my ankle and not knowing the terrain, I had little hope of being quiet enough to escape without him knowing it.

I rested my head against the tree behind me, weighing my options. I knew my training would be next to useless with my ankle, unless he was stupid enough to come too close. It was the cane that worried me. It was a weapon that could be an issue if he was willing to use it. At that moment, I wished I'd revealed to him that I was a woman. Men had a habit of underestimating women, so if I tried to do something, he would probably try and grab me instead of using the cane. That would put me at an advantage.

I watched him turn over, and when the next couple gunshots fired without waking him, I knew this was my most likely opportunity. I rolled over slowly, the twigs under me snapping as I moved. I kept my eyes locked on his back, seeing if the sounds would wake him. I remembered how my father could sleep through a marching band, just to wake up at the sound of my brother's cough from across the hall.

I prayed Gracen wasn't similarly tuned to breaking twigs.

When he still didn't move, I risked pushing myself up, placing most of my weight on my good leg as I used the tree for support. The pain in my bad ankle had subsided, but I decided against trying to see how much I could use it. With any luck, I could get far enough without testing it too much, and, by morning, I'd be far from here, and the swelling would have gone down.

I started to move in short hops, looking back once or twice to see if he'd woken up, but his back was still to me, and it didn't seem like that was going to change. Feeling bolder, I quickened my pace, quickly pushing through the trees until I found myself on an open plain.

That was when I realized that Gracen wasn't crazy after all.

There was no highway. There were no flashing lights from distant ambulances or the honking of cars. There were no towering buildings in the distance or the familiar Boston lights shining back at me. As far as I could see, the city I knew didn't exist.

I could see Boston, but it was nothing like the Boston I knew.

Gunshots blasted again, and I finally realized what was weird about them. They weren't the gunfire I'd become accustomed to in the army. Those weren't modern guns. Even if there was some sort of rational reason for why I kept hearing shooting from Boston, I could think of no reason as to why they'd be using old-fashioned guns.

I didn't know how or why it had happened. I had no explanation for any of it, but it didn't matter.

I was in the past. In 1775 Colonial America, to be specific.

I tried to remember what I'd read in my brother's book and realized that walking towards Boston would either get me killed or worse. The battle would be across the river, but still too close for comfort. Even if the British soldiers assumed that I was a man, I doubted they'd be inclined to be compassionate to someone sneaking around the night before a battle.

Even though I now knew that Gracen was telling the truth about where – *when* – I was, he was still a stranger, and I didn't know where his loyalties lay.

I did, however, know that I'd feel more comfortable with colonists than I would with the Brits. I didn't know where the army was, but I figured I would have better luck finding a “rebel” colonist out there somewhere than trying to sneak past the British army in Boston. My ankle was slowing me down, but I didn't stop moving. I needed to get as far away from here as possible, especially since I knew exactly what was going to happen tomorrow.

I found a road, keeping to the tree-line as I followed it, ready to hide if anything seemed out of the ordinary. My training was starting to kick in, my senses more alert, the darkness around me slowly becoming more comforting. I tried to make as little noise as possible, stopping as often as I needed to rest in the hopes that I wouldn't collapse from fatigue. The truth was, I didn't know half the extent of my injuries, and I had a feeling that my ankle was the least of my worries. The knot on my head throbbed in time with my pulse, which wasn't exactly comforting.

I heard the sounds of footsteps ahead, and I quickly pushed deeper into



the woods. I crouched down, making sure to keep my weight off my bad ankle, and watched the road. I listened closely, and soon, the sounds of men came closer. A few minutes later, they appeared, their coats brown, their muskets held against their shoulders as they patrolled down the road.

Brown coats, not red ones.

Colonials.

This was my chance to get with people I'd be able to trust. I pushed myself to my feet, but just before I could make my presence known, something hard hit the back of my head.

My knees buckled as the world around me started to go dark, and the last thing I knew before I passed out was that a pair of arms kept me from going to the ground.

I came to with a deep, excruciating pain in the back of my head that made everything else I was feeling in my body seem like mild aches.

My vision swam in and out of focus, and when I was finally able to blink the world back into proper view, Gracen was sitting a few feet away from me looking like he'd just been to hell and back. His hat was missing, his curls in wild disarray. His overcoat was draped over his shoulders like a cape, and he was holding his cane in both hands.

I tried to move, and it was only when I couldn't that I realized my hands had been tied together behind my back. The ropes dug into my skin, and I had a feeling that even if I were able to break free, the numbness would render them useless for a while.

I glared at him, but he merely raised an eyebrow in response.

"Untie my hands," I demanded.

His grip on his cane tightened even as his frown deepened. "Do you have any idea what you could have done?"

"I have a pretty good idea, actually," I hissed. "I'm not as stupid as you seem to think I am."

"You almost got us both killed," he hissed back. "You're a sympathizer, aren't you? Or is it more than that? Are you a spy? A soldier?"

"None of the above," I said. And it was true. Technically. The army I was a soldier in didn't actually exist yet. "I just needed to get away from Boston."

"Why?" Gracen asked. Then, before I could decide whether or not to answer, he spoke again, "On second thought, don't answer that. I can't risk

being seen with you. My family can't be tied to sympathizers."

I struggled against the ropes, stopping only as they dug deeper into my skin. There was no way around it. If I wanted to leave, I'd have to talk my way out of this.

"Listen, I'm grateful for what you've done," I started, "but I can't be here. I need to get home. There's no reason for me to be here."

He shook his head. "I can't let you go now. It's too dangerous, and since I'm the only one of us who seems to understand how much, you're staying put until dawn."

I regarded him carefully, weighing my options and quickly realized that I didn't actually have any. "What then?" I asked.

"Then you will be free to go," he said. "You shall go your way, and I shall go mine."

I wanted to tell him that dawn would be a little bit too late, that the gunfire we were still hearing wouldn't stop but would become louder, closer. That by the time the sun came up tomorrow, things would get much more complicated.

But I kept my mouth shut, unwilling to risk giving away who I really was and the time I was actually from. Besides, I doubted he'd believe me. I didn't believe it myself, and I was living it.

"So we wait?" I asked.

He nodded and sat back, his eyes fixed on me as he tried to find a comfortable position. I tried to do the same, but my hands made that an impossibility. Between that and the insanity of the last few hours, I doubted I'd get any sleep. From the way Gracen was looking at me, it was a fair bet he wouldn't be sleeping either.

It was going to be a long night.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

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*M*y father was a large man, the kind who made you think twice before you decided to do anything stupid. His size had kept him out of trouble for most of his life, and the scowl he usually kept plastered on his face had pretty much the same effect. A military man to the core, a patriot at heart, he exemplified everything the US Army stood for.

And he scared the shit out of pretty much everyone who saw him.

But I knew the real him. I knew the heart of gold he concealed, the warm hugs he gave, the smiles that came when he was proud. There were times when I felt like he had ruined my future forever, that no other man could ever match up to him.

Maybe that was why I put up with so much of Bruce's shit, because on some level, I felt like my expectations were too high.

I also knew that if my father found out some of the shit Bruce pulled, my fiancé would've come face-to-face with the scariest my father could be.

Which was what happened one night I came home crying after Bruce and I had been in a terrible fight.

I'd just returned from my first tour and had a week of leave. I'd gone home but had spent my first night on a date with Bruce...where he'd proceeded to drink too much and make snide comments about how women looked in uniform. When I called him on it, he'd gone into a fifteen-minute tirade about how things hadn't been easy for him while I was gone. How hard it'd been to go that long without seeing me. Without sex.

That was the last straw. I'd stormed out and taken a cab home. Dad hadn't

said a word. Hadn't asked me what was wrong. He'd just held me until I stopped crying.

I hadn't heard him leave later that night, but the next day, Bruce had come to apologize. The moment I saw his expression when my dad came down the stairs behind me, I'd known why Bruce had come.

I wondered what my father would've thought of Gracen. Somehow, I didn't get the impression that he would be as easily intimidated as Bruce. Dad would've liked that.

I, however, wasn't so sure I liked it. Or him, for that matter.

As the night dragged on, sleep didn't get any closer. I tossed and turned, my hands hurting more and more as the ropes rubbed my skin raw. While I was used to not being in the most comfortable places to sleep, this was definitely on the top of my discomfort list.

Finally, I gave up and looked over to where Gracen sat. His eyes were closed, his cane still in his grasp.

I had to admit he was a handsome man, despite his crude ways of dealing with situations. His high cheekbones and chiseled jaw made him easy on the eyes, and his curls just added to the charm. The fact that he wasn't wearing a wig, like a lot of people during this time period, told me that he was as pretentious as his accent made him sound.

If I'd met him in another place and time, I would have probably given him more than just a second glance. He was the kind of man who commanded attention, of that much I was sure.

My mind wandered back to Bruce, and I wondered what he was doing now or if my parents had called him when I didn't arrive home. Then again, even if they had, there was no guarantee he would've answered. I doubted he'd be calling me again anytime soon to try to get me to come early. He might've sounded annoyed at first, but I didn't doubt he'd find a way to get over it. Over the years, he'd lost the part of him that had always put me first – if he'd ever really had it to begin with.

I wondered what would have happened if I'd done as he asked and gotten straight on a plane to Vegas. My parents would've been upset, my father probably even more than my mother. I knew he'd been looking forward to my return and had wanted to discuss my possible re-enlistment before I made a final decision. I was surprised when he supported my decision to eventually open my own pediatric practice, even suggesting that he could lease a small space downtown to help me set up. When I first mentioned that this might be

the time to make that change, I thought he'd give me hell for wanting out, but he hadn't.

He was probably going out of his mind by now and trying not to show it. My mother would definitely be worried sick. I could only imagine how Ennis was handling it. I wished there was some way for me to let them know that I was okay.

*If* being tied up in the company of an eighteenth-century Loyalist a day before one of the precursor battles of the American Revolution was any indication of me being okay.

I closed my eyes and tried to fall asleep, but my mind was still racing from worry, from all of the new information. How the hell was this even possible? How had I gotten here?

I retraced everything that I could remember. The accident, the man trying to unbuckle me from the car, everything, but I still couldn't find any logical explanation for the time warp I'd found myself in. I vaguely remembered my time in the darkness, the feeling of being hurled back and forth, the arms that had grabbed and pulled me. My mind tried hard to piece things together. It still didn't make any sense, and I was slowly starting to realize that there might not ever be an answer.

I might just have to accept that I was in 1775...and might never get back to my own time.

I wasn't sure if I could, but I was too tired to do anything about it now, even if the ropes around my wrists had left me with any viable options. I coughed and shook my head, trying to work out the knots in my neck and fight the pair of throbbing spots on the back of my skull. One from the accident, the other from Gracen.

"If you plan to stay awake all night, do you mind keeping it down," he spoke up without opening his eyes.

I looked at him and grinned. If I had to be miserable, at least I knew he wasn't doing much better. "I doubt my coughing is what's keeping you awake," I said.

He opened his eyes and glared at me. "It wouldn't, if you'd bloody lie down and go to sleep."

I used my best sarcastic voice. "I'm sorry if the prisoner is causing you problems."

"You're not a prisoner."

I turned slightly to my side to show him the ropes, an eyebrow raised as I

dared him to contradict the obvious.

“Well, at least not for long,” he amended. “Believe me, I want to get rid of you as much as you wish to be rid of me, but I cannot have you going off to the rebels.”

“Why do you even care?” I asked. “If I truly were a sympathizer, wouldn’t the best option be to send me over to the colonists?”

His eyes widened as he leaned forward, all pretense of sleep gone. “Are you bloody mad, man?” He sounded shocked. “Let you tell them that Gracen Lightwood pulled you from the fields where the army would have certainly found you, most likely held you as a spy? Do you know what that would do to my family?”

I rolled my eyes. “There’s no need to get overdramatic.”

He scowled at me. “You know nothing of my family, Mr. Daviot. My father, Roston Lightwood, supports the English position here in the colonies more than he’s supported me. His wealth depends on the British, and he would rather his family die before ever having any of us associated with the rebels.”

“That’s a shame,” I muttered, knowing well what would happen to the Loyalists in the years to come.

“A shame?” Gracen asked in exasperation. “Bloody ungrateful, if you ask me.”

“So you share your father’s opinions?” I found myself honestly curious, not only making conversation.

“I have taken no side,” he said. “This isn’t my fight.”

“You live here, don’t you?”

“I was born in London.”

Nice deflection. “That wasn’t my question.”

He looked down and used the tip of his cane to draw patterns in the dirt. “My father loves the Crown. He spent most of his life in service of the king. All he ever had was his work, and he was rewarded for it. It’s why he brought us to the colonies. Shortly after I was born, he was given a tract of land just outside Boston for his services. Had he stayed in England, his inheritance would have been a pittance.”

I was beginning to understand. “You feel the need to be just as grateful as your father.”

He thought about it for a moment. “I suppose that is some of it. But I am a British citizen by birth, no matter where I make my home.”

In a flash of memory, I remembered something I'd seen in some movie. How the people who were born and raised in England didn't consider the colonists to be British citizens...until it came to their blind obedience.

“You know that not everyone in the colonies enjoys the same liberties as British citizens, right?” I asked. “That the *rebels*, as you call them, just want to be treated equally.”

He gave me a hard look. “The world is rarely so simple; something you colonists don't seem to understand.”

I wanted to disagree. I did understand it. I had seen war. I had seen death. I'd seen what it meant to fight for what you believed in against people whose beliefs were just as strong. There was rarely any right side, rarely a winning side, and things were never clear cut or easy. No matter how righteous the cause, innocents were always in the line of fire.

But some things were worth fighting for, and I knew this had been one of them. America wasn't perfect, but I'd enlisted because I believed in my country.

“I think you should get some sleep,” Gracen ended the conversation. “Sunrise will be in a couple hours, and if we're lucky, we can get away from here before the patrols make their rounds.”

He stretched out on the ground this time, covered his face with his hat, and crossed his arms over his chest. I continued watching him until his breathing steadied, and a light snore escaped him. I didn't like him, I told myself, but I did wonder what would happen to him when the battle began tomorrow.

And what would happen to him as the rebellion became an official war? A war that the British would lose. I didn't know enough about British history to know how drastically the war affected their country, but I did know that it was a turning point that eventually led to America becoming one of the major world powers.

I reminded myself that none of it was my problem. That whatever happened to Gracen and his family had already happened long ago, just like the war had already taken place.

Sort of.

Trying to figure it all out made my head hurt even more.

I finally got into a relatively comfortable position, closed my eyes, and fell asleep.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

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The cannon blast woke me even as I was being shaken. The first thing I was aware of was the urgency with which Gracen was moving. Immediately on the heels of that thought was the change in the periodic gunfire I'd heard last night. It came faster now. Not as fast as it would in my time, but still enough of a change to remind me of where and when I was.

The Battle of Bunker Hill had begun.

“Did you know?” he asked as he cut the rope binding my hands. “Was this why you wanted to get away so urgently?”

“I had no idea,” I lied, rubbing my sore wrists as I watched him throw a glance toward the city. In the light, he was even more handsome than the night before, his features clearer, his emerald eyes more piercing. The frown on his face, though, wasn't as appealing.

He looked at me as if I had tricked him somehow. “Did you attempt to keep me here?” he asked.

“Are you serious?” I asked incredulously. “I tried to get away from you. You were the one keeping me here against my will.”

He pulled his overcoat on without taking his eyes from the tree line. I knew what he was looking for, and I wanted to assure him that if we avoided Breed's Hill, we'd most likely pass by unseen. But I knew if I offered this bit of information, he'd want to know how I came by it, and that wasn't a story I could tell.

“I want nothing to do with this.” Gracen's voice was hard. “You are free to do as you please, but I will not be a part of this madness.”



I moved quickly to his side, pleased at how much better my ankle felt, and crouched beside him even as the sounds of muskets and cannons roared nearby. This was what I wanted to avoid last night, though, in hindsight, I realized it would have been a bad idea to join up with the soldiers now facing off against the British. While the British casualties would be more than double the American ones, it would still be a bloodbath.

“We should probably stick together,” I said.

I'd told myself that Gracen wasn't my responsibility, but now that it came down to it, I couldn't leave him here, knowing what I did. Even though neither of us were soldiers in this war, it felt too much like leaving a man behind, no matter how things had originally played out for him.

He was moving now, and I followed. At least he was being cautious as he inched toward the river. As I walked behind him, I was unsure if I should give him details about where the majority of the fighting was taking place. My sense of direction was skewed at the moment, and I had no idea where we were in relation to Breed's Hill. Ennis would have known.

Keeping low and moving slow were our best bets. With neither of us being armed and me still limping a bit, I could only hope that if we ran into either side, they'd take us for civilians trying to avoid being shot.

Morning turned into afternoon as the heat rose steadily. I wanted to ask Gracen how much farther, but being quiet was more important than the sweat pouring down my face. Theoretically, I'd known that Boston and the surrounding countryside would have looked different than what I was used to, but I hadn't realized how much. I was completely dependent on Gracen to lead me now. I was completely lost.

Then I saw the smoke.

Charlestown, Massachusetts was on fire.

Through the trees and brush, I could see flickers of orange and red. The people in Boston would have a better view. According to the book Ennis had given me to read, one of those Bostonians would be John Quincy Adams, a child now, but who would later become president.

The strange things we remember in moments of duress.

Even though the details were lost, the smell of the smoke and the sounds of battle drove home more than anything else just how great a price had been paid for our freedom. This was only one of many battles that would make up the war, and it wouldn't be long before the colonists would run out of bullets and resort to throwing rocks. It would be a bloodbath.

We had to leave before we were counted among the casualties.

I grabbed Gracen by the arm, but he wouldn't budge.

"My God," he whispered as he watched the flames across the Charles River.

I pulled harder. "Gracen, we have to move, now!"

He stumbled a few steps, his face pale. I didn't blame him. I'd seen war firsthand, and I felt sick to my stomach. For someone who'd never witnessed it, it was overwhelming. I pulled harder, and Gracen followed me a dozen feet or so before we were stopped by three muskets pointing straight at us.

"Halt, in the name of King George!"

Shit.

I pushed Gracen behind me, an involuntary act since there was no way I'd be able to protect either one of us, but I was also pretty sure he'd be useless if it came to a fight. The redcoat in the middle lowered his musket, coming toward us in slow strides. The other two kept their weapons trained right on us.

"Identify yourselves!" the leader demanded.

I held up my hands to show that I didn't have any weapons. Even though it irked me, I knew that we were safer with the British than the Americans at the moment.

"My name is Gracen Lightwood." He stepped around me, and I frowned at him. He ignored me. "I am the son of Roston Lightwood, a Loyalist to the Crown, and a friend to the British army."

The man looked at me, clearly expecting me to add my own identity to the mix. Gracen knew where my loyalties were, and I wasn't sure I could trust him to support any lies I might tell, but I also knew I couldn't tell the truth.

"Mr. Daviot is my steward," Gracen lied, putting a firm hand on my shoulder. "We were on our way to my estate when the fighting started, and we decided to take cover and wait out the battle."

The redcoat looked past us toward where the battle continued. He didn't even bother hiding his contempt at what I was sure he considered cowardly behavior. I had no doubt he wished to be with his comrades, charging the rebels on the hill. I wanted to tell him that he was better off here.

"In the name of King George, I am putting you under arrest and taking you to camp for questioning," the man said.

"Good man, I assure, there is no need—" Gracen began but immediately held his tongue when he was shot an angry glance. The other two soldiers

came forward, clearly intending to do as they'd been told.

I couldn't let them take us to camp. I didn't know how close it was to Breed's Hill, for one thing. For another, I was somehow still passing as a man. If we were taken somewhere to be questioned, there was a good chance that my gender would be discovered which would cause more problems than I even wanted to think about.

Since I was unarmed, I needed to be fast. I said a quick prayer that my training back home would be as much of a surprise as my resistance and then moved. Kicking at the musket pointed at me, it fell to the side just as the man pulled the trigger. The sound of the shot was deafening, but it was the target I was worrying about, and the lead ball had the desired effect as it buried in one of the other soldier's legs.

As the musket was brought back around, the redcoat seemed eager to use the bayonet on me, but I grabbed the barrel and pulled it forward. I watched as the blade slid into the other soldier before he could do anything more than stare at us in shock.

The redcoat hit me, his fist slamming against the back of my head. I saw stars and staggered, pain shooting through my skull and down my spine. I let the adrenaline flood through me, giving me what I needed to move past the pain, and not a moment too soon. The soldier pulled his weapon out of his fallen comrade and turned it on me.

He thrust the bayonet toward me and the blade cut through my shirt and shoulder, drawing blood. It did little damage, and I ignored the pain as I pushed the weapon away and grabbed the soldier. My hands wrapped around his arm, and I brought his elbow upwards with tremendous force. The man screamed in pain as I felt his joint snap and the gun fell from his hand. He was quick though and managed a blow to the jaw that caught me enough off guard that I fell.

I was sure that would be it for me, but that was when Gracen moved. His cane caught the redcoat square in the jaw. The man staggered, surprised by the attack, but collected himself quickly. He went for Gracen, but I grabbed at him as he passed. His elbow connected with my temple, and my grip loosened enough for him to break free.

He grabbed his gun and turned on me, ignoring Gracen as the soldier who'd been shot joined in the fight. He grabbed Gracen's leg, but I barely had time to register it before the leader drove his bayonet down.

I screamed at the pain searing through my leg as the blade sliced through

skin and muscle. Grabbing the barrel of the gun to keep the soldier from pulling the bayonet out, I kicked with my good leg. From the corner of my eye, I saw Gracen knocked to the ground. The man above me saw it too and reached for his dead comrade's gun.

Without thinking, I yanked the bayonet free, sending a fresh wave of pain blasting through my system. Swinging out, the bayonet sunk into the leader's side before he could reach Gracen. I twisted it sharply, and the soldier turned toward me. Our eyes locked for a brief second before he slumped to the ground.

I fell back, the pain in my leg and shoulder overcoming the adrenaline. A gunshot made me jump, and I looked over to see Gracen holding a small pistol, smoke still coming from the barrel. The injured soldier was now dead.

Gracen's eyes met mine, and I saw horror at what we'd done. I opened my mouth to tell him that we hadn't been given a choice, that it had been us or them, but I knew he wouldn't understand, not when he'd been so certain that his father's loyalties would protect him.

At the moment, however, that wasn't our biggest problem.

About thirty yards away, three more redcoats were running towards us, and I knew there was no getting away.

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## CHAPTER NINE

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*“The key is to not get caught.”*

*Wilkins and I had been doing grunt work all day, and all I wanted now was to grab a nap in the short time we had before dinner.*

*“Go to sleep, Wilkins,” I called out.*

*“I’m serious, Daviot,” he said. “This isn’t a place where you want to play hero. To these people...anyone who’s not Muslim is an infidel, and they’re going to treat you like one. Probably worse since you’re a woman doing a man’s job.”*

*I shook my head, knowing it was pointless to argue with his stereotyping. The truth was, I’d met several locals over the past couple months, most of whom had treated me with respect, some I even considered friends.*

*“When the going gets rough, Daviot, you run,” Wilkins continued. “And if you can’t run, you better make sure you have a bullet left that you can aim at your head.”*

*I sat up on my elbow and looked over at him, frowning as he stared back at me with his child-like grin. “You know you’re full of shit, right?”*

*“Am I?”*

*“Go to sleep!” This time, my tone was harsher, and when I laid back down, he didn’t reply.*

*The water was cold, and I instantly snapped awake.*

*I was on my knees, my hands tied behind my back, and the wound on my leg crudely tied to stop the bleeding. My face and hair were dripping from the water they’d thrown on me.*

I looked up from my kneeling position, taking in my surroundings. A few feet away from me sat Gracen. He was in a chair, frowning at the officer who leaned calmly against the edge of an oak table. I had a feeling Gracen had sold the same lie he'd given the other soldiers, which meant I was the more expendable of the two of us. The fact that the officer was smiling at me didn't make me feel any more at ease.

There were four other soldiers around us, and the closest one to me held the bucket that I assumed once contained the water that was now running down my face. I glanced at Gracen, my eyes catching his, and the worry I saw there was surprising.

"I always thought of you colonists as a rugged bunch, wild dogs running about and snapping your muzzles at anything that walked by." The officer sneered down at me. "While your friend put up a surprising fight, in the end, you were still no more than I expected."

I stared up at him, silent, unwilling to give him the satisfaction of a reply, though I knew exactly what he was talking about. The sound of gunfire had ceased, the battle obviously over. The British had won, but I knew what was coming. I gave the man a small smile.

"This amuses you?"

I nodded. "You might have won, but I'm pretty sure you've lost more than you've gained."

A fist connected with the side of my face, and I fell backwards, unable to stop myself from hitting the ground hard. My cheek throbbed, but my leg hurt more. The way I'd fallen had pulled the muscles in my leg and made the wound bleed again.

"I do not like being here," the officer said, standing up and dusting his coat as he looked down at me. "I would much rather be home, among civilized people, but until this rebellion is quashed, I'm here. So, you will help me get home. Let us start with how many men are outside Boston, shall we?"

"I don't know," I answered.

A kick to my ribs and I gasped as the air was pushed from my lungs.

"When are your reinforcements arriving?"

I shook my head slowly. "I don't know."

Another kick, probably cracking my ribs.

The officer sighed heavily. "Lying will get you nowhere. Now, you know that someone such as yourself, dressed in non-regulation uniform, can be

considered a spy. And we hang spies.”

“I demand a meeting with General Gage,” Gracen cut in.

The officer looked at him for a few seconds before back-handing him, the ring on his finger leaving a thin cut across his handsome cheek. “You don’t make demands here.”

