



DARKER

the inquirer



M.S. PARKER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DARKER II

THE INQUIRER

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Published by Belmonte Publishing LLC

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The Darker Trilogy

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Darker II: The Inquirer (This book)

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One

Bradyn

“Phone call for you, sugar,” Shadae Huxley called out the back door. “Says she’s a friend of Nyx’s.”

I frowned as I set down the rotted fence post I’d just pulled out of the ground. “Can you take a message? I want to get this next post in and the hole filled before it gets dark.”

“Do I look like a damn secretary or your mother?” Shadae shook a spoon at me. “Now, you best get in here before I start thinkin’ you’re messin’ around on that sweet girl.”

I knew better than to argue with the woman who served as my boss, my landlord, and my friend, even though I had a few things I could’ve said about the less-than-sweet Nyx Phoenix. As I walked toward the house, I pulled my shirt from my back pocket and wiped my face.

September was almost over, but it was still hotter than Satan’s balls. For a moment, I let myself wonder what it was like in New York, but then I pushed the thought away. Nyx had just left, and I hadn’t found out about it until I’d gone to her cabin to walk with her to breakfast and found the note she’d put on her door. It’d been addressed to Shadae and Brew, and there hadn’t been a single damn word for me.

I didn’t know what Nyx and I had, but I didn’t think that total exclusion boded well for us.

“Did she give you her name?” I took my shoes off, leaving them on the porch before stepping inside the kitchen.

Shadae held out the phone. “Kaimi Edlund.”

I recognized the name, and an unreasonable fear went through me. Kaimi was Nyx’s best friend and the person whose wedding Nyx was attending this weekend. Was she calling because Nyx hadn’t arrived yet? Or had Nyx

wanted to end things with me but been too afraid to do it herself?

The questions raced through my mind in the few seconds it took me to put the phone to my ear. “Hello?”

“Is this Bradyn?”

“It is.”

“My name’s Kaimi Edlund. I’m a friend of Nyx Phoenix.”

“I’ve heard of you.”

“Then you know that Nyx is here in New York for my wedding.” She made it a statement and then got right to the point of her call. “She doesn’t have a plus-one, and pretty much everyone else we’ve invited is coming as a pair. I was hoping you’d come be her date, starting tomorrow night at the rehearsal.”

Of all the possibilities I’d considered in the last two minutes, an invitation to a wedding hundreds of miles away hadn’t been one of them.

“The fact that you’re calling instead of Nyx makes me think she doesn’t know about us talking.” It was the politest way I could think of to address the proverbial elephant in the room.

“She doesn’t,” Kaimi cleared her throat, “but she doesn’t always know what’s best for her either.”

Considering the little I knew about Nyx, that made sense, especially since Kaimi was family. Like Nyx, I knew that real, true family had very little to do with DNA.

“I’d like to surprise her,” Kaimi continued. “She told me about how well the two of you hit it off, and I think she’ll be thrilled to see you.”

My ears burned, and it had nothing to do with the sun I’d been working under most of the day. How much had Nyx shared? I wasn’t a prude or ashamed or anything like that, but I wasn’t an exhibitionist either.

Sex, for me, was a private thing. Sure, I didn’t mind risky stuff like when Nyx and I had been in the hayloft or getting a little hot and heavy at a club

like Hades, but details weren't something I usually shared. The fact that I didn't know if I could say the same about Nyx bothered me.

"I'll help out with a plane ticket and hotel if the cost is an issue."

I appreciated the offer, but it still made me want to laugh. Not too long ago, I would've been able to use a private jet and rent a hotel room at one of the best hotels in New York. Now, thanks to my principles, the most I could do was say that I didn't need financial help.

"No, thank you." I glanced at the clock. "Money's not really the problem. It's flight availability. I don't know if I can get one in time."

"Another reason it'd be better as a surprise." I heard footsteps across the line and thought she must be pacing. "If you're not able to make it, then she doesn't have to know that I asked you to come. No disappointment."

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" I asked, keeping a tight rein on my emotions.

I didn't want to let myself get too attached to the idea of seeing Nyx again. Not just seeing her in her own element but doing something as normal as going to a wedding together.

She'd said more than once that she didn't date, but we'd gone on a sort-of-date before she left. It'd been a private one, but this would be an opportunity for a public one...and a chance for me to meet the most important people in her life.

"I've known Nyx since she was thirteen years old." Kaimi's voice softened. "I can read her better than anyone, and when she talks about you...she didn't say anything different than what I've heard her say about other guys, but I heard what she *didn't* say. If anyone can make something with her, I think it'd be you."

I closed my eyes. I wanted that. I'd wanted it from the first moment I saw her at the airport, a split second before she'd crashed into me. I'd taken one look into those bright green eyes of hers, and I'd been lost. A couple inches over average height, she was still a foot shorter than me, but she carried herself as if she was six feet tall.

“Rose would really like to meet you too. She was worried about Nyx being alone at the wedding. Here, let her tell you herself.”

Shit. How was I supposed to say no to a kid?

A little over twenty-four hours later, I was standing less than a foot from Nyx and trying to figure out if she was glad to see me or not. I’d been honest about why I was there, but I felt like I was blaming Kaimi and not taking responsibility for my own part in the surprise.

“Do you want me to stay?” I forced myself to exhale the breath I’d been holding. “I came for you, not for me. Just say the word, and I’ll go back to my hotel and spend the rest of the weekend sightseeing.”

My stomach clenched at the thought of leaving her so soon, but I’d do it if it was what she wanted. The short time I’d known her had been enough for me to understand that there was a fine line to walk when it came to her. If I left, I needed her to understand that it wouldn’t be because I was mad that she didn’t want me here, but because I respected her wishes.

As I waited for a response, the look in her eyes shifted, like she was lost in thought. Too many thoughts.

“Hey.” I touched her cheek and restrained myself from turning it into something lingering. “I mean it, Nyx. Say the word, and I’ll leave. No hard feelings. And if you want me to stay, there’s no expectations. I’ll follow your lead.”

When she took my hand, relief went through me. It didn’t matter how little or how much time we spent together, or how intimate that time was. I was just glad to be here.

I felt the same way later that night when I went back to my hotel room alone. I wanted her, but I planned to let her be the one to decide what that would look like and when that would happen. The next day at the reception, my patience paid off because she asked me to take her back to my room.

Everything went better than I could have dreamed. I gave her a massage and took down those gorgeous dark red waves of hers. Then we made love.