“My name is Gracen Lightwood, captain.” Gracen looked pissed. “My father is Roston Lightwood. We are loyal British subjects and friends to the Crown. Our lands were presented to us by the king himself. I demand to see General Gage.”

The officer bent down, his face inches from Gracen’s as he smiled. I’d seen that look before, and it wasn’t one I cared to see now. This captain wouldn’t be intimidated.

“I know your father,” the captain said. “Now, I ask myself how he would react to knowing that his son was found in the company of a sympathizer, or worse, a colonist soldier. I doubt he’d be very pleased.” The officer grabbed Gracen by the jaw. “He may ask to put the noose around your neck himself.”

Gracen didn’t even flinch. “Let us send for my father and see?”

The officer let go of Gracen and gave him a shove, knocking both Gracen and the chair onto the ground. One look at the expression in Gracen’s eyes told me that no matter what his politics were coming in here, he wouldn’t extend that loyalty to this captain.

“Now,” the officer cut into my thoughts as he crouched in front of me, “let us discuss what information you will give me.”

I shook my head and closed my eyes, bracing myself for another beating. When I felt pressure on my leg, a boot pressing down on my wound, my eyes snapped open, and I screamed in pain.

“This is bleeding badly,” he said, his tone almost conversational. “You might not even make it to the gallows.” He removed his foot and leaned closer. “Now, I can make all that pain go away, or I can make it much, much worse. The choice is yours.”

I didn’t answer, focusing instead on taking slow, deep breaths as I fought through the pain. I could take more, even though the prospect wasn’t appealing. All I needed was for him to decide to leave me to die at some point and hope that I was able to escape.

Let them have their fun, for now. I planned to kill each and every one of them as soon as I had the chance.

The officer sighed and heavy hands grabbed me by the shoulders, picking

me up. They dragged me to the opposite side of the tent and tossed me there to lick my wounds. The bucket was tossed aimlessly at me, the hard wood slamming against my head as it tumbled away. Dazed, I watched it roll...only to stop at the side of a musket, the protruding bayonet inches from where I lay.

I sat up slowly, exaggerating the extent of my pain as I watched the officer and soldiers shift their attention to Gracen. Two of them yanked him upright.

“You know, I do not consider colonists to be true British citizens,” the officer said. “Not like you and I, Mr. Lightwood. I see them on the level of the Irish, or the Scots. A lower class of being. They can hardly be surprised to not be afforded the same liberties as those of us more deserving.”

“I know what the colonies owe the Crown,” Gracen said stiffly. “And as you pointed out, I am not colony born.”

The officer nodded in mock approval, applauding softly as he smiled at his soldiers. “I do believe we owe the man an apology, do we not, boys? I say we free him from his shackles and pour him a cup of tea.”

The mockery wasn't lost on Gracen, and the look on his face said he didn't appreciate it. I had a feeling that Gracen Lightwood wasn't accustomed to being mocked.

*Keep them busy, Gracen, I thought. And we might just get out of this alive.*

Fortunately, the captain was willing to help as well. “Tell me, Loyalist Gracen Lightwood. Why are you with this colonist?”

“As I previously told you, he is a servant. My steward, specifically. And he accompanied me on a trip. We were on our way home when we were ambushed without warning or cause.”

“And where were you before this?”

“Farther South, visiting friends.”

I slowly shifted my position closer to the bayonet beside me, keeping my eyes on the soldiers the whole time, stopping when one looked over at me, then resuming movement when they looked away. I kept going until the tip of the bayonet poked into the small of my back, and the ropes around my wrist rested on the sharp blade.

The officer looked at Gracen skeptically, and while all attention was focused away from me, I used the opportunity to cut the ropes. As I sawed up and down, I felt them begin to loosen but knew it would be a while before I



could get all the way through. I didn't rush it though. Getting them off was one thing, finding a way out of here something else completely.

And with Gracen tied to a chair, escaping wouldn't be easy. Taking on three unseasoned soldiers was one thing, and we had barely come out of it alive. Four soldiers and an officer were an entirely different issue. Add to that the fact that I had no idea where we were or what would be waiting outside this tent, I knew the odds were stacked against us.

I needed a plan and quick.

"Tell me, young Lightwood," the officer said, his voice even louder than before. "Why haven't you enlisted in the king's army?"

Gracen didn't answer, his silence deafening, his expression impassive.

The officer smiled. "Perhaps you might be more like your colonist friend here than you care to admit."

"Not all men of eligible age have enlisted." Gracen's voice was mild. "I happen to know of several English-born citizens who prefer to show their loyalty to the Crown in other ways."

The captain gave Gracen a look of pure disgust. "Citizens who think they are too good to fight for their king are little better than cowards."

Gracen flushed. "The king knows that my family is loyal, and when my father hears of how I have been treated, there will be hell to pay."

The officer didn't look worried, but he did stand and speak to the other soldiers. "I believe we have given young Mister Lightwood and his *steward* enough to think about. We shall come back later to determine if their tongues have been loosened."

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## CHAPTER TEN

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We were alone for hours, neither one of us speaking, though I wasn't sure if Gracen was staying silent for strategic reasons or because I'd pissed him off. Either way, I used the time to gather information that could be potentially useful.

As the light coming in through the tent changed, then receded, the temperature dropped, making it a little more bearable. The sun had fallen, and although I'd been able to cut through my binds, I stayed where I was, waiting. Thinking.

Based on the voices outside, the soldiers had rotated shifts, the first two having left at sundown. They were replaced by two younger sentries who sounded like boys barely out of high school. I remembered back to when I'd first enlisted and wondered if they were going through the same shock I had gone through the first few nights away from home. Then I realized that they were probably closer to sixteen than eighteen, and a wave of guilt washed over me.

I didn't want to hurt them, knowing well that they weren't responsible for what happened to Gracen and me, but I had a pretty good idea that if I waited any longer, any chance of escape would be gone. I didn't know the details surrounding the aftermath of the battle, and I didn't want to risk us getting caught up in something else. It was now or never, and after listening to the sounds around me, I had a strong feeling that whatever camp we were in, this tent was on the edge of it. If that was true, we could escape through the back and be gone before anyone noticed.

I looked at Gracen, hoping to somehow get his attention without having

to speak, but he seemed to be asleep, an incredible feat given the fact that he was still tied to a chair. I just hoped that his limbs hadn't fallen asleep and that he'd be willing to listen to me when I told him to run.

Now that my hands were free, I removed the bayonet from the musket, then whistled to the sentries. They both peeked inside, and I saw that I was right about their age. Neither one looked old enough to shave, which didn't make what I had to do any easier.

"I need a drink," I said, making my voice raspy and weak.

The boys looked at each other, and I could tell they were trying to figure out what to do.

"I'm sure your captain wants us alive so he can question us further, and I've been bleeding a great deal. Some water will go a long way to making sure I don't die in the middle of the night."

The boys – I still couldn't think of them as men – looked at each other. The first shrugged and the second rolled his eyes as he made his way out of the tent to get my drink. I gestured to the other boy, then at my leg.

"Mind taking a look at that?" I asked, letting my head loll over to my shoulder. "The bandage might need to be tightened."

The boy sighed and lowered his musket. I apparently looked bad enough that he didn't consider me a threat.

I'd been counting on that.

As soon as he was close enough, I grabbed him by the collar of his coat and slid the bayonet into his neck, my hand covering his mouth to stop any sound from escaping. Blood gushed as his body dropped and the bayonet came loose. My stomach churned, but I managed to keep myself from throwing up. I hadn't had a choice. Knocking him out wasn't an option, not when I needed to make sure he wouldn't wake up at the wrong time.

I closed his eyes, looking away as I quickly pushed myself up to my feet. I told myself that he probably wouldn't have made it through the end of the war anyway, but it didn't soothe my guilt.

I limped to the entrance and waited, the bayonet held firmly in my hand. Gracen stirred but didn't wake up, and I silently prayed he stayed that way until I was ready. I didn't need him second guessing what I'd done.

I was doing enough of that myself.

When the second soldier walked in, I waited for the flaps to close and quickly wrapped an arm around his neck, putting the bayonet's tip near his carotid.

“One word,” I whispered, realizing I couldn’t make myself push the sharp tip through, “and you’ll be joining your friend over there.”

I turned him slightly so he could see the other soldier. He gagged, and then I slammed the end of the bayonet against the back of his head and lowered the unconscious boy to the ground. I stared at him, knowing I should finish him off, but couldn’t.

Giving myself a mental shake, I knew I needed to move quickly, not knowing how long it would be for the next guard shift, and definitely not willing to stick around and find out. I’d been lucky twice today, and I didn’t want to push it any more than that.

I heard Wilkins’ voice in the back of my mind, urging me to run, to save myself. I hobbled to the back of the tent, and with the tip of the bayonet, sliced downwards, ripping at the fabric while praying I was right about the tent’s position. I peeked out through the opening I’d made and was greeted by an empty field with a tree line a dozen yards away.

*That’s the third one,* I thought to myself. There wouldn’t be any more lucky breaks for me after this one.

I walked back to where Gracen sat and then took a minute to tighten my bandage. He would have to be strong for the both of us because I was fading fast.

As soon as I started to cut the ropes around his wrists, he snapped awake. For a moment, he struggled, and I was afraid he’d panic and alert soldiers to the fact that something was wrong.

I grabbed his shoulder hard as my hand slammed down on his mouth. He looked at me, frowning in confusion. Then he looked past me at the two soldiers on the ground and all the color drained from his face. I shook him back into focus and then took my hand from his mouth.

“You did that?” he whispered.

“Now’s not the time,” I said. “We need to go. Can you walk?”

Gracen didn’t answer, only stared at the two soldiers lying on the ground, the pool of blood around one of them soaking into the dirt.

“Gracen?”

He finally turned to me. “Yes?”

“Can you walk?” I repeated my question.

He stood up slowly, shaking his legs before nodding at me. I staggered, and he caught me. For one long moment, I found myself staring deep into his eyes, momentarily mesmerized by them.

It was as if all the air was sucked from the tent as he held me for that moment. Then he blinked and his face morphed into confusion as he looked at me. He shook his head as if trying to clear it and I realized I needed to do the same.

*Snap back to reality, sweetheart,* I heard Wilkins in my head.

Right. Escape.

Plus, Gracen thought I was a man, so unless he was harboring same-sex tendencies – which based on his confused look, he wasn't – he was simply making sure I didn't fall.

I straightened and pointed at the rip I'd made in the tent. He put a hand on my shoulder and gestured for me to wait, making his way to where I'd been tossed earlier. A moment later, he came back with two muskets and a pouch of lead balls.

“After the last twenty-four hours, I have a feeling we might need these.”

“Let's hope we don't have to use them,” I said. I didn't add that I was pretty sure I'd have no idea *how* to use one.

He nodded his agreement and led the way out of the tent. We paused outside for a few seconds to make sure no one was scouting the perimeter. When we were confident we could get to the tree line safely, I wrapped an arm around Gracen's neck, and we hurried across to safety. I kept fighting the urge to look back and see if anyone had noticed our escape, fearing that simply acknowledging the possibility would make it a reality. We made slow progress, each step fraying my nerves a little more, but we were soon in the protection of the surrounding woods, and Gracen sat me down against a tree as we stopped to catch our breaths.

“We have to keep moving,” I said.

He nodded in agreement, clearly still processing what just happened and I noticed he avoided looking directly at me.

“How far away is your estate?” I asked. It was no longer a question of whether or not I'd go. I had to find somewhere to heal before I could look into getting home.

“Not far, if we take the road past the colonists.”

I felt a wave of relief that he wasn't shutting down on me. “I'd rather we didn't cross paths with any more armies tonight.”

“Agreed.” He smiled at me. It looked forced, but at least it was a smile. “Although to be quite honest, I doubt they'd be a problem for you.”

I gestured to my leg. The bleeding had stopped, but the pain was getting

worse. "I think I'm pretty much done for a while."

"Then we'll stick to the woods," he said. "Better to be safe."

I nodded, looking back over my shoulder at the camp we'd just escaped. The skies above had started to change color, turning a deep, dark blue. Dawn was a couple of hours away, which probably meant the guards would be found soon. We needed a head start if we wanted to get out of here alive.

"We'd better get going," I said.

Gracen nodded and helped me to my feet, wrapping my arm around his neck again as he grabbed a musket with his free hand. "They know who I am, so they will most likely go straight to the estate rather than trying to track us. Once we're there, my father will contact General Gage and the captain will find himself under inquiry for his treatment of us both."

I thought back to the smile on the officer's face and had a sinking feeling that his scenario might not be entirely accurate. I wasn't going to argue though. "Let's not wait to find out."

Gracen nodded, and we began to move again. The night covered our escape, and as we made our way through the woods, the tension in me started to ease. The danger was far from over, but at least we were heading in the right direction.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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We stuck to the woods, keeping our distance, always alert. The only indication that we were anywhere near danger was the distant voices of colonists in their camps and the lights from the fires. They'd be tending their own wounded, regrouping now, and I hoped they wouldn't pay much attention to a pair of ragged men not wearing uniforms. Well, uniforms that they'd recognize anyway.

As I limped alongside Gracen, the world narrowed down to the next step, then the one after that. I'd hoped for a vacation from my tour and got the complete opposite. Here I was, in the wilderness, looking over my shoulder every step of the way. I was tired, the fatigue setting in quick, my ankle relentlessly assuring me that it was still injured. Between the car accident and everything else that had taken place, I barely had a single inch of my body that wasn't aching.

Gracen stopped us several times, although we both knew that the best thing to do in our current situation was to keep moving. I could see the concern on his face, and I knew his constant need for rests were to make sure I could still make the trek to his estate, even though he didn't say it out loud. I appreciated the generous gesture, especially since I needed it.

It wasn't just the physical wearing on me either. My mind kept replaying the events of the day, particularly the deaths of the soldiers I'd killed. I'd never killed anyone before. Well, that I knew of. I'd fired a gun during a couple skirmishes, but I'd never known whether or not I'd inflicted anything mortal. These deaths...they hadn't been far away, impersonal. I'd taken the lives of those men up close. The first two had been bad enough, but it was the

last one, the boy, that I knew would haunt me.

I remembered how Wilkins had always told me that when it finally happened, when I'd be in a situation where the choice was to kill or be killed, I would operate on instinct. That my training would kick in, and it had. I'd felt very little at the time, and I wondered whether that was a good or bad thing. Either way, something in my gut told me that it wouldn't be the last time I'd take a life.

A shudder ran through me, and nausea twisted my stomach.

"You did the right thing," Gracen spoke softly, almost gently. "We both did."

I shook my head, unable to believe him. A part of me began to wonder if there could have been another way, if maybe by morning the officer would have come to his senses and released us without bloodshed.

"We had no other choice."

A hand came down on my shoulder, and I looked up. Gracen's expression was grim, and I wondered if he felt the same guilt over the soldier he'd shot. Was it worse for him since he considered himself one of them? I at least had the comfort of thinking of these men as enemy combatants. Enemies that would've most likely died in this war anyway. Or was it easier? Had Gracen's upbringing prepared him to act when his life was at risk so that he was able to justify it more easily than I did?

But he hadn't killed that boy. Hadn't made the decision to kill rather than incapacitate. That decision had been solely mine, and I wondered now if I'd made it on my own so I didn't have to argue with him. Or if I'd been trying to protect him from what needed to be done.

"How much farther?" I asked, knowing I was deflecting rather than acknowledging what he was saying.

"We're almost there," he said as he pushed himself to his feet. He gave me a ghost of a smile. "I believe you'll be quite pleased with what you'll see."

Even in the dark, the house was impressive.

I didn't know anything about architecture, but I could appreciate the beauty of the structure. Three stories, it boasted at least half a dozen rooms on the second, judging by the number of windows. No smoke came from either of two large chimneys, but the night was still warm enough that they



wouldn't be needed. Candlelight seeped through the windows and drapes, the illumination casting an almost romantic glow over the carefully maintained garden and lawn.

Gracen led us to the back, keeping us to the shadows. I didn't understand why, but I didn't question him. This was his place, his time. I had to trust that he would get us to safety. Still, I half-thought he'd march up to the front door and walk in like he was king of the castle, the young Lightwood having finally returned to his not-so-humble abode, announcing his arrival with resolution. Instead, we stopped in front of a nearly-hidden back door on which he rapped softly and waited.

After a minute, the door opened a crack, a lamp illuminating the dark features of a man who had obviously been asleep. The man's eyes widened at the sight of Gracen, and he quickly opened the door all the way to let us inside.

We stepped into a kitchen, and I breathed a sigh of relief. Despite my exhaustion, I was struck by the simplicity of the large space, a stark difference from the stainless steel workplace my mother had recently set up in our family home to replace the homey kitchen I'd grown up with.

When I was a kid, I remembered tearing into the kitchen, clutching my latest artistic endeavor, eager to see it take a place of pride on the refrigerator. I'd tried to hide my sadness when I'd returned from my previous tour to find everything gone, replaced by a collection of twenty-first-century new-age appliances that had looked like they'd jumped right out of a magazine. I'd understood the practicality of the new layout, but it hadn't made me miss the old things any less.

I barely had time to take it all in when Gracen grabbed me by the arm and pushed me along, whispering something inaudible to the man who'd let us in.

We left the kitchen in an inexplicable hurry, climbing stairs to the second floor, then on to the third. He led me to a small room, slowly opened the door, and then gestured for me to follow him inside.

He lit a candle, allowing me to see the small, simple space. In one corner, right beside a rickety dresser was a bed, the mattress clearly worn but well-kept. He set the candle on the dresser as I sat down on the edge of the bed, my body sighing in relief as I stretched my legs out.

"You can stay here," he said, taking off his coat and laying it down on a chair I hadn't noticed. "It isn't much, but it's safe."

There was a light knock on the door, and Gracen opened it to let the man

in. He carried a tray with a bowl and several pieces of cloth on it over to the dresser. He gave Gracen a questioning look.

“That will be all, Titus.” Gracen nodded at him.

Titus eyed me for a moment before he nodded and exited the room. I got the impression that the servant didn't trust me, but as long as Gracen did, I was fine. He closed the door softly behind him, sighing as he rested his head against the door.

“What’s with the secrecy?” I asked, standing up and inspecting the tray. There was a pungent smell coming from the liquid in the bowl that made me cringe.

“Word will eventually get out about what happened at the camp,” he said. “And if my father discovers you here, he'll hand you over without a thought.”

“We were both there,” I pointed out.

Gracen shook his head. “My father will find a way to make it look like I had nothing to do with the deaths, and that my escape was against my will.”

My eyebrows shot up. “He'll say that I kidnapped you?”

“Don’t take it personally, Daviot,” he said with a sigh. “I will not allow my father to turn you over. You are free to stay here as long as you wish, and when things calm down, I will make sure you get home.”

If only he had the ability to make that offer for real, I thought.

He put out his hand. “You saved my life, and for that, I am indebted to you, Mr. Daviot.”

I looked up at him, the candlelight casting alternating shadows and light across his features. My eyes traced down across his jaw to his chin, rising to his lips, then up to his eyes again. He frowned at me, and I quickly took his hand. His handshake was firm, from one gentleman to the other, and it took every ounce of willpower within me to stop myself from telling him the truth about who I was. Or at least my gender.

He released my hand. “Until tomorrow, my friend.”

I nodded briefly and watched him leave, hating myself for the pang that went through me when the door closed behind him.

I waited for a few more minutes, making sure no one was coming back before I undressed. I didn't even want to think about what that Titus man would think if he saw that I was a woman.

I slipped out of my shirt, wincing in pain as I pulled my arms through the sleeves. The cut on my shoulder had stopped bleeding, but I had a feeling if I didn't disinfect it, it would turn nasty by the morning. I didn't even want to

think about what had been on that bayonet.

I got up and made my way to the dresser, taking it easy on my bad leg. As I passed by the small window, I caught a glimpse of my reflection and frowned. My hair was disheveled, my skin streaked with blood and dirt. I unclasped my bra, sighing at the relief of being free of its constraint. I could see the deep red grooves on my skin from where the elastic had dug in.

I dipped one of the cloths on the tray into the bowl, and then tentatively swabbed my wound. Better to get this one taken care of first, then sit down to do my leg. I clenched my eyes closed as pain lanced through my arm. I kept the cloth pressed down though, knowing that whatever was in the liquid was definitely doing more good than harm. After a couple minutes, I dipped the cloth into the bowl again before returning it to my shoulder, the burning less painful this time. I hoped that meant it was working.

I caught sight of my tattoo, the colors of the American flag barely visible in the soft light coming from the candle. I was glad Gracen hadn't seen it. If he had, I would have had a lot of explaining to do.

In the back of my head, I could almost hear my brother's laughter. He'd been with me when I had gotten it, laughing to the point of tears as I'd gritted my teeth to keep from squirming. He'd sat in the chair beside me getting his own tattoo, and although it was a point of pride that his little sister was doing the same, my reaction had amused him. He hadn't, however, teased me about the picture.

We didn't joke about patriotism in my family. Something Bruce had discovered when he'd teased me and taken it too far. Ennis had knocked him to the ground with a single blow.

I stared at the tattoo as I unconsciously cleaned my wound. I knew it would be at least a year before the flag would start to look anything like the one I would come to know. For the first time in my life, the Stars and Stripes wasn't being displayed anywhere but on my own skin.

I finished cleaning my shoulder and then took the bowl over to the bed. I set it on the floor, dunked a cloth into the liquid, and sat down to rest my leg before I attempted to remove my pants. I knew I was safe here, but at that moment, I would have done anything to be back home. To have my parents with me. I didn't really miss Bruce, which should've said something about the strength of our relationship – or lack of it – but I would've taken any familiar face at the moment.

I took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. I wasn't in Boston anymore,

at least not my Boston, and whatever was going on between me and Bruce would have to wait. At the moment, I had more important things to worry about. First, finish tending to my wounds. Then, keep myself from being captured by the British and killed for killing their soldiers. After that, most important of all, I needed to figure out how to get home.

My mind was groggy, though, and fatigue was quickly setting in. I wasn't going to come up with any useful ideas now. I'd be lucky if I got my leg cleaned before I passed out.

There was a light knock on the door, and Gracen let himself in before I could respond.

“Mr. Daviot, I forgot to tell you—”

I sat frozen on the spot as I watched his eyes grow wide. When I registered where his gaze was directed, I quickly grabbed for my shirt as I rushed to cover myself. Heat flooded my face, embarrassment taking precedence over everything else.

Then my eyes met Gracen's and the anger in his gaze made me remember what was at stake here.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

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The day I told my family about my engagement to Bruce had been far more uncomfortable than any such announcement should have been.

I'd been ecstatic about the prospect of marrying my high school sweetheart, silently riding a high throughout the day as I had contemplated just how to share the news with the rest of my family. It had been during dinner, when everyone was sitting quietly around the table, offering bits and pieces of conversation about random topics. Ennis had just started talking about the most recent paper he was working on when I blurted it out, like pulling off a band-aid, and the entire table had gone terribly quiet.

I remembered the smile on my face, wide and cheerful, as I'd waited for the rest of my family to congratulate me, to show the same joy as I felt. Finally, my smile had faded as Ennis and my mother had tried to say something, anything, remotely encouraging. Their words had been a mix of mumbles and stutters, my sudden outburst having taken them completely by surprise. They, at least, were trying.

My father was the only one frowning at me, clear disapproval written on his face. He'd never been fond of Bruce, and that night my dad hadn't sugar-coated anything. He'd told me exactly what he thought of my choice, but even if he hadn't said it, I would've known by the expression on his face. I could still remember the way my father had looked at me that night, furious, his hands clenched into fists as he fought hard not to burst out in anger.

Gracen was giving me that same look now.

I sat completely still on the bed, my hands clenching my shirt as I covered

myself, just as lost for words as he was. I was barely aware of the pain in my body, only focusing on the man in front of me. His eyes darted from my face to my chest and back again as his lips flattened into a thin line.

“I can explain,” I started.

He raised his hand in a gesture that clearly meant that I should stop talking. I could sense his anger from across the room, could almost hear his mind working. I needed to figure out a plan, a story, something to explain the deception.

He whirled around, his back toward me. “Cover yourself,” he hissed.

I was about to say that the important bits were covered but thought better of it. Modesty wasn't really the issue at the moment. I pulled my shirt on as I played various scenarios through my head, wondering what this sudden discovery might mean for me now. Whether I liked it or not, I needed Gracen and the shelter of his home, at least for the time being.

I coughed, and Gracen looked over his shoulder at me. Seeing that I was now decent, he turned back around and marched right up to me.

“You lied to me!” His voice was low, but that didn't detract from how pissed off he clearly was.

I sighed. “I didn't lie to you. I just never corrected you.”

“You're a woman!” His voice began to rise, his eyes searching my face as if seeing it for the first time.

I pushed my hair back from my face. “Yes, I am, but if you'd just let me explain.”

“What can you possibly say that would make this lie better?” he yelled. He quickly looked over his shoulder at the door, and then lowered his voice. “Do you even understand the consequences of your deception?”

“Consequences?” I asked, frustrated at how much he was blowing this out of proportion. “I saved your life! You said that yourself! How is my being a woman relevant to keeping you alive?”

“You put yourself in unnecessary danger,” he hissed. “You could have been killed!”

I stopped my retort, taken back by the concern I could hear mixed with the anger in his voice. Here he was, this man who I barely knew was berating me for putting myself in harm's way, when my own fiancé never even bothered to tell me to be safe. In Bruce's mind, it was pointless to say something like that to someone in a war zone. I had told him that I understood, but I didn't realize until now how much I missed the concern.