She wouldn't call it that if I asked what we did, and maybe it was too soon for me to feel it, but I never really liked lying to myself, and that's what it would've been, plain and simple. I couldn't flat-out say that I loved her, but it was damn close.

I didn't do one-night stands. Nothing wrong with it if that's what someone else needed, but I just wasn't wired that way. I was more of a serial-monogamy person. I dated with the intention of the relationship growing. I never started something that I didn't anticipate continuing.

Then again, I hadn't thought I'd be the type of guy who'd make out with a woman the same day I met her. If she hadn't stopped us that first night, we might've had sex right there. Then I'd completely stepped back at Hades, voluntarily submitting to her even though I'd never thought of myself as anything but Dominant. The fact that I'd had sex with her there at all had surprised me.

Hell, everything about this thing with her was new, not the least of which was me and how I was with her. I wanted to protect her – even more after I learned what'd happened to her as a kid – but I couldn't treat her like I had my past girlfriends.

My last two girlfriends had been submissive in all aspects of their lives. They'd wanted total domination from me, and I'd given it to them. I hadn't been into BDSM when I started dating my first girlfriend in high school, but she had the same quiet, timid personality. The only one of my ex's who hadn't really fit into that mold had spent most of our relationship pretending. She'd been a brilliant actress, hiding pretty much everything about herself until things had exploded.

Nyx wasn't any of that.

She was bold and strong and tough. While she wasn't an open person, she didn't lie about who she was either.

At least, I hadn't thought so until just now when I heard her side of a conversation with someone I assumed was her boss.

“...I can use my contact to get some face-to-face time.”

She hadn't said my name, but considering she'd preceded that statement by telling her boss that she'd found someone connected to the Traylor family, I felt pretty confident that she meant me.

"I'll send you more information as I get it."

I clenched my teeth, barely hearing Nyx end the call. What the fuck had that been about? When I'd introduced myself to her at the police station, I could've sworn she hadn't recognized my last name. But she had to have known who I was, wouldn't she? Nothing else explained what I'd just heard.

She'd been using me this entire time.

Here I'd been worried about her, angry about what had been done to her, concerned that I could accidentally trigger her, and she'd been playing me.

Betrayal cut deep, magnified by a too-familiar humiliation.

"You've been spying on me this whole time?" I was proud of myself for not yelling the question, but I doubted this conversation was going to get quieter or calmer.

I was right.

Accusations flew, and my temper built...until she hit below the belt.

"Planning to make me a villain in your little movie? The bitch who dared to ask questions about the great Traylor family? Maybe even throw in how my stepfather fucked me. Everyone likes a bit of sex in their entertainment."

She opened the door and said one final thing.

"Or maybe you think I was lying about that too. Don't worry, no one else ever believed me either."

All the anger drained out of me, taking my strength with it, and I dropped into the nearby chair.

What the hell had just happened?

* * *

A week.

It'd been almost a full week since Nyx had walked out of my hotel room, and I hadn't seen or talked to her since. I honestly doubted I'd ever hear from her again, and I should have already been moving on, forgetting about her.

It wasn't like we'd actually been in a relationship, and just because I'd been hoping that was the way it would go didn't mean that's what she'd thought too. And even if she had thought it, it didn't matter now.

She'd lied.

How could I believe anything she'd said?

I'd turned things over in my head more than once, trying to decide how much of what she'd done and said had been true.

Meeting me at the airport?

I didn't see how she could've purposefully run into me since I hadn't known I'd be dropping off a guest at the airport until Nyx's flight had already been on its way here. But maybe she'd intended to have some sort of 'chance' meeting with me already and just took the opportunity that me being at the airport brought.

Then there was the fact that she'd made the first physical move. At the time, I thought it'd been because she was attracted to me, but in the past, I'd learned the hard way that I wasn't as good a judge of that as I'd once thought.

I sighed as I turned off my shower. No good was going to come out of me going over it all again. I needed to get my head out of the clouds and focus on my work. Not my riding lessons, since I'd gotten through those more or less fine, but my *real* work. I really had needed a job when I'd come to the ranch, but choosing to apply here had come with secondary motives.

One positive thing I could say about the blow-up with Nyx was that I wanted to stay busy. Throwing myself into work would be a good way to do just that.

After drying off, I draped the towel over my shoulders and used the end to dry inside my ears. I was still doing that when I stepped into my bedroom and discovered a naked woman in my bed.

And not just any naked woman either.

It was her.

“What the hell are you doin’ here?”

Two

Nyx

Alcohol.

“You know a decent bar?” I asked as I shut the cab door. “I don’t need anything fancy, but I don’t want a dive either.”

“I know a place.”

As the driver took us back down to the road, I was tempted to close my eyes, like that would block out the image of that naked brunette standing in the doorway and telling me that Bradyn was in the shower. It wouldn’t. I knew from experience that eyes open or eyes closed didn’t matter. Some shit just stuck in your head, and it was usually the stuff you most wanted to forget.

I’d been lucky, in a way, being put into juvie before I’d gotten hooked on negative ways to cope with my past. The juvie part hadn’t been the lucky thing. It’d been the fact that I’d been put in a room with Kaimi, who’d already done the whole rebellious thing and learned from it. She’d made sure I knew that I needed to learn how to deal with shit without drugs or booze. Not that drinking was a bad thing, just that I shouldn’t rely on it. And I never had.

Right now, though, I was too fucking tired to try to work through it in my head. Maybe after sleeping it off and dealing with the hangover, I’d realize how much better off I was now. I’d come back here because of the Huxleys and their connection to the Douglasses. All of their connections to the Traylor family. I hadn’t been sure how well I’d be able to handle dealing with Bradyn’s family if things with him had still been...confusing.

There was nothing confusing about a naked woman.

A flash of hot anger washed through me, and I let it burn away the hurt. Not away. Not really. But it made it more bearable, and that was all I really needed right now.

It was the shock of it that made it so bad. That had to be the reason.

We hadn't made promises, exactly. We'd agreed to only fuck each other, and I'd been stupid enough to believe that he meant it. I'd never asked for exclusivity from any other partner because that hadn't ever been part of the deal.

The taxi pulled into the parking lot next to a building with a neon sign that said Franco's. I paid the driver, adding a tip for his willingness to stay at the ranch while I'd gone to Bradyn's cabin. He thanked me and gave me his card, telling me to call when I needed a ride back to my hotel.

I'd gotten a voicemail from Shadae earlier this week, telling me that she'd keep my cabin for me until I called to tell her I wasn't coming back. I hadn't called, which meant I'd been able to leave my suitcase there and take the key she'd left under the mat. I could've stayed.

Which would have been a bad idea.

The bar was exactly what I'd asked for. On a Saturday night, it was busy, but not so packed that I felt claustrophobic. I took a seat at the bar with the wall at one side and an older woman at the other. She looked like she was here for the same reason I was. To forget something and be alone without actually being alone. Based on the blank way she glanced at me before turning back to her drink, I didn't need to worry about her hitting on me.

"What can I get you?" The bartender was massive, his bulk taking up enough room that I wondered if he could even turn sideways in that small space behind the bar.

"Long Beach Iced Tea." Close to the Long Island Iced Tea, I preferred the taste of this one when I wanted something stronger than beer but not strong enough to knock me on my ass. I also wasn't in the mood to throw back a few shots and go back to the ranch, and this drink would let me take my time.

The bartender nodded, and less than a minute later, the drink was in front of me. I sipped at it, the burn faint as it traveled down my throat and into my stomach. It was good, but I couldn't enjoy it the way I would have if I'd been here under other circumstances.

Circumstances like not finding a naked woman in Bradyn's cabin. Or circumstances where I'd known better than to get involved with someone while working.

Okay, so I hadn't known that he was connected to my case until after we'd already slept together a couple times, but I had known before the last time. I should have never let it happen. Just because I hadn't wanted to make a big deal about him being my date for Kaimi's wedding didn't mean I'd needed to go back to his hotel room and have sex with him again.

I had no excuse for my behavior. Just because I'd wanted him wasn't good enough. My actions had consequences, and this was one of them. I'd been stupid enough to trust him, and I was paying for it now.

One thought followed another, and I didn't try to stop them. I'd drown them tonight and have a massive headache tomorrow, but at least he'd be out of my system, and I could focus on work.

At some point after my second or third drink, I'd started people watching, but I didn't realize that I was even doing it until a guy sat down at the table closest to me, and the redhead who already occupied the space asked him to leave.

"Let me buy you a drink." He leaned closer to her, his smile not reaching his eyes. "Just one drink, and if you still want me to go, I will."

He sounded polite enough about it, but something about him made me think he wasn't going to be put off that easily.

"No thank you." The redhead's voice was firm, and I wondered if she saw the same thing in him that I did. "I'm waiting for a friend."

"Have a drink with me while you're waiting. When your friend gets here, she can join us."

"I'd rather not."

He reached across the table and put his hand over hers. When she jerked her hand back, he didn't grab her, but even from where I was sitting, I could see the anger on his face.

“Don’t be like that.”

I was fairly certain that *don’t be like that* was second only to *you’d be prettier if you smiled* when it came to phrases that pissed me off, but it was a close second.

“I’d like you to leave.” The edge to her voice shook, and the fear under her words was clear.

“Only if you come with me.”

Nope.

I hopped off my chair and made it to their table in just a couple steps. My head felt a bit wobbly, but I wasn’t slurring or stumbling, so I was sober enough to deal with this asshole.

“You’re in my seat.”

I felt the woman’s surprise more than saw it, but I didn’t look away from the guy.

“I don’t see your name on it.”

“For real?” I laughed. Shit. I was a little drunker than I’d thought. “What are you, twelve?”

His face turned red, like that deep tomato red that made you think of strokes and heart attacks. “You laughin’ at me, bitch?”

“Aren’t you smart?” I felt people watching me now, but I kept my focus on him.

He seemed like the sort of coward who’d wait until I looked away and then punch me or something like that. His hands were in fists when he stood, but I didn’t back down. It could’ve been the alcohol, but it also could’ve been the fact that I was tired of seeing assholes like this act like women owed him something.

“This ain’t your business,” he said. “You best go back to your seat before I do somethin’ you’ll regret.”

I stepped toward him, putting us almost nose to nose. Literally. He and I were basically the same height. Probably why he was such a douche. Trying to make up for what he lacked in height. Probably other areas too.

For one tense moment, I thought he was going to hit me even though most of the bar was watching us now, but then someone appeared to my left. I could only make out a vague shape with my peripheral vision, but as soon as the person spoke, I knew who it was.

“Security’s gonna take care of him, Nyx.” Isaac Huxley had an amazing voice. It slid over my skin like...well, like something warm and nice. “And they’ll walk the young lady to her car when she’s ready to leave.”

I looked over at Isaac. “Promise she’ll be okay?”

He smiled, the resemblance to his father almost eerie. If I had a picture of Brew at Isaac’s age, I doubted anyone would’ve been able to tell them apart. Behind me, the jerk was being half-dragged to the door, cursing and yelling insults. I ignored him and waited for Isaac to answer my question.

“I promise.” He reached over and touched my arm. “Why don’t you let me take you back to the ranch rather than calling a cab? Since we’re going to the same place, it makes sense.”

He was right, it did. I just wasn’t sure I was ready to go back yet. Then again, I realized, if I went with him, maybe I really could get past Bradyn through this good-looking man. We’d flirted a bit before, and he seemed interested in me, but in a casual kind of way.

Exactly what I wanted.

After all, everybody knew that the fastest way to get under someone was to get over someone else.

Or something like that.

“All right.”

He put his hand on my back, between my shoulder blades, and used his touch to steer me out of the bar. I kept waiting for the heat and electricity I felt every time Bradyn touched me, but I felt nothing but pleasant warmth and a

feeling of safety. Not the same sort of safety I'd felt around Bradyn, but safe enough.

I wasn't going to fall for that twice, though. If Isaac and I fucked tonight, that's all it would be. No second time. No talking about my past. If he couldn't handle the way I needed things to be, we wouldn't do anything at all.

The ride back to the ranch was fuzzy, but the cool – well, cooler – air that came at me when Isaac opened the door woke me up enough to give me the strength to get out without needing help. He gripped my elbow anyway, and I let him. As I made my way toward my cabin, I couldn't stop from looking toward Bradyn's cabin, wondering if the woman was still there, if they were in bed together.

If they were fucking right now.

I frowned.

Nope.

Fuck that.

I stopped, and when Bradyn turned toward me, a question on his face, I grabbed the front of his shirt and yanked him toward me.