“What were you thinking?” he asked as he paced the room. He ran his hand through his hair.

“I can take care of myself, Gracen,” I said, deciding not to remind him how I had helped him as well.

“What was I thinking? How did I not see this?” he muttered, and I couldn’t quite tell if he was talking to me or to himself. His eyes were fixated on the floor as he paced back and forth, his hand rubbing the nape of his neck. He stopped suddenly and looked at me. “Is Daviot even your name?”

“It is,” I said quickly. “It’s Honor. Honor Daviot.”

“Honor,” he rolled my name across his tongue as if he was testing it. “How ironic.”

“Need I remind you that it was *you* who tied me up last night?” I spat. “I was content with going my way on my own. You’re the one who kept me by your side like a prisoner!”

“I was protecting you!” he snapped. “I found what I thought was a hurt man lying in an empty field, out in the open, and decided to help. In retrospect, maybe I shouldn’t have!”

“Protect me?” I scoffed. “If I remember correctly, we’re here right now because of me.”

“You’re a woman!”

“What the hell does that have to do with anything?” I’d put up with a lot of shit in the army for being a woman, but this was testing my last nerve.

“You lied to me,” he repeated. “You knowingly deceived me and led me to believe I was in the company of a gentleman in need of assistance. I risked my own life to defend you. I killed that man to defend you.”

“I never asked you to!” I said in retort.

“You never needed to!” he said through clenched teeth. “It was the right thing to do! The honorable thing to do! And now I find out you’re a woman.”

“So it’s only honorable when you thought I was a man? How does that make any sense at all?”

“That is not what I said.” He sounded exasperated.

“You’re sure as hell implying it,” I countered.

“Then you’re just as foolish as you are a liar!”

I took in long and deep breaths, knowing that my own spike in temper wasn’t helping matters. We both needed to calm down, or things would keep escalating, which wouldn’t go anywhere productive.

“I want the truth,” Gracen said.

“Excuse me?”

“I want the truth, all of it,” he repeated. “I believe I’m entitled to complete honesty after all this.”

I looked up at him, our eyes locking as I tried to weigh my options. How was I supposed to tell him the truth when I didn't even understand it myself? How could I explain to him where I was from, or when I was from for that matter? Considering his clear opinion of women, I had no doubt that he'd instantly dismiss the truth as some sort of hysteria.

But I had to think of something, and he was clearly getting impatient.

“I ran away,” I said simply, feigning discomfort, stalling to further develop a fake story in my head.

“From whom?”

“My father,” I blurted out, saying the first thing that came to my mind. “I was to be married to a man I didn’t love, and when I objected, I was beaten and told that what I wanted didn't matter.”

Gracen’s expression softened, and I knew I'd chosen the right angle. I watched as his jaw unclenched and the furrows on his forehead relaxed. I felt guilty at having to lie to him again, but the alternative was out of the question. I'd be lucky if I wasn't locked up in a madhouse.

“I couldn’t stay,” I continued, pushing deeper into my lie. “I had no other option but to run. I knew I wouldn’t be able to travel alone as a woman, so I stole clothes from one of my brothers and escaped. I was on my way to Canada, with no food or water, and probably lost consciousness when you found me.”

“You were on foot?” Gracen asked, his look showing slight skepticism.

“I couldn't risk taking a horse.” I assumed what I hoped was a hurt expression. “My father would be more likely to search for a missing horse than a missing daughter.”

Gracen eyed me for a moment, and I could see him trying to decide whether or not to believe me. I prayed he would since I'd reached the end of my endurance. I was tired, my leg ached, and I was worried that if he didn't let this go, I'd pass out before I knew whether or not he planned to turn me over to the British...or just dump me somewhere outside and leave the rest to chance.

I winced as I shifted, and he looked down at my leg, then at the bowl.

“Do you need help?” Color suffused his cheeks.

“I can do it myself. Thank you.” I managed not to blush at the thought of



having his hands on my thigh.

He nodded, then crossed his arms over his chest. “You shouldn’t have lied to me,” he said, his voice barely audible.

“I didn’t know if I could trust you.” That, at least, was honest.

He frowned, an expression of hurt flitting across his face before it vanished. Our eyes locked for a few seconds before he turned away.

“What do we do now?” I asked.

“I cannot condone your actions,” he said. “However, I will not meddle in things that do not concern me. Come morning, you can decide for yourself what you wish to do.”

I felt panic creep up on me. I couldn't let him kick me out. Not in this condition. I didn't think I'd survive. I needed at least a couple days. “I can cook.”

His head snapped up in surprise as he looked at me. “I beg your pardon?”

“I can cook,” I said. “I can help out here.”

He shook his head. “You have a destination.”

“Until my leg gets better, I won't be going far.” I pleaded with him with my eyes. “At least let me be useful.”

He eyed me for a moment longer before nodding. “As you wish.” He turned to leave, his hand resting on the handle of the door as he looked back at me. “I’ll send Titus up with proper clothing, and I’ll explain the situation to him. He’ll keep quiet about our homecoming.”

“What about your father?” I asked.

He paused before smiling and saying, “I’ll make sure he knows we have a new girl in the kitchen.”

With that he exited the room, softly closing the door behind him.

Great. I was a new girl. In the kitchen.

Then again, that was better than British prisoner and accused spy so I couldn’t complain. Besides, I wasn't planning on staying any longer than I had to. Once my leg was healed and I figured out how to get home, I was gone.

I didn't belong here, and there was nothing that made me want to stay.

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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I spent the next couple days learning every nook of the Lightwood estate as I kept myself busy. I also made sure I stayed in the background. Titus was the only one who knew how I'd come in, and Gracen had made it clear that those circumstances were to be kept quiet. Judging by the look Titus had given me when I first hobbled downstairs in the dress he found, he wasn't too fond of me, but as long as he kept his mouth shut, I didn't care.

After a cursory introduction to the rest of the staff, I'd been put to work. The house was as massive on the inside as it'd appeared on the outside, and every room was richly decorated with antiques and furniture that looked like they belonged in a museum. Except I'd never been to a museum that could hold a candle to this place.

I started in the kitchen, first gathering water from the pump outside before slowly being trusted with more elaborate tasks. It was a tiring business, hours spent just to prepare dinner. My mother had always been a great cook, and I'd always understood the amount of work that had gone into meal preparation. At least, I had in my time. After only one day, I understood why places like this had to have a full staff. One person couldn't have done it all. The servants all worked together like a well-oiled machine. Everyone knew their place and what they were supposed to do.

Which meant it was apparent from moment one that I wasn't a regular member of the staff.

I felt completely out of place no matter how hard I tried. The long gowns I wore were a stark contrast to the uniforms I'd been wearing almost non-stop

since I'd enlisted. The way I talked and acted were both out of place and time. I was constantly having to check myself to make sure I wasn't using colloquialisms that hadn't been made up yet. Fortunately, most members of the staff seemed to accept the lie that I'd been born in a more western part of the colonies. Or they were just following the instructions I was sure Titus had given regarding my past.

I tried my best to follow Gracen's advice as well, making sure I said very little, and never about anything personal. There were times I had to ask questions, but whenever possible, I stuck with quick smiles and nods. My leg was healing quickly, but I still hadn't figured out what my plan would be for getting home, so staying here seemed like the best idea for the time being.

That first day, I'd heard rumors that a high-ranking British officer had come by, but since I hadn't been dragged out of the house to face murder charges, I assumed Gracen's father had taken care of it. Still, I kept a low profile.

In some ways, my schedule wasn't much different than it had been in Iraq. Up at dawn, working my ass off, and then, by evening, I would retreat to my room, usually too tired to do anything but lie down on the uncomfortable bed and stare aimlessly at the ceiling until exhaustion caught up with me. I usually spent those last waking minutes thinking about home, about my parents and Ennis, sometimes about Bruce, and more often about Gracen.

I hadn't seen him much since that night, catching quick glimpses of him here and there as I went about my chores. I caught myself staring at him a few times, watching how he moved, the confidence with which he carried himself. When I'd gotten the chance to talk to him, the discussions had been short and quick, Gracen usually asking about how I was being treated before rushing off to attend to one thing or the other. He wasn't cold, exactly, but there was a definite effort to distance himself.

Except I was certain I could feel him watching me. Every time I tried to catch him, he was busy with something else, but I knew he kept looking my way. His eyes haunted me, and at times, I felt as if they could see right through me. Every time he did look my way, I found myself flustered. Half the time, I dropped whatever I was holding or forgot important things. Like my name. Or why I shouldn't just tell him the whole truth about who I was and what had brought me there.

I wouldn't, of course, because I'd already gotten myself into enough trouble. I didn't need to add "crazy person claiming to be from the future" to

it.

Sometimes it was like he was two different people. One I'd become vaguely familiar with during our time together outside the estate. The other was the façade I saw for the first time when Gracen had brought in his father to meet the new servant.

Roston Lightwood was the complete opposite of his son. He was shorter than Gracen, but still a tall man. His hair was silver, though I suspected it'd been dark at one time. His eyes were hazel, but the color wasn't the only difference. His expression and gaze were cold, disdainful. He was a man of stature, and he had no problems flaunting it in front of everyone, as if his very life depended on his ability to make everyone around him feel small.

He looked me up and down for the briefest of seconds when he'd first seen me, clicking his tongue as I watched him genuinely size me up, as if I were one of his horses and he was deciding what to do with me. He'd only asked for my name, nothing more, and when I'd given it to him, he quickly dismissed me with a wave of his hand.

Maybe it was wrong of me, but I despised him immediately. I quickly lowered my gaze so that he wouldn't see my emotions all over my face. I didn't know what Gracen had told his father about the "man" who'd killed the British soldiers, but I did know that the only thing Roston knew about me was that I was a charity case who had nowhere else to go. That put me lower than the colonial servants, which was saying something.

He ran the household like clockwork, and the servants were wary of angering him. I'd never seen him angry, but I'd seen his look before, the look of a man who would do anything to get what he wanted and would never take no for an answer.

It was a miracle Gracen had a gentle side at all living under this man's thumb.

"Washington is a madman."

Roston stood firmly in the center of the study, wine in his hand as he demanded the attention of the room. Gracen sat in a chair beside him, eyeing his father as the older man gestured in the direction of the city.

"As if a ragged bunch of farmers would be a match for the greatest army in the world." Roston drained half of his glass. "Hopefully, this loss will show those rebels that this is a lost cause for them."

I stood to one side in the parlor, my head lowered as Titus whispered instructions to me every few minutes. I moved swiftly through the room, doing as asked, making sure Master Lightwood and his guests were kept content. It took all of my self-control not to show how disgusted I felt, both at what they were saying and at myself for serving them without speaking up.

There were four other men with them, all Loyalists who had gathered to discuss the siege and the battle. I'd already bitten the inside of my cheek a dozen times or more to stop myself from speaking up, the ridiculous accusations and insults being tossed around both frustrating and provoking.

I was pretty sure Titus was hoping I'd slip up and voice my opinions on the matter, maybe get thrown out, or worse, arrested and handed over to the British. What had Gracen called me? A sympathizer? I didn't know if he'd passed that along to Titus, or if Titus had figured it out somehow, but the sideways looks the steward was giving me told me that my placement here hadn't been accidental.

So far, I'd caught Gracen's eye only once throughout it all, and I'd seen the concern there. He didn't need to worry. As pissed off as I was by what they were saying, I had enough self-control to bite my tongue.

Besides, I reminded myself, I knew how the war would eventually end.

"A marvelous victory," one of the guests voiced, raising his glass as if to toast what I knew had been the turning point...for the Americans.

I suppressed a smile as I remembered that the British had lost more than twice the number of soldiers as the Americans. Technically, they'd won, but history would record Bunker Hill as a different kind of victory.

Roston smiled at the man and raised his glass as well. "I almost pity the colonists," he said with a smile. "Then I remember that I have better things to do with my emotions."

The rest of the party – minus one – chuckled at that, and my fists clenched. Gracen looked over at me again, and this time, I knew my true feelings were showing. But it wasn't just anger at what the other men were saying. It was at what *he* wasn't saying. I wanted to yell at him to speak up, to tell them how a *colonist* had saved his life, but I didn't.

It wasn't easy.

"It's George Washington," another man said. "Instilling false hope in these colonists. Some of them are nothing more than peasants, really. A shame, how their loyalty can so easily be manipulated."

"A true gentleman cannot be manipulated," a third chimed in. "These

savages had no loyalty to begin with.”

“I wouldn’t necessarily say that,” Gracen said, and for an instant, the entire room fell into an awkward silence. His eyes flickered to me for a second, but no one else seemed to notice, though I suddenly felt like the temperature in the room had gone up a couple degrees. “They are loyal to their cause. I think we can attest to that.”

“A lost cause,” Roston corrected.

Gracen hesitated as he looked at his father, then nodded slowly. “That may be, but loyalty nonetheless.” “Whether these skirmishes end in their favor or ours, we cannot deny that their loyalties lie with their commander-in-chief.”

Roston scoffed as one of the other guests chuckled heartily. “Commander-in-chief indeed,” the elder Lightwood sneered. “The man’s a hooligan and a fake. His followers will notice that soon enough.”

“Precisely, Father,” Gracen smiled, his voice even. “His *followers*. Certainly, we can call that loyalty.”

“I believe, Roston, that your boy has found sympathy for the colonists,” one of the guests chuckled. From where I stood, though, I could see the man’s eyes, and the look he was giving Gracen was far from amused, despite the fake smile on his face.

Roston noticed it too.

“My son is more loyal to the Crown than his father,” Roston said firmly. “If it were not for my sake, he would be standing in the ranks of the king’s army shooting rebels as we speak.”

“Then why hold him back?” the other man challenged.

Roston took a sip from his wine as he regarded his guest. The challenge had not gone unnoticed, and I could easily see the fury building.

“My son’s engagement party is the day after tomorrow,” Roston said, his voice strained yet calm. “After that, he is free to do as he pleases.”

My chest tightened in a way I didn’t like, and I stole a glance at Gracen. His face had gone white, though judging by the similar color of his knuckles, anger, not fear, was the emotion behind it. His lips pressed together, and I knew he was holding back what he really wanted to say.

“In that case,” one of the other guests broke through the tension that had risen in the room, “a toast to the young Lightwood.”

The other men raised their glasses in unison, and from my corner in the shadows, I tried to tell myself that Gracen’s engagement didn’t matter to me.

Not. At. All.

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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“*Y*ou a different one, ain’t ya?”

I looked up from the buckets of water I'd just dragged in to see a young black girl looking down at me. I'd seen her around but hadn't talked to her. And to be honest, my interactions with the rest of the staff had lost what little importance they'd had.

It was the day of Gracen’s engagement party, and the preparations for it weren’t the only things keeping me awake at night. I hadn't seen Gracen since that night in the parlor, and I hadn’t dared ask about him either. Titus clearly felt that what happened had put me in my place, and I wondered if it was less my loyalties and more my relationship with Master Gracen that had concerned him. Though what Titus suspected that relationship was, I didn't know.

I was still trying to wrap my head around the fact that he was engaged, a fact that had kept me up late, kept me distracted when I should've been trying to figure out how to get home. I had no idea why I cared that he was getting married, only that I did. I tried writing it off as some sort of weird bond due to what we'd gone through together, but a part of me couldn't help but feel it was something more.

Not that it could ever be anything other than what it was. For all I knew, Gracen and his wife-to-be were the ancestors of some really important person, and if I messed with that, I'd seriously screw up the world I wanted to get back to.

“Not just your talkin’,” the girl said. She eyed me from where she stood, her dress hanging on her lean figure. “Everything about you is different.”



I smiled at her, and her eyes widened a bit. I felt bad about that. I'd been trying to keep to myself, so even in the short time I'd been here, I'd developed a reputation for not being the friendliest person. I was pretty sure Titus had done all he could to help me along with that.

“What’s your name?” I asked as I straightened. I winced as the movement pulled the still tender skin on my leg.

She wasn’t as tall as most of the other women, but I had a feeling it was more due to her age than anything else. She had that lanky look that I had before I hit my last growth spurt.

“Dye,” the girl answered.

“I’m Honor,” I said, holding out my hand.

She looked at it briefly before taking it, her hold firm as she nodded.

“So, Dye, why do you think I’m different?”

She shrugged, but her eyes never left mine. “You’re no colonist,” she said. “You ain’t from these parts, but you don’t sound like no foreigner I ever heard.”

I stuck with the story I told Gracen. “I ran away from home, and Master Gracen was good enough to hire me.”

Dye shook her head. “You ain’t run away from nothin’,” she said firmly. “You been brought here.”

I frowned, not understanding. “What do you mean?”

“I know runaways,” Dye said, “and you ain’t one. I reckon you don’t run away easy.”

I was about to reply when Titus walked into the kitchen and started barking orders. Dye instantly acted like she'd been busy helping me with the buckets as we trudged to a corner of the kitchen and got to work. I saw her eyeing Titus from where we stood, and when her gaze fell back to me, her expression told me that she wasn't done talking.

I wasn't sure yet if that was a good or bad thing.

The party was beyond extravagant.

Never in my life had I ever seen so many people in such close quarters, flaunting their riches as if competing against one another. The level of sheer narcissism and pretentiousness almost made me gag. The worst part was that I knew people in my own time weren't any different. Even those who protested the war saw nothing wrong with lavish parties and excessive

spending habits.

The bulk of guests were gathered in the main dining room, the biggest space in the entire house. I spent most of the morning being taught how to properly set the table. Now, I stood to one side, waiting for a gesture from one guest or the other before rushing to get what was needed, fighting the urge to spit in the wine as I wore my best fake smile and acted as if the condescending tones and barks thrown at me were normal.

Part of me wondered how many of these people would remain in America after the war ended, if their descendants lied about loyalties the way I knew some people did regarding slavery and civil rights. Had I been fighting to protect the descendants of these arrogant, prejudiced people? Fortunately, I was kept too busy to dwell on those thoughts for too long.

The entire staff was working tonight, the overwhelming number of guests kept us all on our toes, and from the corner of my eye, I caught sight of Dye, the expression on her face telling me that I wasn't the only one needing to practice self-control.

I had to admit though, being in the midst of the upper class during this time period had certainly opened my eyes as to why these people were Loyalists. Everything about the revolution endangered their way of life. While people would always complain about the chasm between the rich and the poor, as well as the problems with immigration, the distinctions of class had gotten blurred in most places.

Despite my desire to announce to the entire room that they were the ones fighting a losing battle, I kept a low profile, making sure I met every snide comment or lecherous glance with a polite smile and nod of my head. My temper simmered just below the surface, threatening to explode with every new insult. At one point during the festivities, I tried to retreat to the kitchen where I wouldn't have to deal with people, but Titus seemed to sense my discomfort and pushed me back out into the melee.

Since I appeared to have no other choice but to smile and bear it, I instead focused on the details. The clothing, the food, the speech patterns. Ennis would've killed for only a few minutes of what I was experiencing. If – *when*, not *if* – I got home, I didn't know if I'd be able to share what happened with anyone, but if I did, Ennis would be it, and he'd want to know everything.

“Ladies and gentlemen, if I may have your attention!”

The chatter quickly died as we all turned toward Roston. He, like almost all of the other men in the room, had donned a wig for the occasion, and it

only added to his pretentious manner. I didn't know the proper names for everything he was wearing, but it all looked stiff and heavy, the quality of the material obvious even from where I was standing. For one surreal moment, I felt like I'd fallen into some historical painting or textbook picture.

Then Roston began his speech, and I snapped back to the reality of my present situation.

“There comes a time in every man’s life when the happiness of his son is of utmost importance.” His voice seemed to echo in the silence, his words reverberating through the room. “That time has come for me, as I stand proudly amongst you all to celebrate my son’s engagement to the beautiful Miss Clara Stiles.”

A double set of doors to Roston’s left opened, and I felt the breath catch in my chest as I saw Gracen for the first time tonight. He was dressed as finely as his father, but the younger Lightwood wore it better. Each cut and line, from his coat to his breeches, told me that the clothes had been specially made for him. He must've been as sweltering as the rest of the people crammed into the room, but his face betrayed nothing. And I could see all of it. He wasn't wearing a wig, but he'd pulled his hair back in the current fashion, somehow managing to tame his wild curls.

He only held my attention for a few seconds, however, as my gaze turned to his fiancée. She was gorgeous, her dress perfectly complimenting her curves even as it dazzled the room. Her sandy-colored hair was piled up on top of her head in a way that made me wonder how long it had taken to get it to stay. Her sapphire eyes moved across the room, clearly taking stock of all in attendance. Her features were fine and delicate, the epitome of feminine.

The minute the couple stepped through the doors, the entire room burst into applause. I forced myself to join in despite the ache I felt. No matter how much I told myself that I should be happy for Gracen, that this had technically already happened, I couldn't stop my chest from tightening, couldn't stop the way my stomach churned.

As I watched the couple stride into the room, my breath began to come in short gasps. The corset I'd been forced into made each inhalation painful and I looked around for an escape. The noise around me became overwhelming, the scent of so many bodies overpowering. I could barely think.

Then, suddenly, I felt a hand on my arm. Dye had already begun to pull me away before I even registered that it was her. I concentrated on staying on my feet, trusting her to take me somewhere safe. As she led my escape, I

could hear Roston's voice booming behind me as he started up again. Something about duty and honor that made me want to laugh. I could respect Loyalists who managed to love their home country while still respecting others. I didn't have to know much about him to know that men like him were patriotic because it suited their lifestyle.

I'd seen plenty of his type in my own time.

We came to an abrupt halt as Titus stepped in front of us.

"Where are you going?" He glared at me. "You aren't finished."

"She is for tonight," Dye snapped back.

"Mind your tongue, girl."

To my surprise, she stepped around him, pulling me with her.

"Mind yourself, old man," she said over her shoulder. "This girl is going to be sick from all that noise."

I could barely hear the reply over the second round of applause that echoed from the dining room, and I swallowed hard as I hurriedly followed Dye into the kitchen and out into the cool night air. She didn't ask what happened, or what had triggered my *illness*, but I had no doubt those sharp eyes of hers had caught some of it. Hell, she probably understood it better than I did.

I couldn't be falling for Gracen. Aside from the fact that he was engaged and from a Loyalist family, saying that we were from different worlds was an understatement. In my time, Gracen had been dead for more than two centuries, and it was that time I needed to get back to.

I just didn't know how I could go about doing that.

My feelings for Gracen weren't real. They couldn't be. I barely knew him and I'd never been one who believed in the whole fairy tale thing. I could admit that I was physically attracted to him. He was a good looking man, but that didn't mean anything. I appreciated his good qualities, but that didn't necessarily mean that I felt anything for him aside from admiration and a bit of lust.

I certainly shouldn't feel anything remotely close to jealousy.

Dye took me into my room without asking questions, then gave me a hard look before vanishing back into the hall. The shadows swallowed her up, and I was alone with my thoughts.

Unsurprisingly, I didn't sleep that night.

The last few days had taken their toll on me both mentally and physically, so it wasn't that I wasn't tired. I couldn't feel my feet, and the small of my

back ached. My muscles protested the slightest movement, promising me a new round of pain when I had to get up in the morning. I'd always prided myself on being in excellent physical shape, but I was using a whole different set of muscles here.

I tossed and turned, keeping my eyes shut as I tried to force myself to sleep. I attempted to count sheep, to count backwards, to make a list of mundane things that needed to be done, but none of those things were able to overcome the images and thoughts that kept popping up. I couldn't stop my brain from working overdrive.

My mind kept returning to the image of Gracen walking into the dining room with Clara on his arm, the smile on his face like a slap in the face. I remembered the tightness in my chest at seeing them together, the pang of inexplicable jealousy that rushed through me. The guilt and shame that had followed when I'd remembered my own fiancé. Oddly enough, neither of those emotions were focused toward Bruce, but rather toward my own reaction, as if reminding me that I couldn't be upset with Gracen for his engagement since I had a fiancé of my own.

I shook my head in frustration. What the hell was I thinking? How could I feel this way towards a man I hardly knew, a person I had met only a week before? I couldn't wrap my head around it. I knew Wilkins would tell me that it was some love at first sight kind of thing. Destiny or soulmates or some other garbage. I'd given up on all of those things being real long ago. What I had with Bruce might not have been exciting or perfect, but it was real.

I sat up and ran a hand through my hair, shaking it out as I tried to clear my head. The only light in the room was moonlight from a small window, and I walked over to it, threw it open and closed my eyes against the sweet rush of air against my face.

I had to get out of here. It was no longer a matter of making plans or waiting longer for my leg to be completely healed. My survival might not be at stake, but my sanity definitely was.

I sighed heavily as I paced the small quarters, my bare feet cold against the hardwood floor as I hugged myself. I should get dressed and leave right now, no looking back, no second thoughts.

Except I wasn't even having second thoughts. These were first thoughts. Ones that said I didn't really want to leave. That I should stay.

It was ridiculous, of course. This wasn't my time, my life. There was nothing for me here except a job I didn't want, a war that I knew wouldn't end

as quickly as Roston and his friends wanted it to. And a man who I couldn't have, no matter what my heart was beginning to say.

I reminded myself that I had a perfectly wonderful life back home. I had a family I loved, a fiancé I may or may not decide to keep and a future in medicine. A future that I'd worked hard to attain. For all I knew, whatever part of the universe that had brought me here in the first place would decide to fix its mistake and take me home tomorrow.

This time, this place, none of it was mine. Whatever happened to Roston, to Dye, to Gracen and Clara, it'd all been finished long before I was born. Their story was already written, and I had no place in it.