Okay, so I surprised him with the kiss, but I assumed he'd do the same thing every other man who was attracted to women would do and kiss me the fuck back.

I did *not* expect him to grip my shoulders and hold me in place while he stepped a good foot and a half away.

"I'm flattered," he said, his eyes not meeting mine. "But you're drunk."

"What the fuck?!" I shook off his hands. "Who do you think you are?! I'm a grown woman! I can kiss whoever the hell I want to kiss! Won't be you again. I can tell you that."

My face was hot, my hands curled so that my nails dug into my palms. The physical stuff, though, wasn't anything compared to the sick feeling in my stomach. It had nothing to do with the alcohol. I hadn't drunk enough to

throw up. Which I knew meant I was sober enough to decide if I wanted to kiss someone.

A tiny voice spoke up, reminding me that I might not have been blackout drunk, but maybe I wasn't the best judge of whether or not I was too drunk to kiss a man.

Nope.

I was in control. I got to decide what I did, when I did it, and with who.

Whom.

Fuck it.

“Fuck you, Isaac. You and the horse you rode in on.”

With that harsh insult out of the way, I opened my mouth to tell Isaac Huxley *exactly* what I thought of him.

Three

Bradyn

I was hovering on that line between waking and sleep when the sound of a vehicle coming up the drive woke me all the way. Since there weren't any guests scheduled to come into the ranch until the end of October, my mind immediately went to Nyx.

Even while I told myself to just let it go, that I could wait until morning to find out if she was actually back or not, I climbed out of bed and walked over to the window. I recognized the truck as Isaac's and wondered if he'd decided to bring back someone for the night but wanted to use one of the cabins instead of taking her into his room at the main house.

I didn't blame him. I couldn't imagine trying to have sex with someone knowing that my parents were right down the hall.

Then I realized who was with him, and my stomach clenched. When Nyx kissed him, I started to turn away because I didn't want to see that, not even when I was as mad at her as I was. Except more movement kept me watching.

Isaac wasn't kissing her back, and it looked like she was pissed about it.

She wasn't staggering, but I didn't doubt that she'd been drinking. It didn't take much for me to put together that Isaac had found her at the bar he'd mentioned going to, and he'd brought her back here because she was drunk. Not because he planned to sleep with her.

I could hear her yelling, though not the words, and I was out the door before I realized what I was doing. I trusted Isaac not to take advantage of Nyx and not to hurt her, but I still felt a wave of protectiveness wash over me, and I kept walking.

Halfway to her, I remembered that I was just in a pair of boxers, but I wasn't about to go back to put on clothes and shoes. Who knew what would happen in that short amount of time?

“Fuck you, Isaac. You and the horse you rode in on.”

Under other circumstances, I would’ve found that funny, but I could see her spiraling, and protecting her from herself took priority. I stepped between her and Isaac, my hands up with palms out in case she decided to throw a punch. Considering how we’d left things, physical violence wasn’t completely out of the question.

“What the fuck do *you* want?” Nyx put her hands on her hips and glared at me.

“I can take it from here, Isaac.” I didn’t look away from the raging woman, even though I was talking to the man behind me.

Nyx scowled. “I don’t need to be taken care of, asshole.”

Clearly, alcohol hadn’t made her forget that we were pissed at each other.

“Let me get you inside, Nyx,” Isaac said. “You shouldn’t be wandering around out here when it’s dark.”

“I’m not a child, Isaac. Fuck off.”

Isaac sighed, and I was tempted to roll my eyes.

“Go ahead back to the house, Isaac.” I turned just enough to show him the seriousness on my face. “I’ll make sure she doesn’t hurt herself.”

She was muttering things under her breath that I was pretty sure I didn’t want to hear, but I ignored her for the moment because Isaac stepped closer. “I can handle her.” His voice was low. “You don’t need to play superhero, Bradyn.”

I liked Isaac. I really did. He was a good guy, and he treated his parents well. Any man or woman would be lucky to have him.

Except Nyx.

She was here under false pretenses and had lied to his parents. That was the reason why. It had nothing to do with the fact that I still wanted her despite all that.

“I’m not playing hero,” I said. “Just trust me on this. It’ll be better if I deal with drunk Nyx.”

“All right, I’ll go.” He paused, his finger coming close to my face. “If you take advantage of her, I’ll cut your balls off and use them as Halloween decorations.”

“Thanks for that imagery,” I said dryly.

A moment later, the gravel crunched as Isaac walked back to his car. I waited until he drove away to speak to Nyx. The fact that she was still standing there, glowering at me, was yet more proof that she’d had too much to drink. If she’d been sober, she would’ve been either slamming the door in my face or cussing me out.

“Tomorrow morning, you’re going to feel pretty stupid for yelling at Isaac the way you did.” I shoved all ten fingers through my hair. “He’ll forgive you for it. The Huxleys are good people that way.”

“I wouldn’t have said any of it if he had just kissed me back.” Her tone was petulant.

“I think, tomorrow, you’ll be glad he didn’t.” My voice was tight. “You should really go sleep it off. Alone.”

She made a sound that I, belatedly, recognized as some sort of laugh. Not the real laugh I’d heard before. This one was filled with a lifetime of bitterness. I didn’t like it.

“It’s none of your damn business who’s in my bed. Just like it’s none of mine who’s in yours.”

“What?”

She reached out like she was going to shove my shoulder but missed, throwing her off balance. I reached out automatically to help her, but she smacked away my hands. Somehow, she managed to regain her balance, and she looked even more pissed than before. Repeating my question was probably a bad idea, but I did it anyway.

“What did you mean?”

She rolled her eyes. “I guess that answers the question if she fucked your brains out.”

My jaw dropped as I connected the dots. I didn't know how, but she'd seen Antoinette in my cabin.

Was that why she'd gotten drunk?

Did it matter?

The problem was, the answer to both of those questions was the same.

I didn't know.

Four

Nyx

I shouldn't have said that.

Shit.

I'd known kissing Isaac was a bad idea, but I hadn't realized it was going to send everything else down the crapper. Of course, Bradyn had to do what he'd been doing from the moment I first arrived in Savannah. He just showed the fuck up.

"When did you get back?" he asked, an intense expression on his face. "You were here earlier, weren't you?"

I shook my head, then regretted the movement as it nearly knocked me off balance. "Doesn't matter. Like I said, not my business."

I should've just gone straight inside when I got here. Ignored Isaac and just gone to bed.

"I'd like to know how you saw what you did, but I don't think that's the most important thing right now." Bradyn took a small step toward me. "Look, nothing happened."

"Right." I pointed at him as he became two people, then came back together into one. "Cuz a naked woman answering your door while you're in the shower doesn't scream 'just had sex.'"

"Fuck," he muttered. "No, Nyx. I didn't have sex with her."

I rolled my eyes. "I don't care."

"Yes," he said quietly. "You do."

Dammit.

"Her name is Antoinette Houston. She's my ex. Really ex."

I must've looked like I didn't believe him – I didn't – because he kept talking.

“Look, we started dating in college. I was a senior, she was a junior. We were serious.” He scratched at his cheek, an absent gesture that, for some reason, annoyed me. “A little over a year after she graduated, she and my dad started having an affair. It was nearly six months before I caught them.”

My eyes widened, my drunken brain still functioning well enough to remember what I'd found in my investigation. Something about Bradyn leaving his father's campaign and an affair Clancy Traylor'd supposedly had.

“She's the reason you left your father's campaign.”

His mouth tightened. “You've been doing your homework.”

“I've been doing my job, actually.”

Shit, I was losing some of my buzz. That was the last thing I wanted, especially around Bradyn. If I got sober, I'd be relieved that he hadn't slept with Antionette, and that would be a bad thing.

“Yeah, we'll need to talk about that job of yours, but not now. In the morning, after you've sobered up.”

I glared at him, even though collapsing on my bed right now sounded like a good idea. I didn't need him telling me what to do. I didn't need anyone for anything.

“Fuck you.”

He took a step toward me, and I barely stopped myself from backing away. “Is that a *fuck you and the horse you rode in on*, or is it a *I want to fuck you six ways from Sunday*?”

I swallowed hard and tried to remember that I was pissed at him. Except I couldn't really remember *why* I was supposed to be pissed at him. The naked woman thing wasn't what I'd thought, and what I'd assumed about him and his family might not have been what it'd looked like either.

How the hell was I supposed to think when he smelled so damn good?

He came close enough for me to feel the heat of him, so different from the heavy, humid warmth of an early October night in Georgia. His eyes met mine, and I couldn't look away. I was frozen in place, desperately wanting him to touch me, even though another part of me never wanted him this close to me again.

He raised his hand and pushed some hair back from my face, his fingertips practically singeing me. For two long seconds, I thought he'd kiss me, and I knew I'd let him. If he kissed me, I'd be lost. We'd end up in one of our cabins, tearing each other's clothes off. No matter how much my body wanted that to happen, my head insisted that it'd be the worst idea in the history of worst ideas.

"Which is it, little firebird? I think we both know which one is more fun." He bent his head down so that his mouth was next to my ear, his voice rumbling through my body and setting me on fire. "I could bend you right over that porch railing and have you screamin' my name in no time. Or you could ride me into oblivion, squeeze my prick in that tight cunt of yours until we're both cross-eyed and can't walk straight."

I let out a shaky breath. Fuck.

He straightened. "I think I can trust you to get into bed without any help. Good night, ma'am."

I stared at him, jaw hanging open, not really believing he would leave me here like this...until he disappeared into his cabin and shut the door behind him.

Motherfucking bastard.

Five

Bradyn

Congratulations, Bradyn, I thought as I entered my cabin and closed the door behind me. You've managed to completely let your dick take over.

That wasn't entirely true. If my cock'd had its way, it would've been buried deep inside Nyx already. That would've been bad for numerous reasons, not the least of which was because she was drunk.

After her friend's wedding, she'd been a little tipsy, but I hadn't doubted her ability to consent. Tonight though...I wasn't so sure. She'd been damn lucky Isaac had been there to bring her back. If she'd met a guy like that prick at the hotel bar the first night she arrived here, I wasn't sure things would've turned out the way they had.

I might not trust her anymore, but I wouldn't wish harm on her, especially not *that*. A man would have to be a special kind of bastard to think that way.

I walked over to the window and looked outside, careful not to move the curtains. I wanted to make sure she went into her cabin rather than wandering around in the dark, but I didn't want her to know I was checking up on her. She'd be even more furious at me, and that would be one more thing to deal with in the morning.

Fortunately, she was already on the porch. Even though I wasn't at an angle where I could see her actually go into her cabin, the fact that she didn't come back down off the porch made me think she was safely inside. At least with no other guests here right now, I didn't have to worry if she'd locked her door.

It was a good thing we hadn't ended up in a relationship. I would've wanted to throttle her for putting herself in danger the way she had. I knew she was a grown woman and all that, but it didn't stop me from worrying about something happening to her.

I wasn't one of those men who thought women 'asked for it' or that type of bullshit, but the world sucked. That meant that people needed to take precautions that wouldn't have been necessary if everyone just treated others decently.

My mom had always called those opinions my 'wide-eyed dreamer way of thinking.' My father hadn't been nearly that polite. Naïve had probably been the nicest thing he'd called me.

None of my family had ever understood how I could look for the positive in things but still understand how the real world worked. I wasn't some Pollyanna who thought life was rainbows and lemon drops, but I did think it was possible for people to be good to each other if they just tried. I believed in *could*, but not necessarily *would*.

I sighed and stepped away from the window. The last few years had been tough on that way of thinking, and I'd felt myself getting more and more jaded. All of this stuff with Nyx wasn't helping matters. I'd admired her for how she refused to let her past define her, and then I'd learned that everything she'd said might have been a lie.

And I hated myself for thinking it.

"Should've just stayed in bed." Adding a few choice curses, I went into the bathroom to wipe off my feet before crawling between my sheets.

I usually didn't have problems falling asleep, even on days where I hadn't been doing a lot of physical work. I was just one of those people who could close my eyes, decide I wanted to sleep, and a few minutes later, I was out.

Except that wasn't happening tonight. In fact, it hadn't been happening all week, not since Nyx had left my hotel room in New York. Every night was the same. I'd lay in bed with my eyes closed, and my mind would replay every moment I'd spent with her.

Sometimes, it was a highlight reel of all the best stuff, and other times it was her panic attacks and nightmare, then her telling me what had happened to her. Other times, it was just that last morning together, me overhearing her, the accusations we'd both made.

No matter what I did, until I finally managed to fall asleep, she was in my head.

Tonight was no different.

Well, a little different since my surprise visitor earlier had dredged up other memories and feelings that now mixed with all my confusion over Nyx.