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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*B*y the time dawn arrived, I was no closer to sleep and felt even worse than before. I couldn't stop thinking about Gracen and Clara, how perfect they'd looked together, how I was sure that if history played out the way it had originally the two of them would be married. And with that came the knowledge that to preserve history, I couldn't interfere, no matter how much I wanted to. Besides, I had my own time – and my own fiancé – I needed to get back to.

It was time to leave.

I knew that I had at least another hour before the household woke up and started their morning rituals, so if I slipped out now, I could be a decent distance away by the time anyone noticed I was gone. I looked about the room, gathering a few things in my pillowcase as I pushed the guilt aside. The Lightwood family was wealthy enough that they wouldn't miss any of this. I needed to move quickly so as not to lose my head start.

Or my nerve.

I opened my bedroom door and peeked out, checking the landing for any sign of servants waking up early. When I was sure I was in the clear, I stepped out, taking care to keep my steps as soft as possible as I made my way downstairs.

As I descended the staircase, my mind tried to reason with me, tried to get me to go back upstairs and forget this whole thing. After all, I had no idea where I was going. This entire endeavor seemed as foolish as it was unplanned.

What was I going to do? Head back to the place where Gracen found me?

Even if I could find it, I had no doubt that I'd run the risk of being caught by either army. While I was now dressed as a woman, the officer who'd interrogated me before might remember who I was. They might have old-fashioned notions about women, but that didn't mean they wouldn't hang me for killing their soldiers. If nothing else, it would've solidified the captain's suspicions that I was a spy.

I shook my head as I continued down the stairs. I'd worry about that once I was on the road. The one thing I knew for certain was that I couldn't stay here. It would hurt too much, and I'd be far too tempted to try to change history.

I reached the ground floor and waited, listening for any unusual sounds. When I was satisfied that I was still the only one awake, I made my way down the small hallway to the kitchen. I moved quickly, keeping my eyes on my feet to avoid any missteps. I was pretty sure that women were required to dress like this so that running away would be more difficult.

As I made my way toward the back door, Dye's face suddenly came to mind. I hadn't made any friends here, but if I stayed, she could become one. Part of me wondered if I should have waited another day so I could tell her I was leaving, maybe even offer her a bit of insight into the future so she could protect herself. As noble as that sounded, I knew it was one more excuse to try to convince myself to stay.

I opened the back door and stopped cold when I saw Gracen standing in front of me. His eyes, which had looked half-asleep, widened in surprise, and I swore under my breath. In part, I was cursing my luck, but another part of me was cursing myself. While I, logically, didn't want to see Gracen, my heart went off in a series of skips that made my face flush and my stomach twist.

"Honor." His voice was hoarse. He cleared his throat as his eyes fell to the pillowcase I clutched, and he frowned. "Where are you going?"

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. I stuttered something incomprehensible as I quickly tried to find an explanation that would both make sense and still hide my true plan.

Unfortunately, he came to the right conclusion before I could manage to speak again. "Are you leaving?"

Scowling, he reached for my sack, and I pulled it back. Technically, the things in it were his, but I needed at least some supplies, even if the only food I now possessed were a couple day-old rolls I'd grabbed on my way through



the kitchen.

“It’s complicated,” I said finally. I could've told him that it was time for me to finish my journey to Canada, but I knew that he'd ask why I was sneaking out. I couldn't give him a reason for that.

Gracen’s frown deepened. “Complicated? You're sneaking out while everyone is still asleep.”

“I never meant to stay here for long,” I reminded him. “It was just supposed to be until my leg healed.”

“I know, but I expected at least the common courtesy of a goodbye. You’re sneaking out like a common thief.” His eyes darted to my bag again. “Is that the truth? Have you decided to rob my family after all we've done for you?”

I struggled to keep my temper. “I'm not a thief. I've worked for my room and board. All I have in here is some clothes and some bread.” I held out the pillowcase. “Take it.”

He shook his head, color staining his cheeks. “That's not necessary. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have accused you.” His eyes met mine, and a thrill ran down my spine. “It's not safe for you out there alone.”

His voice was soft, the concern on his face clear. I almost closed my eyes. I didn't want to see that he cared about my well-being because it would be easier to walk away if I could think that I was only a responsibility to him, nothing more. If I knew that he felt anything at all for me as a person, I wasn't sure I could leave.

Even now, I could feel it, the pull toward him, the inexplicable draw that I'd spent the last few days trying to ignore. I didn't understand it, and I was sure that I didn't like it. I knew that I wasn't supposed to like it. Not with Bruce's ring tucked safely away in my luggage somewhere in the future. I always took it off when I was overseas, not wanting to risk it being lost. Now, I wished I'd worn it onto the plane, if for no other reason than as a reminder of who held my heart.

Or, at least, who was supposed to.

I couldn't deny that I wasn't sure anymore.

All the more reason for me to get away before things got even more complicated.

“Please step aside,” I whispered. “I’d like to leave.”

“No.” Gracen practically growled the word. He took a step toward me and my heart thudded wildly against my ribs. “I won’t allow it.”

“We had an agreement,” I repeated. “I'm not a prisoner here, am I?”

“Of course not.”

“Then let me go.” I had to force the words out of me.

Every fiber of my being screamed at me to stay, to beg Gracen to keep me with him. The intensity of what I was feeling scared me, fueling my need to escape. I'd always prided myself on my independence, on my strength. I never felt like I needed Bruce. I wanted to marry him, and I hadn't liked being away from him, but I'd never felt this inexplicable *need* for him. Not like what I was feeling right now.

The worst part was, I knew it was dangerous, and a part of me didn't care.

Gracen shook his head in response to my request. “Go back to your room and think this through.” His eyes narrowed. “Is it because of my father's friends? They're Loyalists, but they're harmless. And no one other than myself knows that your views aren't...similar.”

“It has nothing to do with the company you keep,” I said. Then I amended it, wanting to be honest with him about this. “Not entirely about them, anyway. This is your house, and I have no say over what happens within these walls.”

“I demand a proper explanation.” He crowded into my space, his eyes flashing. “I deserve that. After everything we've been through, I deserve an honest explanation.”

I looked out the kitchen window at the first signs of daylight and realized that if I didn't leave now, I would have the entire staff to deal with.

“I don't have one,” I whispered. I needed to leave.

Now.

I tried to push past Gracen, but he grabbed my shoulders, stopping me from going more than a few steps. His fingers burned through my sleeves. I'd never before craved human touch so much.

“Let me go, Gracen,” I begged as desperation filled me. Tears burned my eyes, and I struggled not to cry. I couldn't let him know how much this hurt me. “Please, just let me go.”

His eyes locked on mine, and those impossible butterflies in my stomach fluttered. The room was suddenly too warm, the air too thick to breathe. His body was less than an inch from mine, and despite the layers of clothing between us, I imagined I could feel the heat of him.

“Gracen,” I murmured, unsure what I was asking him to do.

He decided for me as he bent his head and brushed his lips across mine. A

shock went through me, and then his hands were sliding up my arms, one to linger on my neck, the other cupping the back of my head. He deepened the kiss, his tongue sliding across my bottom lip. As my lips parted, I leaned into him, feeling his hunger matching my own. I forgot where I was, what I was supposed to be doing. All that mattered was how right this felt.

Then, as suddenly as the kiss began, it was over. He pulled away, and I could see the confusion in his eyes as he stared down at me. This wasn't right, and we both knew it. Even though Gracen didn't know about Bruce, we both knew about Clara, and that alone was enough.

Still, I couldn't lie to myself any longer. No matter how many times I told myself that this was a bad idea, that I couldn't get involved. Hell, it didn't even matter that I'd never believed in the kind of connection I felt toward him. It was real.

And it could never happen.

He lowered his eyes even as his skin flushed a deep red. I wanted to comfort him, tell him it was okay, that it was just a spur of the moment reaction that meant nothing. But I couldn't bring myself to say it, even if it hadn't meant anything to him. I knew, if he decided to kiss me again, I would welcome it and damn the consequences.

"I'm sorry," Gracen muttered, his gaze flicking toward me, and then away again.

I nodded, still unable to find the words I needed to say. There was nothing, actually, that I *could* say. It was all just too complicated.

"I shouldn't have done that," he said, rubbing the nape of his neck. "You're right, Honor, you aren't a prisoner here. But, I beg of you, reconsider what you are doing. It isn't safe out there. You're safer here."

"Gracen," I began but stopped when he held up his hand.

"The choice is yours," he continued, his eyes falling to my lips as our bodies seemed to want to pull together. He looked away. "Just know that if you decide to leave, I won't stop you, and I won't be able to protect you."

With a shake of his head, he brushed past me, leaving me alone in the kitchen with the chaos in my mind.

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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I remembered my first kiss with Bruce clearly. I didn't know if it was because it was my first kiss ever, or the fact that I'd been terrified that my father would find out. Or because it was nothing like I'd expected.

Bruce and I had been unofficially dating on and off for a couple years, and while I'd accepted that he'd been too immature to be exclusive, my part of the deal had been that I wouldn't kiss him, or do anything else for that matter, until we were an official couple.

We were in his car, parked in front of my house but away from the living room window where my parents could easily look out and see us parked. A part of me had been worried that one of my parents would draw it open and spot Bruce's car. But they hadn't.

We'd gone to the movies, but I couldn't say what we'd watched. All I could remember was the fact that I'd finally been sitting in the movies with my boyfriend, holding his hand, my head resting on his shoulder as the colors from the big screen flashed across us.

It was one of those teenage things, the perfect first real date with my boyfriend. It didn't matter that we'd actually gone out before, because those outings had been group dates or dances that Bruce hadn't had another date for. This was the first time we'd gone somewhere alone, as boyfriend and girlfriend, and the entire time I'd sat in the theater, I'd known that I would let him kiss me.

We'd gotten home well before my curfew, my father's warning having been given with a smile. The look in his eyes, however, had said it all. He

terrified Bruce, and although that had slowly grown old and less amusing over time, it had kept Bruce in check through high school.

It hadn't, however, kept me from getting my first kiss. I'd always imagined my first kiss to be something special, something that would make me shiver every time I thought about it.

Instead, I'd been disappointed.

I'd known, of course, that I wasn't the first girl Bruce had kissed. Kathy O'Neill was all too happy to tell me that she'd received that honor back in seventh grade. In some ways, I'd expected that since he'd gotten in some practice, he'd at least be good at it.

I thought that until his lips touched mine, parted them, and instantly stuck his tongue in my mouth. The kiss was pushy and sloppy, and it took me by complete surprise. What I'd expected to be something soft and sweet, something to show the way we felt about each other, had clearly all been about him. The follow-up hadn't been any better, and when Bruce's hand had reached under the hem of my shirt, he'd been visibly disappointed at my resistance.

Over time, Bruce had gotten better – or I'd gotten used to his technique – and I'd filed my childhood dream of a perfect first kiss alongside things that I'd learned were just fantasies. Like Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny.

I'd also put time travel on that list, and now that I'd experienced both time travel and an amazing kiss, I was beginning to think that anything was possible.

Maybe Dye had been right after all. Maybe I was here for a reason.

Maybe staying was what I was meant to do all along.

I spent the rest of the day in a bit of a daze, my mind constantly wanting to return to that kiss, to remember the way Gracen's lips had felt against mine. I was next to useless, taking longer than usual to finish my tasks, often earning dirty looks from the other servants, or insults from Titus, but I didn't take any of it to heart. I was too busy thinking about what this all meant. If it meant anything at all.

After lunch, Dye found me in the dining room, cleaning up by myself. I was so busy daydreaming that I didn't notice her until she was standing right next to me, a frown on her face.

"You be a fool," she said, her voice low, but her words sharp.

"Pardon me?"

"You want Master Roston to send you away?" she asked, an eyebrow

raised.

It was on the tip of my tongue to say that I actually did want Roston to send me away, but only if it meant I could go home...or that Gracen was going with me.

“You been workin' slower than molasses today.”

“I didn't sleep much last night,” I said. That was, at least, true.

Dye, however, didn't seem to believe that fatigue was my only reasoning. She watched me work for a few seconds before clicking her tongue and shaking her head.

“You better get what's on yo' mind off it, and soon,” Dye said. “Titus ain't happy, and you can be sure he'll tell Master Roston.”

I turned toward her, giving her one of my own frowns. “Since when have you become my keeper?”

She clicked her tongue again. “You ain't from here, Honor,” she reminded me. “You's a long ways from home, and this place ain't so kind to strangers nowadays. Master Roston wants you out, you gonna be in a spot o' danger.”

I stiffened. “I can handle myself.”

“Maybe,” she nodded, “but when they find out who you really be, they ain't gonna be friendly.”

“I'm not a rebel,” I murmured.

She gave me a hard look before speaking. “I know. You's so much more. I can see that, and you betcha they will too.”

Dye reached down to take the plates I'd collected and walked out of the dining room as I tried to make sense of what she had just said.

By the time evening rolled in, I managed to get myself back on track, picking up my pace while simultaneously trying my best to keep a low profile. It hadn't only been Dye's warning either. I'd bumped into Titus a couple times, and by the second time, I'd gotten a sinking feeling that he was keeping a closer eye on me than usual. Definitely motivation.

I left the study for last, knowing that Roston usually spent most of the day in there, and I was in no mood to interact with the man in any way, let alone hear more Loyalist rhetoric. Besides, if Titus had talked to Roston as Dye had warned me he would, then avoiding him was the better choice.

I opened the study door, then stopped when I saw Roston's back. In front

of him sat Gracen, a scowl on his face. His eyes met mine for a split second before they quickly returned to his father. Despite how quick it was, Roston noticed and glared at me for a moment before dismissing me completely.

Apparently, I'd interrupted something important.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'll come back later."

Roston turned away as if he hadn't heard me, and I backed out of the study, closing the door behind me. I was already starting to walk away when Roston's booming voice came through the thick oak.

"You are being fool hearty!"

I stopped, curiosity getting the best of me. I moved closer to the door but kept my eyes facing forward. I wasn't stupid enough to eavesdrop without keeping an eye out, but I also wasn't about to walk away.

"On the contrary, Father," Gracen's voice was clipped, tight, "I believe I am being quite reasonable."

"You are an Englishman," Roston bellowed. "You cannot have conflicting loyalties. I won't allow it!"

"I do not have *conflicting loyalties*," Gracen countered. "And you do not need to remind me of my heritage."

"It seems that I do," Roston snapped. "I cannot believe we are having this conversation."

"Then why bore yourself?"

"Because you are too stubborn to listen to reason!"

"How is anything you say reasonable?" Gracen raised his voice. "You want me to enlist!"

My heart dropped as a chill ran down my spine. That couldn't happen. Gracen couldn't enlist. Even if he survived the war, he'd go back to England. Thanks to a historical fiction series I'd read a couple years back, I knew how badly the loss had hit England.

"You are a Lightwood!" Roston bellowed, loud enough that I flinched. "We have always been loyal to the Crown and having a son of military age who hasn't enlisted is calling that into question. I will *not* allow our family name to be besmirched!"

For the first time since I had arrived at the Lightwood estate, I felt like Gracen could be in grave danger, and it took all of my self-control not to burst in and tell Roston that his demands would destroy his family.

Roston's friends had often discussed with him what they all believed was a harmless uprising that would be quelled within weeks, or at the most,

months. They had no idea what the colonists would achieve, especially in Boston, and that most of them would be fleeing to Nova Scotia to escape the war. The ones who didn't would most likely return to England with nothing. For now, however, everyone was looking for an opportunity to bring honor to their family's name, fight a few battles and return with heroic stories to tell their grandchildren.

Those discussions had obviously gotten to Roston, and now he was willing to risk the life of his only son for glory and honor. I scowled. Bastard.

"I am sorry, Father, but this is one thing I cannot blindly do," Gracen said. "I have agreed to most everything since my birth. This is different, Father. It's a matter of what I believe in, and I do not know how I truly feel about all this."

"What you believe is of no concern to me," Roston shouted, and I winced at the sound of his fist slamming against something hard. The desk, I assumed. "It is a matter of what is right."

"And how is any of this right?" Gracen asked. "How can you stand there and honestly tell me that this battle is right?"

"It is that damn girl that you brought with you, is it not?" Roston's voice suddenly changed, and my heart skipped a beat, wondering just how dangerous it was for me to be standing here. "Since the moment she arrived, you have changed. I never should have let you convince me into hiring that damn colonist!"

"Honor has nothing to do with this," Gracen said.

"She has a name, does she?" Roston sneered. "Don't think I haven't seen how you look at her."

"I am engaged!" Gracen shouted. "Which, I may remind you, is also something I gave into despite my beliefs. And it will be the last time I shall do so."

There was a sudden silence in the study, and I imagined both men staring each other down, neither of them willing to give in. I could only pray that Gracen would continue to stand his ground. The thought of him in a redcoat uniform made me sick.

I needed to find some way to tell him that he was making the right decision, that he needed to stay as far away from the war as humanly possible. I couldn't let him give in to his father's demands. Not about this. I could survive the engagement, but I wasn't sure I could survive it if he died.

Which was ironic, considering a part of me was still trying to figure out



how to return to a time when he was already dead.

My mind began to race with all the possible ways I could support his personal rebellion and keep him safe. Somewhere in the middle of it all, a small voice in the back of my head began asking why I'd taken such an interest in his well-being. Deep down, I knew the answer to that, but I still wasn't ready to admit it to myself, as if acknowledging how deeply I felt about Gracen would solidify the wrong I was doing. He was an engaged man. I was an engaged woman. Even if that wasn't the case, there was no future in this, no matter how I felt.

"I need you to make up your mind quickly," Roston Lightwood's voice was unusually soft and composed. "These skirmishes won't last for long."

"I certainly hope not," came Gracen's reply, and with that, I knew the discussion had ended.

I heard footsteps, and then...shit! I was standing too close to the door. As quietly as I could, I raced down the hall and turned towards the staircase, making for the second floor where I was sure I could busy myself with one mundane task or another.

Halfway up, I heard the study door open and close. I couldn't resist peeking over the banister to watch Gracen storm down the hall and out of my sight.

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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*I* dreamed that night.

*I was standing in a run-down house of sorts with Gracen by my side. I couldn't make out enough of the interior to tell where we were or even when we were. We were dressed differently, and the air was cold against my skin despite the fact we were inside and I was wearing a coat.*

*In front of us were a man and a woman standing behind a counter, and I knew instinctively that they were the owners of the establishment. The looks on their faces were disturbing, even a little threatening, especially the scowl that the man had directed at me. Now I didn't know if the chill under my skin was from the look or the cold, but I was extremely uncomfortable.*

*The woman was talking to Gracen in broken English with what I figured out was a French accent. They were arguing about something I couldn't quite make out, but that was probably because I couldn't take my eyes off the man who was scowling at me. I felt like I should know him from somewhere, but no matter how hard I tried, I wasn't able to place him.*

*Suddenly, the woman started yelling in French, waving us away. I looked at Gracen, and for the first time, I realized how worn he appeared, a man who had seen and been through more in one lifetime than anyone should. With his hair tied back and dyed, he looked very different from the Gracen I knew, barely recognizable.*

*Still, I knew him, and I knew then that I'd recognize him anywhere. It had little to do with how he looked and everything to do with the way I felt. In that moment, a small burst of inspiration made me wonder if it might have been*

*Gracen who pulled me through time, if this inexplicable connection we had, whatever this was, had been so strong, so powerful, that it broke through space and time itself.*

*Then the woman's voice rose, joined by the gruff voice of the man next to her, both bellowing in incomprehensible French, and the moment was gone. Despite the tension filling the air, Gracen kept his cool. His eyes briefly shifted to me, as if making sure I was still there, before returning to the couple in front of us.*

*After another minute, he started talking, and no matter what I did, I couldn't say a word. Now, it was as if I was watching the whole thing through the eyes of a stranger, unable to take part in what was happening. I clenched my fists, fought against my inability to speak, but none of it did any good.*

*As the shouting faded away, Gracen grabbed my arm, pulling me away as we walked toward the establishment's door. I could see the snow through the windows now, the quick shapes of pedestrians outside as they fought through the cold on their way to their destinations. Wherever and whenever we were, it was winter.*

*The man shouted something else behind us, and then Gracen's hand was gone. I turned to see him running back toward the man. Before I could understand what he was planning to do, his fist connected with the man's jaw. I tried to scream as Gracen followed the man to the ground, throwing punch after punch, but no sound came out. I tried to run to where they were, but my legs were like lead, my movement forced as if I were trudging through quicksand. All I could do was watch...*

*I woke with a start, sweat pouring off me, my breath coming in gasps. The room was dark, the night moonless. Instinctively, I reached to the left where my lamp should be, but nothing was there. Mind still muddled with sleep, I reached up to touch the underside of the top bunk. Again, nothing was there.*

*It came rushing back all at once. The car wreck. Waking up in the past with a stranger watching me.*

*Gracen.*

*I closed my eyes again and tried to focus on slowing my breathing. Gradually, my heart resumed its normal rhythm even as quick and sporadic images of my dream flashed through my mind. My entire body shuddered, and as I closed my eyes, I prayed for a dreamless sleep. Just a few hours of*

uninterrupted, dreamless sleep. That's all I wanted.

“Clara! My dear!” Roston's voice boomed through the house as he greeted his future daughter-in-law. “How wonderful to see you again.”

I'd been sent to fetch water, but lingered near the door instead. I'd never considered myself a masochist until now. I knew, despite my daydreaming, that nothing would happen between Gracen and I. I'd given in to my weakness and stayed, but now, knowing that Gracen's beautiful – and appropriate – fiancée was one room over, I had to admit to myself that our kiss was a mistake.

No matter how much it hurt.

“Mr. Lightwood, I thank you so much for inviting me over.”

I hadn't heard Clara speak until now, and the sound of it grated on my nerves. I told myself that my dislike was unfounded, that it was the result of jealousy, not of any real reasoning. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling that, should she wish it, Clara could succeed where Roston had failed. And I couldn't let that happen.

Even as Clara and Roston continued their small talk, I forced myself out into the scorching summer heat to do as I'd been told. If I wanted to keep Gracen on the right side of this war, I needed to stay, and to do that, I couldn't shirk my duties.

A small voice in the back of my mind asked when I was going to start worrying about getting home, but I reminded myself that I didn't have any control over what happened. Technically, I didn't even know what *had* happened. It wasn't like the time travel stories I'd read or watched where there was a specific place or person or technology that could be pinpointed as the method of travel, even if it wasn't understood. I'd been in a car accident on a highway outside of Boston. I highly doubted I was the first person to fit that criteria.

I was still thinking about statistics and probabilities when I came back into the kitchen with my water.

“Careful, Honor. Titus, he's got his eyes on you,” Dye said as I set the buckets of water in a corner. “You best be keepin' to yourself today.”

“He'd best be staying out of my way,” I replied, surprising myself with how sharp my words were.

Dye raised an eyebrow and shook her head. I caught a hint of a smile on

her face as she leaned closer to me.

“I knows where your loyalty is,” she whispered. “It'd be best for you if you found yourself a place with the rebels.”

“Believe me, they don't need me,” I answered, keeping my voice low.

“I seen you outside the Master's study last night,” she continued.

Shit.

She knew I was, at the very least, a sympathizer, and now she knew I'd been eavesdropping. If she put those two together, Roston could have me arrested as a spy.

Hell, there was no *could* about it. If Roston had the slightest idea that I wasn't who I said I was, he'd have me turned over to the British in a heartbeat.

“I was waiting for them to finish so I could clean the study,” I explained, slowly turning to look at her. The expression on her face said she didn't believe a word I said.

“You be careful,” she said, acting like she had heard nothing of the nonsensical explanation I'd just given her. “Titus be a snake of a man. He think you spyin' on folks, he make your life hell.”

I smiled. “I'll keep that in mind.”

She gave me a sideways look and shook her head. “You do that. Now, you supposed to ask if Master Gracen and his lady friend want somethin' to drink.”

I frowned at the assignment but didn't argue. Dye already suspected that I wasn't who I said I was. If she figured out that I had feelings for Gracen, I knew she wouldn't approve.

I found Gracen and Clara outside on the porch that overlooked the garden. Clara sat on the flowered bench, looking like a porcelain doll in her filmy blue dress, while Gracen stood at the railing, looking out across the carefully manicured paths and blooming flowers.

I paused in the doorway, making myself see the scene objectively, to see Clara as she was and not as I wanted her to be. She was a little older than I knew most unmarried women were, though not quite my age. I was pretty sure that I rated close to being an old maid in the eyes of eighteenth-century society.

She was watching him, and I saw it clearly then, that she wanted him. I couldn't tell if it was love for him, or for his position, but it didn't matter. He'd made her a promise, and when he kissed me, he violated that promise. *I*

violated that promise. I didn't know if it was because I hadn't had more than a quick glance at her, or if I was just that awful of a person, but I hadn't truly thought about the hurt that kiss would cause.

I was a horrible person.

I knew how much it'd hurt me in the past when Bruce had been with other women, even though it was before things were official between us. I suspected he hadn't been faithful afterward either. Now, I was that other woman, and even if all Gracen and I had shared was a kiss, it was wrong.

Guilt washed over me, and I turned around to leave the two of them undisturbed.

"He doesn't understand, Clara." Gracen's words stopped me before I'd gone more than a few steps.

"You have to see it from his point of view, my love," Clara replied, her soft voice sugar-sweet. "He sees the larger picture, and wants to guard you against anything that could hurt your future."

"I understand that," Gracen admitted, "but I would feel better if he could see things from my perspective as well."