From the time I'd been old enough to disagree with my family – for real reasons, not teenage nonsense – I'd had to deal with the conflict that came from loving people I didn't always like or agree with.

When I'd caught Antoinette with my father, I'd learned that I had a point where even love wasn't enough. Not romantic love, or familial love. I'd ended things with Antoinette before she'd even finished getting dressed. My confrontation with my father had taken longer, but it'd ended up with the same results.

I never wanted to see either of them again.

I was cordial to my mother and sister, but they'd both been furious with me for refusing to have anything to do with my father, even after the story had come out about the affair. I suspected they'd actually known about it before then, but I'd never asked them to choose between Dad and me.

I'd half-expected Mom to leave him once the affair had been made public knowledge, but it hadn't really surprised me that she hadn't. Still, we'd managed to stay friendly until I'd released my documentary on Deacon Miller. That had been the last straw, and I'd been completely disinherited. Mom and Ashley had fallen in line then too. Even last year's Christmas and birthday presents had been returned unopened.

I didn't know if I'd ever have a relationship with any of them ever again, but if they'd made the effort, I liked to think I'd at least give it a chance. Even with Dad.

Maybe.

Antoinette was a different story.

I hadn't believed my father's version of events where she'd pursued him until, in a moment of weakness, he'd given in. They'd been sleeping together for six months.

I also didn't believe either of Antoinette's stories. Not the one she'd told me about how they'd fallen in love and had tried to fight it, or the one she'd anonymously told the press about my father using his power to make her feel like she hadn't had a choice. What I knew of the both of them told me that they'd both pursued each other for their own personal gain, and it'd blown up in their faces.

None of this would've mattered at all if she hadn't sneaked into my home this afternoon.

Just thinking about it pissed me off again.

I liked to think of myself as a fairly laid-back person. I could get intense about things from time to time, but I wasn't a guy who flew off the handle at the drop of a hat.

Overusing idioms was a sure sign of how tired and frustrated I was.

I hadn't asked Antoinette why she'd been in my bed; I'd just told her to get out. She'd still been trying to talk when I'd thrown her clothes at her, telling her if she didn't get dressed, I'd throw her out naked. She hadn't believed me, but I'd been ready to do it. I was a gentleman, but even a gentleman had his limits.

The thing that bothered me now was that Antoinette's stunt had led to Nyx getting drunk and kissing Isaac. I wanted it to be because Nyx had put herself into a vulnerable position and then could've caused issues with the Huxleys, but that wasn't the reason I was gritting my teeth in the dark.

I didn't like that Nyx had thought I'd been with another woman so soon after she and I had argued. Hell, I still wasn't sure if I should think of it as a break-up or something else. What something, I didn't know. We'd never defined what we were, but we'd said we weren't going to fuck or flirt with anyone else while she and I were...well, whatever we'd been.

Even though she and I might not be that whatever anymore, until I knew for sure that something was over, I wouldn't act on anything. But just because

that was how I was didn't mean that was how Nyx was. She had kissed Isaac, after all.

Unless the reason she'd kissed him had been because she was jealous and hurt, thinking that I'd already been having sex with the fucking naked woman she'd managed to find in my fucking cabin.

I groaned and pressed the heels of my hands against my eyes hard enough to make sparks on the backs of my eyelids. I just wanted to sleep. No more thinking about how awful this week had been or how much I still wanted Nyx.

No more picturing how she looked underneath me. The weight of her breasts in my hands. No remembering how soft and heavy her hair was, the way it was just the right length for me to hold when I took her from behind.

I hadn't even been tempted by Antoinette's body, even though it was just as nice as it had been back when we were together. She didn't look any different, honestly, and a physical attraction to her wouldn't have been surprising.

But I hadn't been interested. Not just uninterested in having sex with her, but uninterested in even looking in her direction.

Maybe I was wired differently from a lot of guys, but I'd never been able to separate a woman's physical attractiveness from her character. I could find a woman hot even if her personality didn't appeal to me, but if the most beautiful woman in the world was cruel or manipulative or arrogant, I couldn't see past those things.

Why was Nyx different?

I didn't know the whole story of why Nyx had really come to Savannah, but she'd been hiding things. She'd used me like Antoinette had. Why had I been able to ignore my ex's body, but being anywhere near Nyx, no matter what she was wearing, made me want to touch her?

Not just touch her, but protect her. I didn't know how much of what she'd told me was actually the truth, but it didn't change the way I felt.

Was it that I didn't want to believe that someone could lie about something as horrible as their stepfather abusing them for two years? But I knew people did just that. I tended to believe that the majority were true, and all of those sorts of accusations should be investigated thoroughly.

Could it be that I simply *wanted* to believe something about her to be true? Would I excuse her deceit about why she was in Savannah if she'd been honest about the rest?

I tossed off the sheet and went into the bathroom. Maybe a shower would help me relax.

For a couple minutes, I thought it would work, but then she started creeping into my thoughts again. Except my thoughts decided to veer off from memories and into fantasy territory.

She stepped under the spray, her hair darkening to an almost mahogany shade. It stuck to her skin, the water molding it to shoulders and breasts. Her nipples were tight little nubs of pale pink, just begging for my mouth. My gaze followed a trickle of water between her breasts and down to her belly button. Her hand moved between her legs, fingers spreading herself open, moving over slick skin.

I wrapped my hand around my cock almost without thinking about it. The memory of what she looked like naked was always enough to get my blood flowing. I'd managed to avoid this all week, making my showers cold enough to stop any erection in no time at all. If I cut the hot water right now, I could do the same as I'd done before, but I'd never get to sleep that way. A cold shower would kill the possibility of sleep as quickly as it would my hard-on.

And, if I was being honest – if I couldn't be honest with myself while jacking off in the shower, when could I be honest? – I didn't want to stop. Maybe that made me a creep, but I felt like I'd been stretched too thin, frayed to the point of snapping.

“Do you want me to help with that?” Her voice was soft.

“No,” I said as I moved my hand up and down with leisurely strokes. “I want to watch you get yourself off.”

Her teeth sunk into her bottom lip, and her eyes fluttered closed. I didn't know where I wanted to look. Or, rather, there were too many places I wanted to look.

A finger and thumb pulling and rolling a nipple.

Two fingers making circles over her clit.

The muscles in her stomach tensing and releasing.

Flush stealing across her cheeks and chest.

Eyelids fluttering.

I closed my eyes, focusing on the image of Nyx in my mind. On what she looked like when she was flying toward climax. My hand moved faster, the pressure in me building, coiling.

Little whimpers fell from her mouth, the sweet sounds mixing with the noise of water, of the slip and slide of flesh against flesh. I loved hearing her let go like that, listening to her when she allowed herself to simply be in the moment.

“Come for me, firebird.” The command came out as a growl.

“Yes...” she gasped. “Yes. Yes. Yes!”

She wailed the last word, and...

I came with a guttural sound, my hand tightening as my body seized, the subtle pain boosting the pleasure coursing through me. I leaned forward, resting my forehead on the shower wall as I waited to come down.

Maybe I could finally get some sleep now.

Six

Nyx

I. Wanted. To. Die.

Not really, but it definitely felt like death would be a good idea right about now.

It wasn't the worst hangover I'd ever had, but it wasn't a walk in the park either. My stomach rolled and churned like I'd eaten something rotten. My head pounded, and my mouth felt like someone had shit cotton balls in it.

My tact was also not working well at the moment.

Someone knocked on the door, and I groaned. Considering they'd just tapped on it, I was guessing Isaac or Bradyn since they both knew that I'd been drinking last night.

Shit.

I needed to do serious damage control with Isaac – and the rest of the Huxleys if he'd told his parents about what'd happened.

“Nyx, wake up. It's ten-thirty in the morning.”

Bradyn.

“Just a minute.” I winced but managed to get out of bed and make it to the bathroom.

I must've showered last night because I didn't stink, which was a good thing, but one look in the mirror said I hadn't bothered to do anything with my hair after I'd gotten out. Not even brush it.

I looked like something out of a Tim Burton movie.

I managed to work out most of the tangles and get my hair into a braid that looked more or less neat.

I'd also forgotten to put on clothes after getting out of the shower last night, so I fixed that too. My t-shirt didn't match the shorts I grabbed, but I wasn't really worried about that.

"What do you want?" I snapped as I opened the door.

Bradyn held up a thermos and a basket. For a moment, I thought he was going to take me on a picnic again, and my stomach flipped in a way that had nothing to do with how much I'd had to drink last night.

"Hangover helper." His expression was flat. "We need to talk."

Talk. Right.

I walked back into the cabin and let him take care of the door behind me. He set things down on the table while I got a bottle of water and some aspirin. He might have something that would help too, but I could handle a hangover myself.

"That'll go perfect with this." He pushed the thermos toward me and motioned to the basket.

I took a long swallow of whatever was in the thermos, grimacing at the taste. It wasn't the worst thing I'd ever had to drink, but it wouldn't be winning any awards for taste either. Still, I took another drink. Kaimi's hangover cures had always tasted like sweaty feet, but they'd worked.

"I'll give you a few minutes, and then we should talk before the Huxleys get home from church. It'll make things easier."

"Easier?" I didn't like what he was implying, and if he told me to calm down, things would get ugly.

"I refuse to let you hurt them," he said, crossing his arms. "They don't need to know that you've been using them to get to me."

"Get to you?" I considered throwing whatever was in the thermos at him, but it was working on my headache already. "Why the hell would I want to *get to you*?"

"You tell me."

I glared at him. “I would tell you if I knew what the fuck you were talking about.”

“Stop with the games, Nyx, all right? I know my parents hired you.”

I stared at him. His parents? He thought his parents had hired me for some reason? I shook my head. Too much drama. This was another reason I didn’t date. Everything just got complicated when it went beyond simple fucking.

“If you had your head any farther up your ass, you’d be a medical miracle.” I rubbed my forehead. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Then tell me.” He spread his arms wide. “Tell me why you’re here and who hired you. If I’m wrong, you should be able to prove it.”

“Prove it?” My headache was back, but it had nothing to do with my drinking. “I can’t tell you about my case. My clients deserve their confidentiality.”

“That’s convenient.”

“Really? I’d say it’s fucking *inconvenient* that I can’t defend myself.” I uncurled my fingers and pressed my hand flat on the table. “Look, your parents didn’t hire me. No one hired me for them either.”

That was as honest as I could be without breaking the NDA I’d signed. I didn’t want to say that my case had nothing to do with him or his family since that wasn’t true anymore, but that was as far as I could go.

“Right.” That single word held a shitload of judgment and disbelief.

Fuck it.

“Did you tell Shadae or Brew?” I asked. “That you think your parents hired me? Did you tell them that?”

“No. Like I said, I’m not going to let you hurt them.”

I drained the last of what was in the thermos and set it next to the basket. I wanted to yell at him, tell him that he was being a jerk for assuming that I’d use the Huxleys, but I knew that’s what I’d done too. I’d learned the truth about his family history and used that to make a decision about who he was. I

sure as hell wouldn't have wanted him judging me based on the things my family had done.

I wasn't going to lecture him, though. This wasn't a relationship I was trying to fix so we could ride off into the sunset. I didn't need to debate or explain anything, even if I could have. The Douglasses had given me permission to share their case information with the Huxleys, but Bradyn wasn't a part of that. He wasn't a part of any of this.

I'd be the bigger person, though, and admit that I'd been wrong. No need to behave like him.

"Look, I need to apologize for how I behaved last night." The change of conversation seemed to throw him, and I took advantage of it. "Or, actually, I need to apologize for stuff before that too. I came back yesterday and went to your cabin to tell you I was sorry for jumping to conclusions about what you're doing here. That's when I saw the woman in—"

Bradyn opened his mouth to say something, but I held up my hand. I needed to get everything out.

Inhaling deeply, I continued. "Your ex, I mean. Then, by the time I actually saw you last night, I wasn't in an apologizing mood. So, I'm doing that now. I'm sorry I made assumptions about who you are and what you're doing."

I stood and took the thermos over to the sink. I rinsed it out, wondering if he was going to respond to what I'd said. When I finished, and he was still quiet, I figured that was answer enough.

"You can take the thermos back now. I'll have what's in the basket for lunch and take it up to the house myself later. No need for you to stick around." I went to the door and opened it so he couldn't misunderstand what I was saying. "I don't give a damn if you believe me or not. I have a job to do. And don't worry, I'll stay out of your way the rest of the time I'm here, and after that, it won't matter. I don't intend to ever come back here again."

An uncertain expression was on his face, but he didn't argue or even comment. Instead, he got up, took the thermos, and walked out without saying a word. I made a point of shutting the door normally just in case he was waiting to hear if I slammed it.