Perhaps I'd given Clara the benefit of the doubt too quickly. I hadn't heard much of the conversation between Clara and Roston, but now I suspected she was doing the elder Lightwood's bidding.

"You know that he wants what is best for you," she continued.

"You mean he wants what's best for the family name," Gracen countered. "He cares nothing for how I feel or what I want. It's all about reputation."

"You are your name," she said, "your reputation. It's a part of who you are and who we will be. Your father wants you to honor that."

"You sound like him," Gracen said, frustration clear in his voice.

I heard feet shuffling and repositioned myself behind the door so that I could see what was happening. Clara was now standing in front of Gracen, looking up at him as she held his hands. The expression on her face was one of adoration.

"You know I would never side against you," Clara said earnestly. "Whatever you decide, I will support it fully."

"We're to be married," he said, smiling. "How could I choose a war over that?"

Gracen kissed her hands. I wondered if he would feel the same about her words, her wide eyes, if he'd known that she'd spend several minutes talking to his father before meeting with him. Something about this whole

conversation made me suspicious.

Clara gave him a smile that made my stomach turn. Maybe it wasn't only jealousy on my part. Maybe I had a legitimate reason not to like this woman.

"This is hardly a war," she said dismissively. "If you were to choose to join the army, I doubt you would see much battle. Everyone says it will all be over in a matter of weeks, especially after the loss the rebels suffered recently."

If only that were true, I thought to myself. In my time, it was said that inciting the United States to join a war they'd kept out of had been like waking a sleeping giant. History would show that the Battle of Bunker Hill had a similar effect. The loss had fueled the cause, prompting the rebels to continue to fight. We were only a year from the colonies officially declaring themselves separate from England.

"I would have expected you to care more about the wedding than these so-called skirmishes." There was humor in Gracen's voice.

"I care about you," Clara said firmly, "and our way of life. Those rebels are trying to disturb that, and it would do me great honor if my husband were one of the men who put an end to this rebellion."

That little bitch.

Okay, maybe I was being a tad overly harsh. She didn't know what I knew, but I was more certain than ever that Roston had put her up to this. He probably even played the whole prestige card, telling her that if Gracen didn't enlist, once the war was over, he'd be looked down on for his lack of patriotism. If he listened to her, there was a good chance she would get Gracen killed, and all for a way of life that wouldn't last much longer.

At that moment, I hated that I knew the future. Whoever had said that ignorance was bliss knew what they were talking about. Knowing that the British were going to lose this war only made things worse because men died on both sides of the fight. Even if I managed to convince Gracen to switch sides, that wasn't a guarantee that he'd survive the war. My knowledge could only keep him safe if he lived to see the British sent back to England.

No good could ever come out of this.

I turned away from the couple, my mind racing with how to convince Gracen to forget about all this nonsense, to assure him that his neutrality was the best thing for him. If he didn't fight on either side, he wouldn't die in battle, and at the end, his allegiance could be made to America without appearing to be a turncoat.

“You have a way with words, Clara,” Gracen said.

I closed my eyes as I heard the concession in his voice.

“I’m not trying to sway you from your beliefs, my love,” Clara said. “I just want you to consider your father’s proposition.”

I opened my eyes and risked another look. My heart sank at the expression on Gracen's face. I didn't need to hear him say it. In that moment, I knew, unless I convinced him otherwise, he'd enlist in the British Army, and some dark foreboding told me that he most likely wouldn't survive.



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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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Gracen was in the study, alone. He stood at the window, looking out at the setting sun. The skies had already turned a deep red and was now slowly darkening to a shade of purple. The glow coming through the window cast the room in strange shadows, giving the entire room a strange, surreal look.

I wasn't worried about us being interrupted. I'd been cleaning the second-floor windows when I'd seen Roston and Clara walking to the carriage. He'd gotten in, and the carriage had pulled away. I could've assumed that he was merely being polite and seeing her safely home. She planned to marry his son, it only made sense that he'd be concerned for her safety.

Except my gut told me that Roston was more concerned with finding out whether or not she'd managed to talk Gracen into enlisting.

And I couldn't let that happen.

“Don't do it.”

Gracen turned around but didn't seem surprised to see me. He didn't look angry or even frustrated. In fact, if I had to describe his expression, it would be one of resignation, and that frightened me.

“Excuse me?” His voice was raspy, and he coughed to clear his throat.

“Don't join the British Army.” I closed the door behind me. While Roston and Clara were gone, the house was still full of servants, including Titus, and the last thing I needed them to overhear was me trying to convince Gracen to go against his father.

Gracen's eyes narrowed. “How did you know about that?”

“None of you are particularly quiet with your discussions,” I offered.

He eyed me for a second, frowning, and then his features softened, and he sighed. "You're right. We're not."

I walked over to where he was standing but made sure to keep a respectable distance between the two of us. The last thing we needed was another kiss...no matter how much I wanted it. "Don't do it."

He looked bemused. "Honor, I'm quite surprised by your concern for me, but I assure you, there's little to worry about."

"I doubt that," I muttered.

"I haven't yet decided on my course of action," he said.

"You look like a man who has already made up his mind."

He shook his head as he turned to gaze back out of the window, and relief flooded through me.

"The situation is...complicated, and one I am quite uncomfortable with, despite what everyone says." His voice was quiet, soft. "I truly do not know where I stand, but what I am quite sure of is that this will soon become more than just skirmishes."

I felt relief that he wasn't just buying into all of this, but it wasn't enough. I needed to hear him say that he wasn't going to do it. Part of me wanted to tell him how right he was, how the British might have a couple wins before it was all over, but that, in the end, the British would lose.

I just didn't have a way to explain *how* I knew that without sounding completely insane.

"Maybe you could join me," Gracen teased. "You seem to be quite adept handling yourself, and we both know you can pass as—"

"This isn't a joking matter," I interrupted.

His eyes searched mine for a moment, and I knew he was looking for any sign of amusement. When he found none, he sighed and looked down.

"Very well, Honor Daviot. What would you have me do?"

My mouth opened and then closed again, my mind suddenly blank. I'd been focused on convincing him not to go, wanting him to see that it was in his best interest. Now, however, I didn't think that would be enough for him.

I didn't know why I ever thought otherwise. When I first met him, I thought his not wanting to get involved was because he was hedging his bets or that fighting was beneath him. What I could see now, what I'd seen over the past few days, was that Gracen was actually a man of great principle. He wouldn't support something simply because other people told him he should. He thought things through, considered the weight of his choices.

He wouldn't sit back and do nothing. He just needed to know what he was fighting for. I could see the toll his father and Clara's words were having on him. It was obvious that he was tired of the back and forth, and that he didn't necessarily believe that joining the British Army was important to upholding his family honor.

"Conflicting loyalties, my father calls it," Gracen continued when I didn't answer him. "It isn't that at all, not the way my father means it. I'm not a coward, Honor."

"I know that," I replied, keeping my voice quiet but firm. "I know you're not."

"Then tell me why I won't take up arms and fight the rebels as my father, my fiancée, and our friends seem to think I should?" he asked, his tone matter-of-fact. "If my father was young enough, he would have enlisted at the first sign of trouble." He paused and then added, "I am supposed to be my father's son."

I shook my head before he even finished the sentence. He was nothing like his father. I knew, in the long run, even if he decided to do nothing, it would save him the heartache of having to leave his home with the majority of the other Loyalists. He could continue here, live out the remainder of his life in peace, an Englishman who had stood on the sidelines, supporting neither side. There was nothing wrong with that.

I supposed, to most people, that was the wisest course of action. It wasn't like everyone in my time enlisted, not even in wartime. I understood that it had to be a personal choice, but for me and my family, there'd only ever been one choice.

We fought.

We might not have always understood our orders, and there were times we might not have agreed with the wars we fought, but we knew that we had to take the bad along with the good. Someone had to stand for freedom and protection, and my family was among those who did it.

How could I tell Gracen that he should remain neutral when I knew that my family, in the same situation, would fight? But how could I ask him to fight for any cause he didn't believe in, regardless of what I knew about the future?

And I knew that I had to admit that my need to keep him away from the fighting had little to do with the knowledge of the war's outcome and more to do with how I felt about him. I couldn't bear to think about Gracen in the

battlefield, musket in hand, firing at the enemy as he and the other soldiers stood in perfect lines begging to be killed. I didn't doubt for a moment that he'd only be involved with the traditional form of battle tactics rather than the more covert attacks that some of the American forces would use.

"You'll be killed," I said, my voice faltering as I spoke.

He nodded. "Despite what Clara says, I know that's a possibility." His voice turned bitter. "I can't say that I think my father would be too bothered by it. His only son dying to quench the uprising. Quite an honor."

"That's not funny," I snapped.

"That was hardly my intention." He shrugged. "It's a bit sad, actually."

It was strange, how well I could read him, even after such a short acquaintance. His expression was impassive, but I knew he was thinking, that he was trying to figure out what to do, which course of action would allow him to maintain his principles while not completely alienating his father...or being considered a traitor by everyone he knew and loved.

"Join the colonists."

So...apparently, my brain decided that blurting out those three words to the son of a devout Loyalist was a good idea.

Gracen's head snapped up, his eyes wide. "What?"

No going back now.

"If you feel that you must fight, then join the colonists," I repeated.

"Are you absolutely mad?" His voice rose as his face flushed.

I quickly looked over my shoulder even though the door was closed. This wasn't a conversation I wanted anyone to overhear.

He understood the gesture and immediately lowered his voice. "Declining to join the British Army is one thing, but fighting with the colonists?" he hissed. "Not only is there the same danger associated with war but to do so will most likely cost my family everything. I could be tried as a traitor, my family name disgraced."

I said the only thing I could think of. "The one thing I can assure you is that your family name will not be disgraced."

"You have no way of knowing that."

"I have a feeling," I lied.

"A feeling!" He barked a bitter laugh as he shook his head. "My father has a *feeling*. Clara has a *feeling*, and now you do too." His voice was harsh as he continued, "Let me tell you a thing or two about *feelings*, Honor Daviot. They are rarely reliable."

He turned away from me before I could answer and rubbed the back of his neck. I hated myself for the look on his face, but I couldn't bring myself to regret choosing to warn him.

"I cannot understand why you would make this suggestion," he said.

"My father always told me that you should fight for what you believe is right," I said. "Can you honestly tell me that you believe the things the Crown has been doing to the colonies is right?"

"It isn't my place to even argue this." His voice rose again.

"Why the hell not?" I asked, my patience wearing thin. "You know the difference between right and wrong. If you thought the Crown was in the right, you wouldn't even be conflicted about this. You'd have picked up your gun the day the colonists threw tea into the harbor."

He stared at me for a moment before stammering, "H-how dare you even presume to know what I think?"

"I might not have known you for long, Gracen, but I know honorable men," I argued, "and you *are* an honorable man. No one with your family's history of loyalty to the Crown would be standing on the sidelines unable to decide what he truly believed if there was no doubt. You might have conflicting loyalties, but it's not between the British and the colonists. It's between your father and what you think is right."

"Stop it." He shook his head. "Stop talking this instant!"

I couldn't, though, not when I didn't know if I'd get another chance to try to convince him."

"You know I'm right, Gracen," I pressed. "You can't fool me—"

"I said enough!" His voice boomed through the study, and for a moment, he sounded eerily like his father.

"No!" I snapped back. I wouldn't let this go. I couldn't. "Your best chance is with the colonists."

"Why?" he asked. "Why would I join a lost cause?"

"You don't believe that."

"I must!"

"Why?" I asked. "Because your father says so?"

Gracen opened his mouth, hesitated, and closed it again. He glowered down at me, his face livid. I waited, knowing that this time, holding my tongue was the best option. He had to think about what I said, decide for himself if it was indeed his father who was holding him back rather than his own beliefs. After nearly half a minute, he sighed heavily and sank into the

chair beside the bookcase.

“I can't do it,” he said slowly. “Even if it were the right thing to do, I cannot.” He looked up at me, and I could almost see the defeat in his eyes. “I will not disgrace my family. After my wedding, I will enlist in the British Army.”

I leaned down and grasped his hand, trying not to let him read the amount of panic flooding through my body. He couldn't do that. I had to find some way to stop him. He looked down at my hands but didn't pull his away.

“You can't do it. It's a terrible mistake.”

“Why?” he asked.

“I can't explain it, Gracen,” I said, frustrated. “Just trust me that it's a bad idea.”

“I need more than something you feel, Honor.” His eyes met mine, as if he was searching for something. I just didn't know what.

I gave him the only excuse I could think of. “What about Clara?” I asked. “Do you really want to leave her a widow?”

He raised an eyebrow. “I don't believe that you care very much for Clara.”

I refused to dignify that with an answer. Mostly because I had no clue how to answer it.

I tried to stand, but this time, he grabbed my hand.

“Why, Honor? Talk to me.”

The urge to tell him everything was overwhelming. I told myself it was because I was tired of pretending, tired of having to constantly be on my guard. It had nothing to do with the fact that I wanted to be honest with Gracen, that I didn't want to lie to him anymore.

I shook my head, fighting back the tears that burned in my eyes. “I'm sorry, I can't.”

That searching look again. “You can't, or you won't?”

“Gracen, please, let me go.”

“I need an answer.” His voice was soft, and it made my stomach twist.

I took a step back, taking my hands with me.

“Why do you want me to join the colonists?” He stood again.

I shook my head. “Gracen, I'm sorry,” I said, my voice barely a whisper.

I turned and started for the door.

“Honor!”

I didn't know if it was the desperation in his voice or the fact that it was

killing me to hold it in, but I blurted out the essential truth that I needed him to know.

“The British lose the war!”

Oh, shit.

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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

---

*“I really hate it when you do that.”*

*Wilkins' voice cut through my thoughts and my head snapped up in surprise. Until that moment, I thought I was alone. The bastard had a way of creeping up without making a sound. It was one of the reasons why I was happy he was on my side. That, and the fact that I knew he'd always have my back.*

*“What are you talking about?” I asked, moving to one side of the broken down wall I was sitting on so that he could sit next to me.*

*We were in a small town just outside Baghdad, one that had definitely seen better days. The war had taken down most of the buildings, the streets so filled with rubble that barely any space was left for our SUVs to move about freely. If a quick escape was ever needed here, we'd be in trouble.*

*There were only two dozen people or so in the streets, and we knew most of them. We actually knew most of the people in the town, and many of them were friendly toward us. It was an oasis of sorts for us. A place where we didn't have to be quite on edge.*

*Wilkins sat down beside me, looking out at where Rogers was playing a friendly game of soccer with a few of the younger local boys. The big man's burly figure seemed to dwarf them all, but size clearly didn't intimidate them. They hollered and yelled at him as they played, all of them grinning like fools.*

*“You have this look you get when you're thinking about home,” Wilkins said as he pulled out an energy bar and took a bite. He offered it to me, but I quickly shook my head. I was rarely hungry when in the field.*



*“Is that so?”*

*He chuckled as he chewed. “I've known you for far too long, Daviot,” he said with a full mouth, and I instinctively smacked his shoulder.*

*It was my way of reminding him to keep his trap shut when eating, but it rarely ever did anything more than encourage him to do it more often.*

*“Is it Bruce?” Wilkins asked, raising an eyebrow at me.*

*I shook my head no. “Parents,” I said. “I miss them. I haven't called my father in a while, and the last time we spoke, he sounded terrible.”*

*Wilkins took another bite from his energy bar, a thoughtful expression on his face. Rogers waved at us to join him, but Wilkins simply gave him the finger, forcing the big man to laugh out loud. Wilkins rarely moved around unless absolutely necessary, something Rogers and I never failed to tease him about.*

*“You worry too much,” Wilkins said. “It's like you're deliberately carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders when no one's asking you to.”*

*“I can't help it,” I replied with a scowl.*

*“Sure you can. You're not responsible for everything.”*

*“That shouldn't stop me from calling home regularly.”*

*“Your dad's an army man, Daviot,” Wilkins said, crumpling up the wrapper and throwing it into the rubble. “He'll understand.”*

*“Do you have to do that?” I asked with a sigh.*

*“Do what?” He gave a wide-eyed look of innocence that I knew to be a lie.*

*“Throw your garbage in the street.”*

*Wilkins gestured outwards. “What street?”*

*“You're unbelievable,” I sighed, jumping down and making my way toward Rogers.*

*“I know you love me, Daviot!” Wilkins called after me.*

*I replied with a single-fingered salute of my own. I loved him like a brother, but he didn't understand the pressure I was under. Okay, the pressure I put myself under. It didn't really matter where it came from though. It was there, and I had to rise to meet it head-on just like I always did. I took my responsibilities seriously. I always did.*

*Shit, shit, shit!*

*My heart was racing, the pounding actually painful against my ribs. My chest tightened, and I was finding it impossible to breathe. I gasped, choked,*

as I struggled to get air into my burning lungs. I knew I was having a panic attack. I'd had them once or twice before when I'd been on leave. It was like my body stored up all of the stress of being deployed and then released it on me all at once when I was home safe.

That clearly wasn't the case now, because I wasn't home, and I sure as hell wasn't safe, especially after the foolish statement I'd just made.

Whatever else Gracen felt toward me didn't prevent him from trying to come to my rescue. I heard him saying my name, but couldn't answer. He came to me, put his hand on my shoulders. I could see the helplessness in his eyes, and it only increased my guilt.

How could I have been so stupid, blurting it out like that? Had I changed history? Had my careless words altered whatever destiny Gracen had already lived out? What if, instead of saving him, I'd just set him on a course that would result in his death?

When I was a senior in high school, I'd read the short story that had coined the phrase "the butterfly effect." In it, a group traveled back in time, and they're all warned the dangers of straying from the assigned path. One man's failure to do just that results in the death of a butterfly. Something small, insignificant. Except when they returned to their own time, everything had changed.

The concept had been a staple of science fiction even before Bradbury had used a butterfly. If one created a time machine to prevent a death, would saving that person prevent the invention of the very machine that had been used to save them? Can a single moment of bravery in high school completely change the destiny of a family? Will history work to correct itself? Or has our effect already been incorporated into the timeline and we're not actually failing to change history, but rather filling our pre-ordained role?

These thoughts swirled relentlessly through my brain as spots danced in front of my eyes. This wasn't a fictional debate or some theoretical conversation about something that could never happen, because it was happening. To me. To someone I cared about.

"Honor—"

"Stay away from me," I warned as I pulled away from Gracen. My voice was thin, little more than a whisper, but it was there.

What had I done?

"Honor, please, calm down." He held up his hands in a gesture I recognized. He was trying to calm me.

A flash of anger went through me at the thought of him being condescending to me. To my surprise, the anger drove away the panic, and I found myself able to breathe. I gulped in air and closed my eyes, trying to focus on not passing out.

“Talk to me, Honor.”

I opened my eyes and saw that he'd come a few steps closer. I shook my head. “You have no idea what I've just done.”

He frowned at me, his expression showing his confusion. “You haven't done anything wrong, Honor. You can't be held accountable for your opinions.”

I started to say that he was wrong since the British would consider my statement to be tantamount to treason, but then his last word registered.

Opinions.

Part of me was relieved that I hadn't caused as much damage as I'd thought, but another part was angry that he could dismiss what I said so easily. I told myself not to be stupid, that he couldn't know that I wasn't simply stating my mind, but rather historical fact. But that wasn't the real reason I was upset, I forced myself to admit. I might not have been able to expect him to believe me, but I wanted him to take me seriously, to take my opinion seriously.

He reached for me, and I realized that I didn't want him to touch me. Not like this. Not when he was treating me like some fragile, hysterical woman.

“Don't touch me,” I snapped as I took a step back.

“It's okay, Honor. You can relax.”

“I need to go,” I said as I took a quick step around him. “I can't stay here anymore.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I've done enough.” I was talking more to myself than him now. “I have to get out of here. I should've left the first time around.”

He grabbed my arm, turning me to face him. I pulled back, tried to step away, to get away. I needed to go. I needed to get home, to my own time, to the time where this part of history had already been written. I struggled against his grip, and he grabbed my other arm. I was strong, but he was stronger.

“Let go.” I stopped fighting and appealed to him directly. “Please, just let me go.”

“I won't enlist, okay?” His voice sounded desperate. “I won't go

anywhere, okay? I'll stay here.”

I was nearly in tears, and I cursed myself for it. He wasn't my responsibility. None of this was. I didn't know the choice Gracen had made originally, and if I changed his mind, for all I knew, I could be changing my entire future. While history hadn't recorded his name, I knew that it wasn't only the people in the textbooks who were responsible for the outcomes of wars. For all I knew, in the history of where I came from, Gracen had enlisted in the British Army, and he'd influenced someone or made some decision that led to a British loss. If he wasn't there, it was possible the Redcoats could win a battle that they'd lost before.

It was too much to think about. Too much responsibility that I didn't want. That I couldn't take. It didn't matter how I felt about him, or that the thought of him dying tore me apart. I couldn't change things.

“I can't...Gracen, I—”

Before I knew what was happening, Gracen's lips were pressed against mine, his hands still gripping me tightly as he drew me toward him. My mind went blank as everything else took a backseat to the feel of his mouth on mine. My pulse picked up again, but it wasn't panic fueling it this time.

For the few seconds we stood there, I felt that time itself had stopped, just for us. That this was the reason I'd been brought here. I remembered the dream I had, the one where I'd had the epiphany that he was the reason I'd gone through time, that this connection between us had been enough to break the rules so the two of us could be together. For a moment, I believed that none of this mattered, that everything would be okay.

Then he was pulling back, his hands still on my arms. I didn't want to open my eyes, didn't want to see the regret on his face. Because he had to regret it. No matter what my dream had made me think or what my heart wanted, I knew that this wasn't a good idea.

When I opened my eyes, I found him looking at me. Staring with the sort of intensity that made me shiver. I'd seen admiration and lust on Bruce's face. I believed that I'd seen love as well. But I'd never had a man look at me the way Gracen was right now.

“Gracen,” I started, but he quickly put a finger on my lips

“Please don't try to leave again, Honor,” he whispered. “I don't want you to go.”

“It's too complicated,” I forced myself to reply. I wanted this so badly, but I knew it couldn't be. “Things are too complicated. Everything is just too

complicated.”

He shook his head and ran a hand up my arm. His fingers curled around the back of my neck, his thumb stroking across my throat. I knew he could feel my pulse fluttering wildly under his touch. I might be able to lie to him, but I couldn't deny what my body wanted.

My heart wanted it too.

“I don't understand what this is between us,” he said softly. “But I can't deny it any longer. I can't lose you. Please, don't leave. It will kill me.”

I swallowed hard, my entire body trembling as I tried to fight the emotions coursing through me. I'd tried writing this off as a mere physical reaction. Then as something one-sided. It made it easier to tell myself that it couldn't happen when I believed he didn't return my feelings. I wasn't sure I was strong enough to resist now.

“Tell me you'll stay,” he whispered.

“You're engaged.” I tried another approach. “No good could ever come from this.”

“I don't love Clara,” he said. “I never did. This whole engagement was my father's doing. A mutually beneficial relationship between families. Nothing more.”

“We barely know each other.” I tried another excuse but knew that I was losing the fight.

“Don't ask me to explain what I don't understand. All I know is that I want to be with you. I *need* to be with you.”

The hand still on my arm moved to my waist, slid around to the small of my back.

I felt exposed, as if he could read everything I felt for him. Everything I shouldn't feel. My hands came to rest on his chest, and through his clothes, I could feel the pounding in his chest, a quick gallop that beat parallel to mine. I wanted nothing more than to reach up and pull his face down to mine, kiss him until neither one of us could breathe.

Fear of the unknown stopped me. Not only the unknown that came naturally with this sort of thing, but of what consequences might come from my actions. How could I possibly be sure that any relationship with Gracen Lightwood wouldn't change the course of history more than I already had?

“Say something,” he murmured.

I took in a deep breath, and then let it out slowly, looking away from him as I tried to think of what to say. His fingers moved to cup my chin and

turned my head back to him. Without hesitation, without concern for consequences, he leaned in for another kiss.

I knew if I told him to stop, he would, but I wasn't strong enough to do it. I gave in, melted against him, and let his touch wash away the doubts and the what-ifs. I stopped worrying and let myself simply be, feel. The hand on my back pulled me tight against him, and I shivered as my body made contact with his. Even through our layers of clothing, I could feel the electricity that flowed between us and knew that this connection between us went deeper than anything I'd imagined possible.

I didn't know who or what had brought me here, or why, but, at least for now, I would stop questioning it. If destiny or the universe or whatever didn't want me with Gracen, then it would just have to send me back to my own time.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY

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There were moments in life that stuck with a person, some good, some bad. The good ones usually filled me with the same sort of combination of emotions. Excitement. Joy. Often some anticipation thrown in. Each one of them always had the same effect on me though: a longing for the ability to find some mystical pause button that would freeze the moment long enough for me to bask in it for as long as I could.

This was one of those moments. Which, of course, just made it all the more surreal.

As I followed Gracen back through the house and up the stairs, I realized where he was taking me. Okay, so I might've been a little slow on the uptake, but in my defense, I never would've thought a man during this time period would have initiated sex outside of marriage. Then again, it wouldn't have surprised me if I really thought about it. Historically, men often seduced their servants.

I pushed the thought aside. Following it wouldn't go anywhere good. I wanted this. I *needed* this. As he led us into his room, I told myself not to overthink this. And when he turned toward me, the heat in his eyes burned away everything else but the desire for him.

I could already feel my hands shaking as I held back the need to reach out and touch him. My cheeks heated up, and I thanked the dim light of the candles for hiding what would have been an obvious indicator of how badly I wanted him. I could barely understand it myself. I'd always thought I understood attraction, but I now realized that what I'd felt before was nothing

compared to what I felt now.

Gracen seemed to glide towards me, a slow movement of his body as his hands reached up to cup my face. Our eyes locked, and it was that moment that I truly wanted time to stop so I could get lost in the waves of color that shifted in the candlelight, lost in the way he looked at me. Capture this moment before real life had a chance to ruin it.

Then again, considering the fact that I was about to sleep with a man who'd been dead for hundreds of years by the time I was born, I'd say my definition of what constituted real life had changed recently.

Then his mouth was on mine, and that was all that mattered.

I hadn't realized I'd expected his kisses to be different now that they were leading to sex until they weren't. There was nothing greedy about them, no desperate attempt to hurry through to get to the main event. His hands didn't even leave my face to try to cop a feel.

My hands curled around his lapels as he broke away from me, and I actually swayed on my feet. Even with my eyes shut, I knew he was close. I could feel his breath against my lips. Every inch of me was tingling.

“What are we doing?” I whispered, my voice cracking. I knew where this would go if we were in my time, but I didn't want to jump to any conclusions. Not with my heart on the line.

One hand slid to the small of my back as the other went around my waist. I opened my eyes to see him staring at me, his eyes almost black.

“What I have wanted to do from the moment I realized that you were a woman,” he said softly. “But only if you wish it as well, Honor.”

The way he said my name made my entire body shudder, and I set my hands lightly on his chest, the soft fabric of his shirt bending between my fingers as his words pierced through my mind. Only if *I* wanted it too. While Bruce had never forced himself on me, he'd certainly never *asked* if I wanted to have sex with him. It'd always just been assumed unless I specifically said I didn't want to.

“Yes, I want—”

His mouth came down on mine, and I instinctively knew that it came from a need to taste me rather than quiet me. I knew it because I felt the same way. I'd never understood the concept of *need* when it came to another person until now. I honestly felt like I'd explode if I didn't get to touch him.

For the first time in my life, I didn't think about the consequences but allowed myself to dive into the moment headfirst. Gone were the thoughts of



Bruce, the worries about Gracen's family and fiancée, the war outside, and the lack of comprehension as to how I was here in the first place. Gone were all my fears, my insecurities, my need to make sense of the world.

All I let myself know was him.

The way his lips moved with mine, the scent of him. The feel of his hair as I ran my fingers through his curls. His broad shoulders, the firm muscles there. My hands slid between us even as his strong fingers kneaded my back. I told him that I wanted this, but I was getting the impression that he was waiting for something from me.

I unbuttoned his shirt even as his teeth grazed my bottom lip. I moaned into his mouth and slid my hands across his chest. His body leaned into mine as I pushed his shirt off his shoulders, his mouth harder against mine, his tongue more demanding. I could feel him hardening against my hip, and then he was taking a step back, his breathing as ragged as my own.

"You're certain about this?" he asked.

I turned around. "I need help with the ties."

His fingers were quick and sure as they moved down my back. As soon as he finished, I turned, not wanting to risk him seeing my tattoo. Just because I refused to worry about all of the other shit going on, didn't mean I'd disregard my safety. The last thing I needed was another slip up.

"Too many damn layers," I muttered as I struggled to get out of the dress and everything else that was under it.

Gracen chuckled, but as the dress finally fell to the floor, the laughter faded, and by the time I looked up at him, his expression was serious again.

"You are a beautiful woman, Honor Daviot."

His gaze ran the whole length of me, one long look that moved over me like a caress. As if my skin wasn't hot enough already.

"So beautiful."

He stepped toward me, the expression on his face not hesitant exactly, but definitely like he was giving me the chance to stop him.

Which wasn't going to happen anytime soon.

His eyes met mine a moment before his hand cupped my breast, and then I was stepping into him. I wrapped my arms around his neck as we fell back onto the bed. My hands moved across his back, gently scratching at him as his lips made their way down my neck, then to my collarbone and lower still. His thumb ran across my nipple, and it hardened under his touch. I arched my back as he kissed his way between my breasts, then moving his tongue across

the flesh before taking a nipple into his mouth.

It'd been so long since I'd had any hands on me other than my own, and even then, it'd been so rare that I could already feel the tension coiling inside me. It wouldn't take much for me to get off.

"Gracen," I moaned, and almost as if he could read my mind, his hand moved down between my thighs.

His fingers caressed me, brushed over the dark curls there before slipping one finger between my folds.

"You're wet."

He sounded surprised, and I wondered if the women he'd slept with before hadn't been. If not, it certainly hadn't been due to his lack of skill. His mouth and hands certainly knew what they were doing. I gasped as he slipped a finger inside me, and I opened my legs, allowed him to settle between them.

As he worked a second finger inside me, the world around me dissipated, leaving nothing but the two of us. It was as if we were in a void, an impenetrable bubble where the two of us couldn't be disturbed. He twisted his fingers, and my entire body exploded, rocked by an intense orgasm. I bit down onto his shoulder to muffle my screams, and his body jerked against mine. I heard him mutter an oath and wondered if I'd gone too far. Maybe he wasn't used to a woman enjoying herself.

He pushed himself up on his elbow, his fingers still inside me. He looked puzzled, but not upset. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

I shook my head. "No, but you're going to kill me."

I groaned in delight as his thumb brushed my clit, my hips now rocking against his hand as his lips traced circles on my neck.

"Is that...pleasurable?" he asked as his thumb touched me again.

I shuddered, hips jerking. "Yes. Oh, fu—yes." I barely managed to catch myself. I wasn't sure if *fuck* was commonly used in this time period, but if it was, I was pretty sure it wasn't something ladies said.

"I'll remember that," he murmured.

It wasn't until I felt the heat of his skin against the insides of my thighs that I realized he'd pushed off his pants at some point. My entire body was pulsing, throbbing, desperate to be filled. I hadn't had anything inside me in too many months to count, and I needed him.

I slid my hand down between us, feeling his stomach muscles jump under my fingers. He drew in a sharp breath when I wrapped my hand around the thick, solid shaft of flesh between us.

“You bewilder me, Honor,” he said, his voice low and rough.

I grabbed him by the back of the neck and pulled him closer, my lips locking onto his for one brilliant, hot moment before breaking away. “Is that a good thing?” I asked.

He nodded, lust shining clearly in his eyes. “Very.”

I pushed my hips up against him, my hand guiding him to my entrance. As the tip of him pushed against me, I had a second of clarity that told me this was the turning point, the moment that would forever change me. And then his hand was there. He adjusted himself, his eyes never leaving mine, and with one quick push, slid inside me.

A moan escaped my lips before I could stop it, and I grabbed onto his shoulders tight as he pushed in deeper. My body stretched around him, near painful pleasure that I'd never experienced before. Bruce wasn't small, but Gracen was different, as if his body had been made specifically to fit mine.

He rocked against me, his movements slow, tentative at first, as if feeling his way inside me before moving with more confident strokes. I knew he didn't want to hurt me, and that made me care about him even more. Then the base of him pressed against my clit and the world exploded around me, my mind bursting with ecstasy. I wrapped my legs around him, my nails digging deep into his skin, my hips grinding against his thrusts. He truly was going to kill me, and in the midst of it all, I could feel one orgasm after the other burst through me until I wasn't sure if I was coming multiple times or just one long, unending climax that I was sure would end me.

In the heat of the moment, with my eyes closed and the touch of his lips against mine as we moaned against each other, I could only think of one thing: how much I wanted this to last forever. I could feel the heat of my body against his, his breath against my lips as he moved, his chest pressed against my breasts as our heartbeats raced each other. Emotions rattled my mind, and my moans quickly turned into soft screams that matched his groans of pleasure.

And then Gracen froze, his muscles flexing and his body stiffening. He pushed in deeper with his last thrust, and as he came, I pushed my hips up, reaching for that last little bit of friction. As I felt him fill every inch inside me, I came with him.

After a long moment, he rolled off of me, and his arms went around my shoulders. He pulled me close and brushed his lips against the top of my head. I made sure I pulled the sheet up high enough to cover my tattoo and

then allowed myself to relax against him. For the first time since I'd woken up here, all the chaos and tension that'd been keeping me awake was gone, and I let the darkness take me.

As long as I was in Gracen's arms, I was safe.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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“*I* don’t trust him.”

*My father was frowning, his eyes narrowed. He was angry, and I tried to remember that he was just trying to protect me. It didn't make it any easier to have my father so opposed to my engagement. I wasn't sure why he hadn't seen this coming. Bruce and I had been exclusive for three years, and I'd just finished boot camp. Of course I wanted to be engaged before I reported to Fort Hood.*

*“You never liked him to start with,” I said.*

*“And I’ve been clear about why,” my father replied. “I know guys like him. I’ve seen what they do, and who they are. He’s not right for you.”*

*I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose. “How about giving him a chance in the first place?”*

*“You think I don’t know the difference between a man who deserves a chance and a man who doesn’t?”*

*“You don't know him like I do.” I gave the same protest that I'd been giving since I'd told my parents that Bruce and I were serious.*

*“I know his type, and I won’t sit around here and watch you throw your life away for him.”*

*“He's my fiancé, and I'm an adult.” I didn't feel much like an adult at the moment, but I needed to remind my father that I wasn't a child anymore.*

*“I will not give my little girl to someone who doesn’t deserve her!”*

*It was only then that I saw the tears in my father's eyes. My father who so rarely cried. It was that more than anything else that got through to me.*

*“You don’t get it, Honor.” His voice calmed, quieted. “There will be*

*moments in your life when you will jump into things based on pure emotion, and when that happens, when the moment is gone and done with, you'll be left with nothing but regret and guilt. I just want to spare you that."*

*I opened my mouth, wanting to say that I wouldn't regret my decision to marry Bruce, that I knew exactly what I was doing, but the reality was, I couldn't know for sure if I had made the right decision. All I had to go on was an emotional connection to the only boy I ever loved. That had to be enough.*

*My father was wrong. He'd see it eventually.*

*I wouldn't let myself think anything else.*

"What have we done?"

The moving bed had woken me, but it was Gracen's anxious question that concerned me more. I sat up in bed, wrapping the sheet around my body, the gesture in equal parts to make sure my tattoo was hidden and because I suddenly felt a lot less confident about being naked in front of him. He was half-dressed, pacing about the room like a mad man.

"What are you talking about?" I asked, still dazed with sleep and a little annoyed at the manner by which I had been forced awake. Images of last night flashed through my mind, and Gracen's nervous manner was quickly dampening the sweetness of the memory.

"This!" He gestured to the two of us. "Us. What we did last night. All of this!"

I clenched the sheets tighter to me, instantly self-conscious. I wondered if this was how drunk people felt when they woke up the next day and found a stranger in their bed. I knew we had a lot to work out, but I never expected to wake up to him freaking out. I forgot about how good last night had felt, my thoughts shifting to more urgent matters, like finding my clothes and escaping. I searched the floor, calculating how fast it would take me to get dressed before Gracen freaked out completely. Too long. Damn eighteenth-century dresses.

"A mistake, that's what this was," he muttered, more to himself than to me. "It was a mistake."

Heat flooded my cheeks. "A mistake?" I asked incredulously. If we'd been drunk, I could've seen that explanation, but we were stone-cold sober. We knew what we were doing and who we were doing it with. "I'm sorry, did I trip and fall naked into your bed before you accidentally rolled on top of me?"

Gracen stopped his pacing and glared at me. “This is not a laughing matter, Honor!”

“Do I look like I’m laughing, Gracen?” I snapped back.

“This was wrong. It shouldn’t have happened.”

I stared at him in utter disbelief, my mind turning with the hundreds of different comebacks I wanted to throw in his face. I couldn’t believe how incredibly naïve I’d been, believing that last night had meant something more than just sex.

“You know what?” I finally said. “You’re absolutely right.”

I threw off the sheet and climbed out of bed, naked, inwardly wincing as Gracen looked away. Bastard. He was obviously ashamed of what we’d done, and while I could understand the ramifications of sleeping with a person while engaged to someone else, he didn’t need to be an ass about it. My hands shook as I pulled my dress on, embarrassed that I had lost control of my emotions long enough to get myself into this mess.

“What should we do now?” Gracen glanced over his shoulder and then turned to face me.

I gave him a confused look. “What do you mean?”

“What will we tell my father?” Gracen asked. “How will we explain this?”

I frowned at him. “What the hell are you talking about?” I asked. “We don’t have to tell your father anything. It’s clear that what happened last night meant absolutely nothing to you, so let’s just act like it never happened, and we can both go about our lives.”

“Act like nothing happened?” His surprise showed on his face. “How can we act like nothing happened?”

“Just forget it,” I snapped back. “This isn’t the first time I’ve seen a man act like a bastard after sex.”

Technically, that was true, but I knew it wasn’t really comparable. Gracen, however, didn’t know that.

He flinched. “What?”

“Did you think this was my first time?” I could hear the bitterness in my laugh. “Oh, don’t worry, *Master Lightwood*. You’re not responsible for taking my virginity, so don’t feel like you owe me anything.”

I started to push past him, only to be stopped when he grabbed my arm. My hand curled into a fist, and I barely managed to keep myself from punching him.

“It was a trick,” Gracen hissed at me. “Last night was a ruse. You seduced me!”

I yanked my arm from his grip but didn't back away. “You kissed me,” I reminded him. “You brought me to your room.”

“Trickery,” he said, his lips curling in anger. “You planned it all, didn't you? You intended to get pregnant and trap me into marriage.”

I slapped him even as I felt the color drain from my face. I'd never been so humiliated, having someone accuse me of trying to trick...I couldn't even think of it. Tears stung my eyes. It was one thing to hurt over a miscommunication about what last night had meant to each of us. It was something completely different to be accused of something so manipulative and cruel.

The fact that he could think me capable of such a thing told me that I didn't know him as well as I thought I did.

And that my father had been right. Acting on emotion was stupid, and all I had now was regret.

“I have work to do,” I said. “Excuse me, *Master Gracen*.” I practically ran from the room before he could respond.

I didn't want to be anywhere near him right now. In fact, all I wanted was to go home. My *real* home and time. I didn't want to be here anymore.



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## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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*A*fter quickly washing up with the tepid water I had in my room, I changed into my other dress. I didn't linger, didn't look at anyone as I hurried into the kitchen and grabbed the water buckets without being told they needed filled. Titus gave me a startled but approving look as I stepped out into the hot summer morning. He continued to send me surprised glances as I moved from one chore to the other, working with the sort of speedy efficiency I'd learned growing up in a military house. I didn't speak to anyone, didn't make eye contact.

I was pretty sure that Titus assumed it was his influence that had sparked the change, but, the truth was, I only wanted to keep my mind off Gracen. I didn't really care what the steward or anyone else thought of me, not that I knew now what Gracen's assessment of my character was.

I hated myself for sleeping with him, for believing that he'd look at sex with me as anything other than a mistake. I felt like a fool. I'd only known Gracen for a little over a week, and I'd thought we had some sort of special connection.

How could I have been so stupid? How had I let my emotions get the better of my judgment? I had been careful in the past few years to not let that happen, always trying to make logical decisions, things that could be calculated and planned. I supposed this was what I got for following my heart.

Still, I couldn't stop myself from being a little disappointed when the whole day passed without seeing Gracen at all. I told myself it was better that way, that I needed to cool down, to reevaluate my situation, and to really

think about what the hell I was doing here in the first place. And what I should do next.

Gracen had been a distraction, I told myself. I still had no idea how I'd gotten to this time and place, but I'd given the matter too little thought over the past few days. I'd originally told myself that once I knew I was safe, I could take the time to start working through the problem.

Except all I'd really thought about was Gracen and a lot of good that had done me.

By the time evening came around, I'd finished up my work, and the skies outside were turning a bright red mixed with velvet darkness. I'd also finally managed to work the anger out of me.

More or less.

Wiping my hands on a hand cloth, I untied my apron and slumped heavily into the closest chair. It was quiet in the kitchen, and for a moment, I could almost pretend that everything I was trying to forget hadn't really happened.

"Master Lightwood is a happy man today."

Dye's voice came from my right. I opened my eyes and watched her set a couple of empty buckets by the door, ready to be filled tomorrow first thing in the morning. I contemplated getting the task over and done with now before I went to bed, if only to see the surprise on Titus's face.

"He's a smilin' and a toastin' like he be one of dem generals fightin' the war."

I frowned at her, a pang of something sharp going through my chest at the thought that Gracen had spent the day cheerful when I'd been so utterly miserable.

"What's got him so happy?" I asked, wondering if I had possibly missed Clara's arrival. Surely he'd be happy to see his *unspoiled* fiancée. I knew the Lightwoods were entertaining guests; I just hadn't cared enough to find out who.

"The young Master Lightwood, he's gone and joined the Redcoats. Left just after breakfast." She gave me a curious look, as if I should've known.

I felt my heart jump into my throat, and my eyes widen in surprise. Whatever anger I'd felt towards Gracen earlier was now replaced by dread and worry. I looked at Dye in disbelief, unable to wrap my head around what she just said.

"Gracen?"

Dye nodded. "Master Lightwood gots himself a nice bit of attention

now,” the black woman said in disgust. It was clear where her loyalties were. “Would almost serve him right if those rebels sent his boy back in a box.”

I jumped to my feet and grabbed Dye's arm. “Don't say things like that!” My voice came out more harshly than I'd intended.

She pulled her arm away, and I let it go. Her eyes flashed as she stared up at me.

“You's a fool, Honor Daviot. Ain't no place for the likes of you in a Lightwood bed.”

My eyes widened even as heat flooded my face. How many people knew what happened between us? He'd acted like what we'd done had been something to be ashamed of, but maybe once I'd told him that I'd had sex before, he'd changed his mind and decided that bedding a servant might be something to brag about.

“You best be findin' your way home, or wherever you going, and leave matters here be,” Dye warned, her voice soft. “Dis ain't no place for a girl like you.”

I was still trying to figure out how to reply when she whirled around and walked away. I stayed where I was, watching her go. A few minutes later, I retreated to my own room, not wanting to risk running into anyone else.

Unsurprisingly, sleep didn't want to come. I couldn't stop thinking of the many ways Gracen's military venture would end badly, the different scenarios playing out in grotesque details in my mind. He definitely didn't lack bravery, and he had killed that soldier when it came down to it, but I knew that the war would stretch out for years to come. Too much could happen before the end, and even if he survived, his world would be changed forever.

I contemplated running after him, stealing away in the dead of the night and finding my way to where he'd enlisted. I thought that maybe the details would be in the study somewhere, and if I was careful and quiet, I could learn where he was stationed and get him out of there before he got himself killed.

It was my fault, I finally admitted. That's why the guilt was eating me. His enlistment was my fault. We'd been at each other's throats this morning, and now he was gone, off to join the Redcoats in a war they would lose. To spite me, because I'd told him not to do it.

If something happened to him, I'd never forgive myself. I had to find him.

I couldn't just sit here and wait, going about my daily chores as if I didn't know what was coming. I stood up suddenly, making my way to the dresser

and pulling out my uniform. I'd found the camouflage pants and shirt the other day, patches of blood still dried from my encounter with the Redcoats. They were clean now. All I needed to do was put them on, and I'd be ready to go.

As I started to pull my nightgown off, my father's words raced back to the forefront of my thoughts. I could almost picture him standing in front of me, frowning in disapproval, warning me of how I was, yet again, letting my emotions get the better of me.

That if I was going to get home, I needed to stop worrying about Gracen and start using my head.

This was absurd. I couldn't do this. I knew nothing of the world outside other than what little I'd read in my brother's books, and even that hadn't been enough for the real thing. In theory, I knew the area, but I knew what it would be like in more than two centuries, not what it was like now.

Shit.

I stared out the small window above my bed into the starry night beyond. I was a stranger here. This wasn't my time, and I knew I'd only made it this far because of Gracen. I wanted to help him, but I didn't know where to start. If Ennis was here, he would've known enough to really help. Me? I read one book years ago. Everything else was what little I remembered from high school. It wasn't much. At least not enough to do what I needed to do.

I balled my fists, feeling my nails cutting into my palms. I hated that I had to acknowledge my helplessness, that I couldn't do this without help. I may have saved Gracen's life, but I couldn't deny that he'd saved mine as well.

*Damn you, Gracen Lightwood.*

I was angry at him all over again. I was angry at how he'd made me fall for him, how he'd taken my attention away from the more important matter of finding my way home. How he'd just up and left me behind without so much as a goodbye.

And I hated myself more for caring about any of it.

I sank back onto my bed, the anger draining as quickly as it came. I couldn't take any more of this. I might not know what I wanted to do about re-enlisting or about my idiot of a fiancé, but at least there, I had family, a place I knew.

I had to get home.

That was the only solution. I had to find some way back home. There was nothing for me here, not that there should be. Whatever delusions I

momentarily had, whatever false opinions I'd used to shroud the truth, I couldn't do it anymore. This wasn't my home, and it never would be. I shouldn't be here.

I had to find my way back.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

---

“Why’s you lookin’ at me like dat?”

Dye stood completely still in the kitchen doorway, buckets in her hands, eyeing me suspiciously as I watched her. I shook my head slowly and then went back to what I was doing.

I wasn't entirely sure what I expected, but when I finally managed to fall asleep, my dreams had been full of flashes and chaotic images. The only thing I could remember when I woke, however, was that I needed to talk to Dye. She was my ticket out of here and back to where I belonged.

Now that Dye was actually there, I couldn't think of how to even start explaining what I needed from her. Hell, I didn't entirely know what I needed. She'd always been a little curious about me, and I wasn't completely certain that she hadn't somehow figured out my secret. If she knew, then it was safe to assume she might also know how my time jump had occurred and might even know what I could do to reverse it, because if she understood traveling through time...

It made my head hurt.

Yet now, in the kitchen with all the other women, with Dye casting suspicious looks in my direction, I found it hard to approach her. What could I even say? I had no idea where to start, especially if I was wrong and Dye knew nothing.

Maybe the girl was just extremely intuitive, and in reality had no idea what I had been through. It was clear I was out of place, that I didn't belong here, but it didn't take a genius to know that. Maybe Dye just had a knack for saying the right things at the right time. In some ways, she reminded me of

the gypsy ladies during carnival season back home.

“If you gonna keep lookin’ at me dat way, I best be makin’ maself pretty,” Dye said, as she dried her hands. “You got somethin’ to tell me, Honor?”

I looked over her shoulder at the other women around us, noticing how some had edged their way closer to us and were eavesdropping on our conversation. I wondered how many were listening for anything they could pass along to Roston, and how many were looking for gossip about me and Gracen.

I made a decision. “Not here,” I said. “Outside at the well.” If she didn’t know anything, then I’d be back at square one, but at least I’d know I was doing whatever possible to get home.

Dye smiled at me and pushed a bucket in my direction. “Good,” she said. “We got us a few more of dese to fill.”

I watched until we were standing at the well, buckets by our side, before I asked the only question that mattered. “What do you know about time travel?”

“Whatcha mean by *time travel*?” Dye pulled a blade of grass and chewed on the end of it as she leaned against the well.

“Moving through time.” I chose my words carefully. “Like going to the future...or the past.”

“Now why’d anyone wanna do dat?” she asked, regarding me shrewdly. “Past’s better left alone, and future’s comin’ whether we likes it or not.”

“That’s not what I meant.” I straightened and stretched the muscles in my back. Being active in the army meant I was in shape, but it didn’t mean I wasn’t feeling it. I struggled to find the words. “What if someone traveled in time without wanting to? Like they were forced into it, and they couldn’t do anything about it.”

She eyed me for a beat before she clicked her tongue and laughed, a rich, full sound. “You speakin’ nonsense, Honor,” she said. “The sun’s getting’ to ya.”

“I’m serious.” I refused to let it go. “What if someone wanted to go home? How would they do that?”

She spat and scratched her scalp, looking off at the extensive grounds of the estate as if looking for the answers around us. In that moment, she looked less like a young servant, and more like some sort of wise woman. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up, and I was certain that she would have

answers for me.

“You’s been chased from home, dat it?”

All the air rushed from my lungs, and my shoulders slumped in defeat. For some reason, I’d thought this would all be over soon. That Dye would have answers for me, and I’d just follow them. I’d be home in no time.

“Dat your explanation for actin’ strange all day?”

“I wasn’t chased from anywhere, Dye,” I said, exasperated. I ran my hands through my hair. “I actually like my home, and I want to go back.”

Dye’s head snapped toward me, and she eyed me for what seemed like forever, as if trying to decide whether or not I’d completely lost my mind. Finally, she shook her head.

“You ain’t never made any sense, Honor,” she said. “I know dis all about Master Gracen runnin’ off to dem Redcoats?”

“This has nothing to do with Gracen,” I quickly argued.

“I ain’t a fool,” Dye said. “I seen da two of you together. How he always be lookin’ at you, even when he pretend he don’t be. It’s a miracle Master Lightwood and little Miss Clara ain’t got a clue, or you be in some serious trouble.”

“Nothing is going on,” I said again.

She raised an eyebrow. “You’s sure about dat?”

“Positive.”

“Den must’ve been someone else I heard hollerin’ in his room dat night.” She grinned at me.

I froze, my eyes wide as her words sank in, and I could immediately feel the heat rush to my cheeks. Shit. How the hell could I talk my way out of this one? Dye chuckled when she saw the look on my face and waved her hand at me.

“If I could count ‘ow many times white men sleep wid da help, I be countin’ ‘til kingdom come.”

I grabbed the pump handle and started working it again so I wouldn’t have to respond. My night with Gracen couldn’t have been like that. He wasn’t like that. The fact that he’d freaked out so badly was an indication that he wasn’t in the habit of sleeping with random women. But if anyone else knew about our night together, they’d assume I was just one in a long line of servants who warmed his bed.

I frowned. I didn’t really care what anyone thought of me, but I hated the idea of anyone thinking poorly of Gracen. Then again, maybe sleeping with



the staff would be something that Roston would consider manly. He seemed like he'd be that sort of chauvinistic asshole.

“So you be feelin’ guilty and wanna run away,” Dye continued as if her statement explained my question.

I shook my head, even though, deep down, I knew that Dye's words were probably truer than I wanted to admit. I didn't want to think about that though. I couldn't think about Gracen right now. I needed to focus on getting home.

“Is there magic that can send me home?” I asked, hating myself for the desperation in my voice.

“A horse can take you home, girl.” She smiled at me. “Ain’t need no magic for dat.”

I stopped what I was doing and looked up at her. “Dye, I’m serious.”

“I’s as serious as you, Honor,” she countered. “You ain’t need to go meddlin’ in things you know nothin’ ‘bout. Ain’t no magic gonna erase da past, and ain’t no magic gonna bring da future. You best be leavin’ it at dat.”

I sighed, trying to hold back my frustration, knowing I was getting nowhere with this conversation. I needed to try something else. Suddenly, I remembered the volumes of books lining the shelves in the study. Maybe I could find answers there. I just needed to find a way to get my hand on them without being noticed. I was pretty sure Master Lightwood wouldn't think too kindly of any of the help touching things that didn't belong to them.

I stifled the sudden and completely inappropriate laughter that wanted to come out. I'd definitely touched something that didn't belong to me.

“Finish up wid dem buckets,” Dye said, breaking through my thoughts. “I gonna take dese two in wid me.”

I nodded at her and continued pumping. With a new goal in mind, I could at least feel like I hadn't given up.

The next few days went by uneventfully as I settled back into a routine. Dye and I chatted, but I didn't bring up time travel again. There was clearly no point. I was, however, still looking into other possibilities. Fortunately for me, sneaking books out of the study and to my room proved to be a simple task. The reality was, no one even noticed anything was missing. I simply left cleaning the study to the very end of the day, polished it off and then escaped before Roston Lightwood and the rest of his Loyalist friends filed in. It was

easy hiding a volume or two in my dress, and none of the men gave me a second look.

They were all too busy congratulating each other on the imminent downfall of the rebel colonists.

It was exhausting. I spent days working and stealing books, hours of the night occupied with reading. Well, technically skimming. I wasn't a slow reader, but it was a lot of reading. There was very little in regards to time traveling or the mystical, but the work helped keep my mind off Gracen as well as the ever-growing frustration of not being able to find a way back home.

It didn't keep me from thinking about Gracen, wondering how he was faring with the other soldiers. I didn't know anything about how the army worked in this time, especially not the British Army. Gracen had been gone less than a week. I didn't know if he would have had time to train, if he'd be put somewhere out of the way and safe, or if he'd be sent straight to an active unit, one that would be in the very middle of the danger.

I'd tried eavesdropping, but there was very little information on Gracen. The only mention of his name was accompanied by the pride Roston felt at his son's patriotism and loyalty. I was surprised at how well I controlled myself considering the anger I felt whenever I heard Roston bragging.

This wasn't my fight. Even the war itself wasn't my fight. It'd already been won. My priority was getting home to my family...and to my fiancé, of course.

Bruce.

Groan.

I was a little embarrassed to admit that I'd hardly thought about Bruce since I'd arrived here, and I had to keep reminding myself about him even as I looked for a way home. The man I was supposed to marry occupied very little of my thoughts despite the trouble I'd gone through with my family to fight for him. It was strange that it'd taken something as drastic as this to make me reevaluate my choices.

As June drew to an end, I still hadn't made any progress, and it was wearing on my nerves. The fact that I'd also heard nothing about Gracen only made matters worse. By the time the sun set on the last night in June, I was barely holding it together. I had no idea what I was doing, was no closer to answers, and was starting to think that the smartest thing I could do would be to head west, get as far away from the coming battles as I could. I knew

enough about roughing it to survive, maybe even do well, in this time.

As I plopped down on my bed and stared up at the ceiling, I wondered if it was time to just accept that unless whatever had brought me here decided to send me home, I was stuck.

Either way, I couldn't stay here any longer. I needed to do something other than wait on the Lightwoods. So, when I was sure the entire household was asleep, I quickly gathered my things and shoved them into the pillowcase. It took less than a few minutes for me to change back into my uniform and head downstairs. This time, I knew I wouldn't turn back.

Gracen wasn't here to stop me.

I walked swiftly, leaving the Lightwood estate behind me. I'd give it one final try before I accepted that I was here to stay, and I knew that meant I had to go back to where it all began. As I made my way back toward Boston, I wasn't sure what to hope for. A way home, or a clear sign to stay.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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*I* stayed close to the road, just within the tree line, yet far enough to avoid detection unless someone was looking very closely. The night was cooler than I remembered July nights to be, but that could've been because I was comparing it to Iraq – or because Boston was warmer in my time. The moon was almost full, allowing me enough light to make my way forward, which I appreciated since the territory wasn't familiar enough for me to move both quickly and stealthily. I measured my steps carefully, trying to make as little noise as possible while keeping my senses sharp for anything out of the ordinary.

I was grateful for the concentration, however. It kept me from worrying so much about Gracen. It was sad, and more than a little annoying, that my brain was more focused on where Gracen was and how he was doing than it was on getting home. I told myself it was because time travel was a bit more mind-boggling than guy problems. My subconscious was trying to deny the impossibility of what happened to me.

Yeah, and I believed that bullshit as much as I believed in the tooth fairy.

Then again, I'd never believed in time travel until I'd found myself in 1775. Maybe I'd meet Santa Claus on my little trek.

On and on I went, one foot in front of the other. Not once did I consider returning to the Lightwood estate. After all, there wasn't anything for me there. Not anymore.

I had no idea how long I'd been walking before I finally stopped to rest, slumping down next to a large tree. My legs ached, and my feet hurt. I felt like I'd been going non-stop since I'd gotten here. One thing after the other,

with barely any time to even breathe.

I took the time to breathe now, but I didn't find any peace from it. After so many months in the desert, the air smelled strange to me, the almost wet scent of trees and grass, but I knew that wasn't the only reason. The lack of the signs of humanity that I'd always associated with back home weren't here. Car exhaust. Lights. Pavement. Even overseas, I'd never been completely away from any of it.

Suddenly, I realized that I was hearing something other than the usual nighttime rustlings of forest animals.

Hooves. Coming this way, and fast.

I jumped up from my resting spot and hurried a few yards deeper into the woods. There, I crouched down and waited to see if it was friend or foe. If I could even tell such a thing. Now, I registered the sounds of wheels as the carriage came around the corner, and I hoped it meant I wasn't about to see British soldiers rounding the bend. A carriage most likely meant a civilian. At least, according to the minuscule bit of knowledge I'd gleaned from movies and TV shows over the years.

I ran through my options, wondering if this might be an easier way for me to get to my destination. Maybe a safer way. I had no idea who was inside the carriage, and there was no telling whether or not they would stop, much less allow me to join them. Still, it had to be better than walking the entire distance, and I was a little wary of what might happen if I got too close to an army camp. I might know the dates and outcomes of a few battles, but I didn't know troop placements or daily strategic operations.

Before the carriage could pass me by, I decided to go with the lesser of two evils. I jumped up from my hiding place and sprinted through the trees, angling my path so that I stepped out into the moonlight with enough space to spare as it jolted to a stop.

The man sitting up top driving the horses let out a stream of curses that tempted me to flip him off. Instead, I held up both hands to show that I didn't have a weapon. I didn't want to risk trying to guess which side the owners of the carriage were on, so I went with saying nothing.

After a moment, the carriage door opened, and the pungent aroma of whiskey and cigars drifted out to welcome me. The moonlight didn't offer me a clear look at the inhabitants, but it was enough for me to get an idea of who was inside. I saw a portly man sitting opposite a beautifully dressed young woman.

“What is the meaning of this?” he bellowed, clearly pissed.

To my surprise, the young woman – maybe even young enough to be considered a girl – slapped at him with her fan, frowning angrily as he turned toward her. She slapped his knee with her fan again, and I watched in amusement as the man huffed and looked away. She turned to me and smiled widely.

“Excuse my father,” the girl chirped. “He is in quite the mood today.”

“No apologies necessary,” I said back, trying to keep my voice as deep and masculine as possible.

“May I ask what a young man such as yourself is doing out here in the middle of the night?” she asked, her eyes dancing.

Right. Young man. Especially in the dark, there was no way someone would mistake me for a woman.

“I’m on my way to Boston,” I said. “I was wondering if perhaps I could trouble you for a ride if you were going that way.”

“Do you take us for fools?” the man snapped at me. “You will rob us and leave us here.”

I heard the sound of a gun clicking and turned to see the muzzle of some sort of pistol pointing at me. I was pretty sure that he'd only have one shot, and it'd take a while to reload, but I didn't want to consider what would happen if he ended up being accurate with that single shot.

“Come now, Father.” She kept her eyes on me. “He doesn’t look like a criminal.”

“They never do,” her father muttered, eyeing me scornfully. “What is your business in Boston, boy?”

“My business is my own,” I said politely. “But I would be much obliged for your assistance.”

The man's eyes narrowed. “What side do you take in these...disputes? I don't wish to make enemies–”

“Oh, Father, you see rebels and redcoats behind every rock and tree nowadays.” The young woman turned back to me and gave me an even more brilliant smile than before. “Of course, we can assist you.”

Her father glowered at me as I climbed into the carriage, but I didn't get shot or hit, so I was satisfied for the time being.

That lasted until about two minutes into our trip when it became apparent that the young woman – Elizabeth, she insisted I call her – was more interested in whether or not I was married than actually helping out a

stranger. It took everything I had to maintain a smile while simultaneously keeping as much distance between us as possible...which was difficult since she kept finding excuses to shift in her seat so her dress would brush against my leg.

It was one thing to have a lesbian flirt with me and have to politely say that I wasn't interested. I had no clue how to handle the attention from someone who thought I was a man.

While the journey was short and uneventful, Elizabeth's attentions and her father's glowers kept it from being pleasant.

She chatted non-stop about parties and dresses, and how much her family's popularity had risen despite recent events. If it had only been prattling about this and that, I could've simply smiled and nodded, feigning interest while barely paying attention. But that wasn't enough. She wanted to know about me too. Her questions never stopped coming, and I worked hard to be as vague as possible, even after I discovered that they were Loyalists. I didn't want to risk leading them back to the Lightwoods.

I had to admit, as I listened to her talk, that it was a bit surprising how few people believed these 'rebel skirmishes' would amount to anything. To Elizabeth and her father, this was all just a game that would quickly come to an end once the British really put their minds to it.

Ennis told me once that people used to say that the sun never set on the British empire because the Brits had colonized so much of the world that, at any given point in time, the sun was shining on a place that Britain claimed as its own. After listening to Roston Lightwood and his friends, and now Elizabeth and her father, I could understand how such a saying had become popular.

I wondered what they would say if I told them, come August, King George would declare the colonies in official rebellion, and things would quickly escalate from there. Probably the same thing Gracen had done, I knew. They'd think it was a dangerous opinion to have.

And then they'd probably throw me out of the carriage.

It was actually a little sad, once I allowed myself to truly think about it. Sure, there were arrogant people who treated the colonists like second-class citizens and wanted England to defeat the rebels so they could remain in power and comfort. But there were also those who deeply loved their country, who didn't want to be a part of a new one, but rather an equal member of the country they'd always thought of as home.

War was never simple, I reminded myself. Something that wouldn't be any different in my time.

I thought of the internment camps in America during World War II. The innocents who'd died in the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Germans who'd faced persecution and death even if they hadn't supported Hitler's regime. The Vietnam War and the horrors that had been committed by both sides.

Then I thought about the war I'd fought in. One that had started the moment a few hate-filled individuals had murdered thousands of Americans. Nearly nine years later, we had no end in sight, and people were questioning the wisdom and morality of what we were doing.

No, war was never simple.

Even with all of these thoughts bouncing around in my head, I kept my mouth shut about politics. I probably would've made a better impression if I'd agreed with them, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. It would've felt too much like a betrayal. The best I could do was keep silent.

As soon as we passed through the siege line, I interrupted Elizabeth's description of her latest dress.

"If you'll excuse me." I gave a polite smile to both Elizabeth and her father. "I believe I'll walk from here."

His eyes narrowed. "Are you a rebel soldier, boy?"

"No," I said as I leaned closer to the door. If he tried to stop me, I'd make a jump for it. Hopefully, they'd be too worried about the Colonial Army to try to go after me.

"Then we'll take you into the city." Elizabeth said it like it was a done deal. "You certainly don't want to be left out here with those rebels." She sniffed, her pretty face twisting into something unattractive.

I shook my head. "I appreciate the ride, but I'd like to stretch my legs a bit. They're stiff from sitting so long."

I didn't add that I knew things would be fairly calm for the rest of the year. There'd be some minor skirmishes, some raids, that sort of thing, but the city would stay as it was until the new year. After that, the British would withdraw and the Americans would have the city. The major danger had passed, so I'd most likely be safe between the Colonial Army and the city limits.

Besides, this was where Gracen had found me, so even if it wasn't exactly safe, if I ever wanted to get home, this was where I had to be.



The carriage had slowed to a walk as the road began to curve. I remembered this area and knew that I had to get out now or I'd never find my way back in the dark.

“If the ungrateful bastard doesn't want to ride with us anymore, I say good riddance.”

Before I could respond, Elizabeth's father pushed open the carriage door and unceremoniously shoved me out. I heard Elizabeth give a scream of protest, but I was more concerned with curling my body so that I landed on my shoulder rather than my face.

By the time I got up, my shoulder and arm throbbing, the carriage was several yards away. At least I'd managed to hang on to my pillowcase of belongings, I thought as I stretched myself out, checking to make sure that some bruises and scrapes were all I had. The cut on my shoulder felt tender, but I didn't feel any blood, which was good. I couldn't, however, say the same for my leg. The wound there had been deeper, so it was taking longer to heal. Even in the dim light, I saw a few new dark spots on my pants, but it could bear my weight.

I sighed. I needed to find somewhere to sleep for the rest of the night. I wasn't sure of the exact spot where Gracen had found me, so I'd need to walk every inch of the area and hope that I tripped something, and it took me back to my time. If I didn't find anything by the time my food supplies ran out, I'd change into the one dress I'd brought and go into the city to decide what to do next.

With a set plan in my mind, I looked around for the best possible place to steal a few hours of sleep. My journey, I knew, was far from over.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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I woke with a start at the touch of a hand on my shoulder, and immediately kicked out, registering a cry of pain when I connected with something. Muscle memory took over even before I'd fully woken, and I twisted away from the hand, pushing myself into a crouch, hands curled into fists. My breaths came in gasps, my heart beating like a hammer in my chest as adrenaline coursed through me.

“Honor, stop!”

I froze at the familiar voice, staring as Gracen held up his hands in surrender. It took my brain a few seconds to catch up and allow my body to relax. Still, I couldn't quite believe he was here. My mind whirled at the odds, the incredible improbability of this man finding me in this same place two separate times. Fate had to be at work.

And he looked like shit. His clothes were rumpled and dirty as if he'd been sleeping in them for a while. His curls were wild, and there were even bits of leaves in his hair. His skin was pale, except for the dark circles under his eyes.

What the hell had happened to him in the week since I'd last seen him?

“Gracen?” I finally managed to say his name.

He smiled at me, but it was a weak smile and didn't quite reach his eyes. “Honor, what are you doing here?” He sounded even more tired than he looked, which was saying something.

“I could ask you the same question,” I countered, my mind still reeling. I believed I'd never see him again. “Why aren't you with your unit...I mean, your regiment?”

He looked away, a dark flush creeping up his neck. The realization hit me all at once.

He'd never joined the army. That might have been what he told his father, but he'd never actually enlisted.

"Did they recognize you from before?" I looked around, wondering how much danger we were in.

He shook his head, giving me a quick glance. "I didn't give them the opportunity to. How could I after the things you said? How passionately you believed them?" He looked at me now. "I am an educated man, Honor, and I've never been one to believe in the superstitions of others...but something about how ardently you argued for your cause..." His voice trailed off for a moment, and then he finished his thought. "It almost made me believe."

I had absolutely no idea how to respond. Despite my best efforts, I hadn't been able to completely keep myself from thinking about what I'd say if I saw him again. It'd seemed like such a remote possibility that I told myself no harm could come of it. Except it had, and now that it was here, my mind was inexplicably blank.

"You have no idea how happy I am that you're here." His voice broke through my thoughts. "I never thought I would see you again."

"Then why did you leave in the first place?" I asked. Maybe it was an inane question, and I had a feeling I'd hate the answer, but I asked it anyway. I needed to know for certain.

The conflict was written on his face, and a part of me was glad that I wasn't the only one going through such emotional turmoil. It would've been worse, I thought, if it'd been easy for him to walk away. If I hadn't meant enough to him for it to be painful.

"Gracen?" I prodded. I didn't know if I'd get another chance to ask him, so I was going to push until I got an answer, no matter if I liked it or not.

"I couldn't stay there anymore." He looked at me, his eyes blazing. "Not while you were there."

I rolled my eyes. Was he serious? First, he said he was glad to see me, then he said he couldn't be near me. Men. I gave an exasperated sigh. "Do you know how contradicting you sound right now?"

"I know, I know," he said as he ruffled his hair and turned away. "This hasn't been easy for me."

"Easy for *you*?" I stared at him, unable to believe what he just said. Anger sparked inside me, burning past everything else to set free the words I'd held

back. “Do you have any idea what I’ve been through since you decided to disappear?” I let every negative emotion bleed into my words, but managed to keep my tears back. “I gave myself to you, trusted you, and when you didn't like what you heard about me, you accused me of being a manipulative slut!”

His eyes were wide when he turned around. “I never said—”

“You might as well have,” I snapped. I wanted all of this out. I needed to have it gone. So I could have closure before I went home. “As soon as you heard you weren't the one who took my precious virginity, you immediately jumped to the conclusion that I'd seduced you to try and trap you in a marriage.”

He at least had the decency to look embarrassed. He started to reach for me, then dropped his hands. “I apologize, truly I do. I wasn't myself that morning. The whole thing took me quite by surprise, and I admit that I didn't handle it well.”

“That’s an understatement,” I muttered. I folded my arms, determined to keep strong. “You acted like a...child, and then ran away.”

“I couldn’t think of a better solution.”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes but didn't hold back what I was thinking. “That wasn’t a solution, Gracen, that was a fear of confrontation.” I let the silence sit between us as I rubbed my arms. I hadn't realized until now how early it was, how the sun hadn't yet burned off the chill. When I finally spoke, my voice was soft, “Do you have any idea how much I hated you for leaving like that?”

His shoulders sagged, and he leaned against a nearby tree, a defeated look on his face. I didn't understand him, didn't understand what he was thinking. He'd stood up to his father about the war, but had fled when faced with having to explain what happened between the two of us.

Maybe I didn't mean enough for him to show that sort of bravery and strength. The thought tore at me.

“What were you expecting would happen?” I asked, taking a step closer. “That you could pretend to your father that you were in the army and when all this was over go home like nothing had changed?”

I wanted to tell him that he'd have years to wait if he thought that.

“I didn’t have a plan,” he admitted, his tone wry. “It seems that I do unwise things when I'm around you.”

I winced as his comment and rubbed my forehead. “And what were you

thinking – or not thinking – that I'd be doing during all this? Or did you even care about that at all?"

Gracen looked up at me. "I care. How could you even question that?"

I stared at him. Was he serious? A thought occurred to me. "Did you think that when all this was over, I'd be waiting for you at the estate? Waiting for you to come back?"

He waited for a moment before answering. "I prayed you would be."

He wasn't kidding. I could see it on his face.

"How could you possibly think that? Any of that?"

Gracen sighed and closed his eyes.

"Do you have any idea how bad—?"

"I was married once."

The statement stopped me cold. I looked at him, but his eyes were still closed.

"Her name was Silva," he continued. "She was seventeen when we married, but I'd loved her since she was thirteen."

I sat on the ground across from him, watching. Waiting. I wasn't sure I wanted to hear him talk about this woman he'd loved so much. I knew it couldn't have a happy ending, not if he was supposed to marry Clara now.

"We had only been married for a few months when she told me we were expecting our first child. We were so happy. Even my father was happy, and I'd never seen him happy before." His eyes opened, but the look in them said he was far away. "I supposed he must've been, with my mother, but I was too young when she died to remember him that way."

"What happened?" I didn't want to ask it, but I had to know.

He finally looked at me. His words were quiet, even. "She died in childbirth, and our son died with her. In one night, I lost everything. Everyone I ever loved was gone." His voice broke.

Without thinking about it, I crossed the short distance between us and wrapped my arms around him. He stiffened at first, then relaxed against me. I held him close, cradling his head against my chest and buried my face in his hair as tears welled up in my own eyes. I wondered if he'd ever let himself cry for his wife and child, or if his father had made that impossible too.

"I never thought I would be able to love anyone like that again." Gracen's voice was muffled until he pulled back and met my gaze. "Until I met you, Honor Daviot."

I swallowed hard. I couldn't let myself hope that he meant what I so

desperately wanted to believe he meant.

“Forgive me, Honor.” He cupped my cheek, his eyes dark and shining. “Forgive me for all of those horrible things I said to you.”

Tears escaped and ran down my cheeks. I couldn't do it. I couldn't pretend that this wasn't happening, not anymore. I'd been fooling myself into thinking that what I had with Bruce was real. *This* was real. More real and pure than anything I'd ever felt in my life.

He leaned into me, resting his forehead against mine. I closed my eyes and concentrated on the feel of his thumb against my cheek, the heat of his breath on my lips.

“I love you, Honor Daviot. With every thread of being inside me, I love you.”

I gave in to what I wanted, what I needed, and closed the distance between us to put my mouth against his.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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*H*e loved me. There was no pretense to it, no prompting or reason why he should say it. He didn't have anything to gain by saying it. Which was why I believed him.

And why I knew I had to leave.

I broke the kiss and took hold of his hands. I squeezed them as I took a deep breath. I had to do this before I lost myself in him. It would be so easy to do, and it would only hurt him in the long run.

"I...I can't..." My throat started to close, not wanting to utter the words. I made the mistake of looking into his eyes. Confusion and hurt stared back at me, and I didn't know what to say next. I pushed myself to my feet and took a step back.

Gracen stood, a bewildered expression on his face. I knew he didn't understand what I was doing or why I was doing it. Hell, I barely understood it. I only knew that it was right.

"You can't what? I don't understand."

I turned away from him so he couldn't see the tears in my eyes. I picked up my pillowcase but didn't bother getting out any of the food I'd packed into it. I wasn't hungry. I wasn't anything. I wasn't even thinking in terms of going home anymore. I just wanted to be done.

"Honor, stop!" He grabbed my arms tight enough to hurt. "Please, just tell me what—"

"I love you too, Gracen!" The words burst out of me, as if I simply couldn't hold them in any longer.

A smile broke across his face, and it was the most beautiful thing I had

ever seen. This was what real love felt like, and it was tearing me apart. I knew what I'd felt for Bruce had never been true love because the thought of never seeing him again didn't cause me any pain.

But what I'd say to Gracen next was going to rip out my heart.

"I'm going home, Gracen." It physically hurt to say the words.

"But you love me," he countered. "We can be together."

"And do what?" I asked, forcing myself to be strong. "Go back to the Lightwood house where you can marry Clara and I'll spend the rest of my life watching you have a family with her? I can't do that. And I won't be your mistress. I'm going home."

He released my arms, and I nearly fell.

"You said your father beat you. Why would you go back to that?"

Shit. I'd forgotten about that.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. I could come up with an excuse. I was sure I could. But I wasn't sure I wanted to anymore. I was tired of lying.

An inkling of an idea poked into my mind. Maybe I could do it all at once. Tell the truth...and push Gracen away enough that leaving him would be easier.

"My father didn't beat me," I said finally. "He's one of the greatest men I know. I lied to you before because I couldn't tell you the truth."

Gracen took a step back as my words sunk in. His eyes narrowed, and for a brief moment, I saw a glimpse of his father in him.

"You've never stopped lying to me, have you?" His hands curled into fists so tight that his knuckles turned white. "Has anything you've ever said been true?"

"I couldn't tell you the truth – I still can't – you wouldn't believe me." I knew I needed to stop trying to explain myself. I needed to accept his anger and leave. But I didn't like the idea of his last thoughts of me being that I was a liar.

"You owe me the truth." His voice was calmer, but I could see the anger in his eyes. "If you love me, try."

Fuck. I couldn't get any air into my lungs, even though I could hear the heavy panting of my labored breathing. Black spots appeared in my vision, and I realized that I couldn't do it. I couldn't just feed him a lie and walk away. If he was going to hate me, then it had to be because he truly knew who I was and where I was from.

"Sit down," I murmured.



“I’ll stand.”

I nodded. My legs couldn't hold me anymore, not now that I'd made the decision to come clean, so I sat. I rested my elbows on my knees and stared at the grass.

“No matter how crazy this sounds, please let me finish, because I don't think I can get through it more than once.”

When he didn't argue, I took that as the closest to an agreement I was going to get.

“These clothes I'm wearing are the uniform of the United States of America.” I could feel his eyes on me. There was no going back now. “I joined the army in the year 2004, shortly after I graduated from high school...”

I explained everything, and he let me talk. I told him about Iraq, my unit and Wilkins, everything I had seen and done overseas, everything that had set me on the path that had eventually led me to him. I told him about Bruce, and how long we'd been together, hoping he'd figure out that my fiancé was the only other person I'd slept with. I couldn't bring myself to specifically say it, but I wanted him to know anyway.

And then I told him what I knew of this war. Of what happened to the British Empire and how America grew into a powerful nation. I kept my voice even, forced myself to detach from any of the emotions that wanted to come forward with the memories.

When I finished, I felt drained, empty, but a little better. At least, no matter what happened, I'd know that Gracen knew the truth. I glanced over at him, but he was staring at the ground. I wasn't sure when he'd sat down, but he was less than a foot away now. Physically, at least. I knew he was a hell of a lot further away in every other sense.

The sun was almost directly overhead now, but I didn't ask him to hurry. It was a lot to take in. I'd lived it, and I barely believed it.

“If you didn't want to tell me the truth, you could have at the very least been respectful.” His voice was soft but angry.

“You can't think I made all this up?” My chest tightened. It wasn't unexpected, but it still hurt.

“I don't see any other explanation for it.” He stood and started to walk away. “I'll leave you be since that seems to be what you wish.”

“I can prove it!” I called after him as I scrambled to my feet. That little voice in the back of my head that had been telling me to walk away was

getting smaller.

As he turned, I grabbed my shirt and yanked it over my head.

“What are you doing? Cover yourself!” Gracen snapped as he turned. His face flushed, but I couldn't help noticing that his gaze kept snapping down to my bra-clad breasts. It was a simple white cotton bra, but by eighteenth-century America standards, it was extremely revealing.

That alone should have been a hint to him that I wasn't from around here, but it wasn't what I wanted to show him.

I took a breath and turned around. I bent my head forward so that my hair wasn't in the way. It took a moment, but then I heard him gasp. I gave him some time to adjust to the side of a tattoo on a woman, and then another minute while he absorbed it.

“What is that?”

I glanced over my shoulder to see him coming toward me, his eyes locked onto my shoulder. “What does it look like?”

He looked up at my face briefly, and I nodded for him to continue, giving him permission to touch me. A shock ran through me as his fingers touched my skin, tracing the lines of the American flag he didn't recognize.

“It looks like a flag,” he said quietly. “But not one I know.”

“This is what the flag of the United States of America will look like in the future. In the time I come from.” I closed my eyes and tried to focus on the truth of the matter rather than the way his touch made me feel.

“Tell me.”

I swallowed hard and prayed that this meant he was starting to believe me. “The stars symbolize the fifty states that will make up the USA. The stripes are the thirteen colonies that will all eventually declare independence from Britain. Soon.”

I looked at him again. His face was pale, eyes wide.

“I swear to you, Gracen, everything I told you is the truth. Including how this war is going to end.”

I watched the emotions play out on his face. Confusion. Anger. Grief. I waited, determined to give him the time he needed.

He stepped closer and traced the lines of my tattoo with his fingers again. Then he bent his head and pressed his lips against the nape of my neck. It sent a shiver down my spine, and I had to remind myself not to get caught up in the physical.

“I believe you.”

The relief that went through me at those three words nearly made my knees buckle.

“Can you forgive me?”

I turned toward him, and then his arms were around me, and I felt safer than I had in a long time.

“Will you?” he murmured against my hair. “Honor, my love, will you forgive me?”

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. He believed me. A lot of things still needed to be figured out, but for right now, in this moment, this was all that mattered.

How long we clung to each other, I didn't know, but when I finally raised my head, it was to see Gracen's face flushed, his eyes looking everywhere but down at me. He took a step back, retrieved my shirt, and held it out to me. I pulled it on, then glanced over to see him staring out into the distance, a confused expression on his face.

“What's wrong?” Anxiety twisted my stomach into a knot. I really hoped he wasn't going to tell me that this all had been a mistake. I wasn't sure I could handle it if he did.

“What's a car?” he asked.

A laugh burst out of me, and I was surprised to realize how long it had been since I'd genuinely laughed. After everything I had told him and everything I had confessed, he asked about the car. I shook my head. Typical man. My father and brother would've approved.

He looked a little annoyed as he turned to look at me. “I need to know what a car is if I am to try to understand how you came to be here.”

“A car is like a much faster carriage,” I explained. I gave him a soft smile. “I'm sorry I laughed. This whole thing is just crazy.”

“Are cars inherently magical?” The question was asked as calmly and seriously as someone would've asked about the weather.

“No.” I studied the grave expression on his face, wondering where he was going with this. “Why?”

“You had no expectation of being transported anywhere but to your home.” He made it a statement rather than a question.

“Correct.”

He scowled. “When I found you, you were hurt, disoriented and had just been in a carriage accident that unexpectedly placed you in a different time. And my response was to tie you up and treat you as an enemy.” He shook his

head. "I cannot blame you for trying to get away from me."

I walked over to him and placed my hands on his cheeks, turning his face toward mine. "We were both in an impossible situation that neither of us could be expected to know how to handle."

Of all the ways for him to react to the truth, I'd never thought he'd blame himself for any of it. I remembered Wilkins telling me once that I carried the weight of the world on my shoulders. I was beginning to see that I had nothing on Gracen.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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I leaned in to kiss him, to reassure him that I didn't blame him. He needed to know that none of this was anyone's fault. Before my lips could touch his, he took a step back, turning his face from mine.

The sickening realization hit me as I dropped my hands. My biggest fear was coming true right in front of me. Telling him who I really was had changed how he felt about me. It'd just taken him a couple minutes to realize it.

My stomach lurched, and I could feel the pain already starting to bubble up. I moved farther away so he could have the space he so clearly wanted. It would kill me to leave, but at least now I knew for certain that I had nothing to stay for. I wouldn't marry Bruce – I couldn't now that I knew what real love felt like – but I would at least have my family.

“Sorry,” I whispered. “I understand if, after everything you’ve just heard, you don’t want me anymore.” My voice faltered on the last word. I couldn’t believe I'd been so stupid. Whether he believed me or not, it was a lot for anyone to handle. Too much apparently. After being honest about everything, I'd lost him anyway.

As I started to turn away, Gracen moved. Except he didn't move away from me. Instead, he closed the distance between us with two long strides and grabbed the tops of my arms, forcing me to face him. His hands rose to my face, and he used his thumbs to brush away the tears that had begun to fall.

“Look at me, Honor.” His voice was earnest, and I raised my eyes. “It does not matter where or what time you are from. I want you, and I love you.

Nothing will change that. I swear it on everything I hold dear.”

He kissed me then, pouring more love and passion into it than I'd felt from Bruce in all the years I'd known him. I slid my arms around Gracen's neck, ran my fingers through his hair. His touch was gentle, but I felt the strength in him, the restraint he used not to be rough with me. I leaned closer to him, wanting him to lose control, but he pulled away instead and brushed back a loose strand of hair.

He kissed my forehead, and I took the opportunity to get the air my lungs demanded. I'd experienced fear in various forms in my life, but nothing as intense as what I felt when I finally told Gracen everything. The risk had been worth it, even though I knew there was one more thing I had to say about it.

“Can you forgive me for lying to you?” I asked. He'd asked for my forgiveness, but I needed his as well.

“There is nothing to forgive,” he whispered, resting his forehead against mine. We stood like that for a moment and then he straightened. His expression was tight when he looked down at me. “Do you still want to go back?” he asked. “Back to your own time?”

I opened my mouth, then closed it when I realized I didn't have an answer ready. What did I want?

I felt a twinge of sadness as I thought about my father and the guidance that he gave me, whether I wanted it or not. I considered my loving mother who'd supported me going into the army when she knew the risks. My older brother who'd been equal parts friend and nemesis. I was used to not seeing them for extended periods of time, but the thought of never seeing them again was different.

And it wasn't only my own feelings I had to take into consideration. I didn't know if I could leave them without answers. Without a goodbye. They were probably worried sick. If time was moving the same here as there, I'd been gone for almost a month. I didn't know what answers they had, but I knew they wouldn't be enough.

The honest answer was that I didn't know whether I wanted to go home or not, but I did know that I didn't want to lose Gracen. Could I choose him over my parents and brother? Over my military friends Wilkins and Rogers?

“If you wish it,” he said quietly, “I will do everything in my power to see you safely home.”

I could hear the effort it took to speak those words, see the pain in his

eyes, and I knew in that moment that he loved me more than Bruce ever had. What I wanted, what I needed, was more important to Gracen than anything else.

“We will explore all possible sources of information,” he continued, clearly taking my hesitation as an answer. The only hint at the inner turmoil he was feeling was how tightly his hands were clenched. “Some of the servants may have mystical knowledge.”

“I spoke to Dye before I left,” I said almost absently, “and she said she didn’t know anything.”

I couldn't waver. Not now. This was the moment where my life would take one path or another. I couldn't say how I knew it, only that I did know, deep in my bones. I could no longer leave it all on chance. I had to decide whether or not to actively pursue finding a way to get back to my time. And I knew that no matter what I chose, I would lose people I loved.

I knew what I truly wanted, even if I hadn't wanted to accept it until now.

“I love my family, and I miss them—” I started.

“Then we will search for a way home for you,” he cut me off. He was all business now, unable to look at me, unwilling to show his pain.

“Let me finish,” I said gently. He nodded, the muscles in his jaw clenching. “I love my family, and I miss them...but I can live without them.” He inhaled sharply but didn't interrupt. “I can't live without you. I don't want to. I don't understand what happened to me, and I don't know if it is permanent or temporary, but whatever control I have, I choose you.”

The relief I felt was immense but not enough to completely overshadow my sadness at the loss of those I loved in my own time. I could survive that grief though. I didn't think I could survive leaving Gracen behind. And I knew that my family would understand. They would want me to be happy. And Gracen made me happy.

I apparently made him happy too because the moment the last word left my mouth, he picked me up, swinging me around. His lips were on mine almost instantly, hard and desperate, telling me without words just how badly the thought of losing me had scared him. I met his kiss with equal fervor, determined to make him understand that my need for him was as strong as his for me.

As he set me on my feet, his hands moved to the small of my back, pulling me closer, pressing our bodies together until I could feel him hard against my hip. His fingers moved up my back, over the outline of my tattoo

under my shirt, reminding me that there were no more secrets between us. Whatever obstacles remained between now and our happy ending, we would face them together.

He pulled away, and although he was breathing heavily, he was clearly stopping us from going any further. My body was protesting, but my brain knew it was probably a good idea. Getting caught up in things might have felt really good, but we did have some other plans we needed to discuss before things got any more heated.

“What do we do now?” I asked as I clung to him, not trusting my legs to hold me.

“I have an idea.”

“What's that?”

I frowned as he stepped away from me and then gasped when he went down to one knee.

He had to be joking...right?

He took my hand between his and squeezed. “Honor Daviot, would you do me the great honor of agreeing to become my wife?”

Shit. He wasn't kidding.



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## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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This was what it was supposed to feel like. Palms sweating. Heart racing. Chest tightening until it was difficult to breathe. Complete adoration in the eyes staring at me. Electricity racing through my body from the point where our hands touched.

Not the casual, half-assed, “so I suppose we should get engaged for real this time” that I'd gotten from Bruce. Even his impulsive proposal after we'd slept together had been more romantic than the one that had actually gotten a ring on my finger.

Both times with him, I'd said yes, but I'd never felt the butterflies in my stomach, the tears welling up in my eyes. I'd said what was expected of me, what I thought I was supposed to say.

This time, I had no doubts, no questions about whether or not this was a good idea. I simply threw my arms around Gracen and squeezed a whisper past the lump in my throat.

“Yes! Of course, yes!”

His embrace was solid, comforting, making me wonder how I'd survived without it, how I'd survived without him. I didn't belong in this time, but I belonged with him. I had no doubt of that. I didn't care where or when I lived, as long as I was with him.

A gunshot in the distance snapped us both back to reality. It wasn't close enough for us to panic, but it was closer than I was comfortable with.

“We should go.” Gracen sighed. “Better to keep moving.”

“Moving where?” I asked.

“Away from Boston for now.” He looked down at me and frowned. “Did

you bring additional clothing?”

I raised an eyebrow and gave him a pointed look. “You do realize that your clothes look as bad as mine, right?”

He chuckled, an easier sound than I'd ever heard from him. He held out his hand to me and pulled me back to him again. “I would like to be able to walk with you and have people know that you are my fiancée, not my steward.”

For another few seconds, I didn't realize what he meant...and then it hit me. I was trying to pass as a man. While not exactly commonplace in my time, any hint of impropriety between two men during this time period was a punishable offense. All it would take would be one wrong look or touch, and we'd be in serious trouble.

“I have a dress.” I reluctantly stepped away from him and reached for the pillowcase I brought with me.

I reached for the hem of my shirt again and chuckled when he turned around. Such a gentleman. I swapped my uniform for the dress, frowning as I pulled it on. While I'd miss running water and some technology, the biggest thing from my time that I'd miss – aside from my family and friends – would be the clothes. Army uniforms weren't always the most comfortable things in the world, but they were a hell of a lot better than the shit women had to wear now.

When I turned back around and saw Gracen watching me, however, I knew that being with him more than made up for the things I would no longer have.

I held out my hand to him, smiling at the look of warm surprise that crossed his face. He took my hand, and I threaded my fingers between his.

“Lead the way.”

We walked for a few minutes before he spoke. “May I ask a question?”

“Of course.” I had a feeling he'd want to know things about the future. I would have if I'd been in his place.

“That was your uniform?”

I nodded.

“Do all women in your time dress as men, or only ones in the military?”

I laughed and squeezed his hand as I tried to explain modern fashion, or at least my limited knowledge of it. I was always the kind of person who went by what I liked, both for comfort and style, rather than designer name or popular trends.

From there, we went around to other topics, prompted both by questions from me and ones from him. We spoke of our families and how we'd grown up. He told me more about Silva, and I told him about Bruce, though his answers were far more complimentary than mine. We talked about things to come, though my basic knowledge of history wasn't even close to enough to answer all of his questions.

We'd been walking for most of the afternoon when we found a small town. Well, in my time it would've been small. Here, it was a thriving community. Houses, a church, an inn, some small shops. I knew the city of Boston, as well as many others, would end the war with physical scars. This town appeared to be untouched, and I didn't know if it would stay that way.

A group of about half a dozen young children ran by, and I hoped that things here would stay as calm and innocent as they appeared right now.

“I want to marry you today.”

The announcement, understandably, caught me by surprise. He turned toward me, his eyes blazing.

“Today?” I stared at him. I didn't know the usual procedure for wedding planning in the eighteenth century, but I assumed some things remained the same. Like who would normally be a part of such a day. “Don't you want your family there?”

My heart twisted at the question. No matter how long we waited, my family would never be there for my wedding.

“I only need you.” He brushed the back of his hand across my cheek. “Why should we wait another minute? I want to make you my wife today, before anyone tries to stop us.”

He was right, I realized. If we waited, things would come between us. His father. Clara. This war. Whatever it was that had brought me here. There were so many things that could stop us from being together. And no reason to put it off. Whether it be today or thirty years from now, I couldn't imagine loving anyone more, or having anyone love me more. I'd already decided to stay for him. This was only making it official.

“Okay, let's do it.”

His entire face lit up at my words, and his eyes shone. I could get used to gazing into them. Losing myself in his eyes. He gave me a quick, breathless kiss.

“Wait here a moment,” he instructed as he headed toward the building I'd already identified as the church, though what kind, I couldn't say.

Considering when and where we were, I felt comfortable assuming it was some sort of Protestant denomination.

I'd seen similar things in Iraq. In the middle of a desert where houses were covered in dirt or sand, worn down, the places of worship were always gleaming, looking essentially brand new. The people cared for the temples with a respectful reverence I'd rarely seen in my own country. I pushed aside the thoughts before they could take hold. I didn't want to think about Iraq now, not on my wedding day.

My wedding. Even after years of being engaged to Bruce, it still sounded weird to think those words. I'd never been the kind of girl who spent hours daydreaming about her wedding, not even after Bruce and I had gotten engaged. My mom would occasionally ask me questions about if we'd set a date or thought about venues, and I'd seen her confusion every time I said we hadn't.

I pushed those thoughts aside too. If I thought about my mom, I would cry, and I didn't want to do that. Fortunately, Gracen was coming toward me, and that was enough to distract me. He wore a fierce, proud expression, and every step he took in my direction was a commanding one. Walking a few paces behind him was a man, and as they drew closer, I realized he was carrying a Bible. The minister. Who didn't look entirely too happy about being there.

As they got closer, Gracen started pulling at his clothes and hair, dusting off the dirt and trying to pull his hair back. It was such a stark difference from the coat and blue cravat he'd worn when his engagement with Clara had been announced.

I suddenly felt self-conscious as I realized that I was about to get married in a dusty, wrinkled blue dress. Without time to do something with my hair, it just hung down to my shoulders, as plain as always. I bent down and plucked a couple of flowers, as much to keep my hands busy as anything else.

Gracen smiled at me, an understanding look on his face. It occurred to me that while I'd never been married before, he had.

"I love you, Honor, and I wish to marry you today, but I understand if you don't want to. We can wait for something a little more...well, more." His tone was soft as he cupped my chin.

It took me a moment to realize that he thought I was regretting my decision because I wanted a big wedding. The truth was, I wasn't hesitant to marry him this way at all, just nervous. Marrying him just made everything

more real. Made me acutely aware that I wasn't going back to my time. That I'd left it all so I could be with this man.

"I want to." I returned his smile. It didn't matter to me where we got married. Hell, I would've followed him to the ends of the earth if I had to.

He dropped his hand from my face to link my fingers with his, and we both turned to face the minister. The entire ceremony went by in a blur, and before I knew it, I had a beautiful silver ring on my ring finger and a new last name.

We'd gone straight to the inn to order some food and get a room for the night, and now we were sitting at a back table with two bowls of fairly suspicious-looking soup and some excellent bread. It was strangely awkward to be sitting at a table with my husband.

Hell, it was awkward to realize that I now had a husband.

Things were moving so fast that my head was spinning.

"Honor?" Gracen questioned, clearly concerned. "Are you well?"

"Yes, sorry, I was just thinking about things," I smiled at him, but I knew it didn't reach my eyes. I changed the subject before he could ask about it. "How did you get the minister to agree to marry us on such short notice? I don't know about now, but in my time, it usually takes some time to get a marriage license."

Except in Vegas, I thought. But I wasn't about to go there.

"Money can do wonders." He looked slightly embarrassed.

"You bribed a minister?" I put down my spoon.

I'd been taught from an early age the importance of fair play, of how people should be treated equally regardless of where they came from or who they were. I'd always despised stories of rich kids getting away with things when poor ones wouldn't have had the chance, and now I was married to someone who'd used his position and wealth to do exactly what I loathed.

"That's just the type of thing your father would do. Use money to get what he wanted." The words came out more harshly than I intended, and I regretted them as soon as he looked up at me, hurt in his eyes. I softened my tone. "I'm sorry. I just feel strongly about people not using their influence to get special treatment." I reached over and lightly touched his hand. "Even if it is done with the best of intentions."

"I only wanted to take care of you," he protested.

"I know." I tried to keep the frustration from my voice. "But I can take care of myself."

“I am aware of that.” He lowered his voice, the admiration clear. “You've proven it a hundred times over.” He paused for a moment, and then continued, “But you are my wife, and I want to take care of you, which is exactly what I will do. Because I can't lose you. I need you as much as you need me.”

“Yes, *husband*,” I said with a smile. It might've been old-fashioned, but I secretly loved the way “husband” sounded when I said it aloud. And I loved even more knowing that he thought of us as an equal partnership.

A comfortable silence fell as we finished our meal, but near the end, I found him watching me with a strange expression on his face. Like he had something he knew he had to say, but he knew that I wouldn't like it.

“Out with it,” I said.

“What?”

“Whatever it is you don't want to say. Just say it.”

He sighed as he took my hand. “We have to go back.”

“Go back where?” I really hoped he wasn't suggesting what I thought.

“Back to my home to explain everything to my father.” He gave me a partial smile. “And to introduce you as my wife.”

Yeah, that was going to go over well.

And there was something else.

“You know at some point we'll have to take a side?” I said it as gently as I could. “And with what I know, there's only one side we can take.”

He sighed. “I know.” His smile widened. “But not tonight, because tonight is our wedding night. Any decisions we have to make can wait.”

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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The room he'd rented was large and simple with a small dresser, a few side tables and a jug of water. The bed was simple as well, but the sheets looked clean, and that was all I cared about at the moment.

Walking a few paces in front of Gracen, I stopped and looked over my shoulder. "Care to help me with this dress, Mr. Lightwood?"

"I would, Mrs. Lightwood."

I shivered, though I wasn't sure if it was from the name, or from the cool air as the dress slipped to the floor. I turned toward him, then chuckled at the look on his face. He clearly hadn't paid much attention to my undergarments before.

"It's called a bra," I said as I reached behind me to unhook it. "I'll explain later."

Gracen's eyes darkened as they slid down my body, and I let him look. There was no embarrassment, no hiding necessary. He knew all of my secrets.

"Your turn."

He shed his clothes quickly, never taking his eyes off of me. When he was naked, it was my turn to admire his lean muscles and tanned skin. I ran my gaze down his chest and stomach to the thick shaft curving up from golden curls. I licked my lips and heard Gracen moan.

Then he was there, his hands sliding over me, cupping my breasts, teasing my nipples. He claimed my lips, his tongue exploring every inch of my mouth. I put my hands on his shoulders, feeling the strength there.

“Take me to bed,” I whispered against his lips. “And don't be gentle.”

He gave me a startled look that darkened the moment I caught his bottom lip between my teeth. His hands drew lines down my body, electrifying everywhere he touched and leaving every cell tingling. They finally came to rest on my hips, moving me backwards until I reached the bed. Without taking his gaze off of me, he pushed me back. I wrapped my arms around him, pulling him down on top of me.

A moan escaped me as our bodies pressed together, and my fingers dug into him. I wrapped my legs around his waist. The tip of his cock brushed against me, and I arched up against him. We had plenty of time later to explore, to learn all of the ways we could bring pleasure to each other. I just needed him inside me.

Now.

I ran my nails down his back until they reached his ass. I pulled him even as I lifted my hips, letting the first couple inches slide inside. He moaned my name, then cursed as he pushed the rest of the way into me. His muscles flexed under my hands as he began to thrust, starting with slow, deep strokes.

Time evaporated, and nothing else mattered as he moved against me, each time filling me more than the last. We'd had a connection before, but this was different. Some of it was because he was my husband because he'd made that forever commitment to be, even when he knew how many problems our marriage would cause. Most of it, however, I knew came from my confession. Now that he knew it all, that we'd shared our deepest secrets with each other, we could give ourselves freely, hold nothing back. As I begged him to drive himself into me harder, faster, I could see on his face that he understood it too. We didn't have to pretend, didn't have to worry about hurting each other. We were both strong, both fighters. We could protect each other, love each other. Equally.

My orgasm exploded through me, and I cried out his name, not caring if anyone else heard. I loved my husband, loved the pleasure that he was giving me, and I refused to be ashamed of it. He pressed his face against the crook of my neck, muffling his own groan as he reached his climax. My body tightened around him, muscles spasming as I came again.

One day, I realized with a start, this would give us a child. We didn't have access to birth control, no real way to keep me from getting pregnant. And the thought didn't concern me like it would have if it had been a different man spending himself inside me. The thought of a family with Gracen was a



happy one.

He rolled off of me and pulled the sheets up over us. Neither of us spoke as we settled into the rapidly dimming light.

“I love you, Honor,” he murmured as he kissed the top of my head.

“I love you too.” I snuggled against him, letting myself relax in the safety and warmth of his arms.

I woke suddenly to a dark room, and was briefly disoriented, not recognizing my surroundings until the arm around me tightened, and I remembered where I was. And who I was with. I shifted, pulling Gracen's arm closer as I put my head back on his chest. I smiled at the sound of his steady heartbeat.

As I waited for sleep to come again, my mind turned to our imminent return to the Lightwood estate. I knew exactly how Roston would take the news of our marriage, and it wouldn't be pretty. I thought of Clara too and felt a pang of guilt. Then I remembered the selfish way she had tried to manipulate Gracen into joining the army because of how it would make her look. And the fact that the engagement wasn't one of love.

Not like this.

A bolt of fear went through me, and I pressed myself more closely to Gracen. I knew the dangers of what was coming, but it wasn't the war I was frightened of. Not really. I knew there'd be risks, but it was the true unknown that scared me. The unknown about what had brought me here...and what could send me home.

That wasn't home now though. My home was lying next to me, and I was suddenly terrified that I might lose him.

“Please,” I whispered into the darkness. To what or who, I didn't know, but I didn't care. All I cared was that it didn't send me back. “Please, let me stay.”

I listened intently until I felt sleep coming to claim me again, but no answer came.

**The Lightwood Affair continues in *Fear and Honor* (*The Lightwood Affair Book 2*). [Click Here](#) to download it now.**

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M. S. Parker is a USA Today Bestselling author and the author of the Erotic Romance series, Club Privè and Chasing Perfection.

Living in Las Vegas, she enjoys sitting by the pool with her laptop writing on her next spicy romance.

Growing up all she wanted to be was a dancer, actor or author. So far only the latter has come true but M. S. Parker hasn't retired her dancing shoes just yet. She is still waiting for the call for her to appear on Dancing With The Stars.

When M. S. isn't writing, she can usually be found reading—oops, scratch that! She is always writing.

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