Leaning against the cool wood, I pushed down my disappointment. I didn't know what I'd been expecting from him, but that hadn't been it. If I'd had that sort of conversation with a sub, yeah, I wouldn't have been surprised if they just walked out without trying to explain or at least ask a few questions. It wasn't in most submissive's natures to try to fight for someone or something, especially not for a 'relationship' that was only physical.

Except I thought there were subs who would at least try to fight if they felt more about me. I suspected Rafael would. When I finally told him that we needed to go our separate ways, I didn't think he'd simply walk away without a word. He wouldn't do anything stupid, but I liked to think he wouldn't just leave.

I supposed that I'd made another assumption about Bradyn. I'd thought that because he wanted more than just fucking, he wouldn't simply walk away. I thought he'd meant what he said in the barn the day after I told him about what Art had done to me.

I don't just want to fuck you. I want to be with you beyond that.

I supposed I should have known that'd come with conditions. Rules about how I had to behave to fit into his world. I'd apologized, but I hadn't completely submitted to him and told him everything he wanted to know. If I couldn't give him what he wanted, what was the point of further conversation, right?

It didn't matter.

I had a job to do, and that was why I'd come back. I wasn't here to hurt the Huxleys. I was here to help them, and it only mattered that *they* believed me.

The first step in the right direction was something I would've needed to do, anyway. There was someone else I had to apologize to for my behavior last night. Hopefully, Isaac would be more gracious about it than Bradyn had been. Based on what I knew of Shadae and Brew's son, I thought he would be.

Hell, he and I could end up being friends by the time all this was over.

I wouldn't date him. After the crash and burn with Bradyn, I was giving up on having any sort of 'normal' relationship for good. I wouldn't put myself

through that. But a friend? Yeah, I could like having Isaac as a friend.

Seven

Nyx

I took a slow breath, and then another. My confrontation with Bradyn hadn't been fun, and I hadn't really *enjoyed* apologizing to Isaac – though he had been nicer than Bradyn – but neither of those conversations made me half as nervous as I was right now, standing at the back door to the house, waiting to talk to Shadae and Brew.

At least bringing back the picnic basket meant I had something in my hands during the walk, and that helped with some of the anxiety.

I knocked on the door and then opened it, as if nothing had changed from the last time I was here.

“Shadae?”

“There you are, sugar.” Shadae stepped into the kitchen with a basket of vegetables. I couldn't really tell what kind, but I had no doubt whatever she did with them would be delicious when she was done with it. “I was wonderin' when you'd be up and about.”

“Thank you for the food.” I put the basket on the counter I'd last seen it on. “And for the hangover drink.”

She winked at me. “Brew and I shut down a bar or two in our time.”

I laughed, but it was a weak sound. I was too anxious about telling them everything. Maybe it was because I still had Bradyn's remarks about my lying about why I was here. That wasn't what I'd done, not intentionally anyway. But would they believe me? Would they hate me the way Bradyn did?

“You look like you've got somethin' on your mind,” Shadae said as she set her basket of vegetables in the sink.

“I do. Is Brew around?”

“He’s on the front porch. We spend most nice Sunday afternoons out there.” She came over to me and put her hand on my arm. She looked more concerned than my own mother had ever been about me.

Well, maybe not *ever*. Up until she met Art, she’d been a decent mom. At least, I couldn’t remember her doing anything particularly awful. Most of my pre-Art memories with her in them had both of my parents. My sister had always been closer to our mother.

“Come on, sugar. Join us on the porch and unburden yourself.”

I let her lead me out front and put me in one of those sliding chairs that always looked like more fun than they actually were, and then she settled next to her husband. Neither of them rushed me, which I appreciated, but them not asking me what was going on meant I had to be the one to start this awkward conversation.

Well, I supposed if I didn’t have the guts to do this, I didn’t have what it took to have the difficult conversations private investigators needed to have.

“I told you that I came down here to Savannah to do some research for a client.” I forced my lips to move in what I hoped looked like a smile. “And normally, I can’t talk about what I do.”

“We know, sugar,” Shadae said. “We don’t expect you to tell us nothin’.”

“I know.” I managed a better smile this time. “But it turns out that the two of you are actually connected to my case.”

Both looked surprised enough that I knew Bradyn hadn’t told them anything about what he thought I was up to. Some of the tension in me loosened.

“I now have permission from my clients to share everything with you, but I’m going to start with the basics, and we can go from there.”

“All right.” Brew put his arm behind Shadae, and she leaned against him.

“Mid-September, I was approached by a lawyer whose firm is representing Carmine and Kathie Douglass.” I watched carefully but didn’t see even a flicker of recognition at the names, but that didn’t surprise me. Even after I gave them Kathie’s maiden name, I doubted they’d know who she was. Their

relation was distant. “They wanted me to research Kathie’s family. Her maiden name was Mae, but it has changed over the years.”

“Her people are from Savannah?” Shadae asked.

“Kathie’s grandfather, Gideon Boyd, moved from Savannah to New York City in 1932.”

Shadae laughed. “I don’t know how old you think we are, sugar, but we’re not *that* old.”

I laughed with her, and the sound eased the tension a little more. “No, I didn’t think you were. I won’t bore you with all the family tree details, but what it boils down to is,” I focused my attention on Brew, “in 1791, your ancestor, Solomon Huxley, married a woman named Deborah Adams.”

He let out a low whistle. “You got that far back, did you? Isaac’s been tryin’ to research both our families for a while now. Am I able to tell him about this?”

“Actually, he sort of knows.” I pressed my damp palms on my thighs. “The genealogy site he uses is the same one that Kathie and Carmine used. Isaac reached out to them when he saw a connection to Kathie Mae. The short version is that Kathie’s ancestor, Deborah Adams, had a child in 1789, prior to her marriage to Solomon Huxley. That daughter’s name was Rachel, and she ended up taking Solomon’s last name. So, even though she and your ancestor, Alexander, both shared the same last name, they were only half-siblings.”

“Not being married don’t mean Solomon wasn’t Rachel’s daddy,” Brew pointed out. “Specially back then.”

I nodded. “That’s one of the reasons I had to come down here, to do some digging in things I couldn’t find online.”

“That’s why you were goin’ down to the historical district, checkin’ out churches and the like,” Shadae said.

“It is.” Now that my initial nervousness had faded, I was starting to get that excitement that only came with figuring out a puzzle. “If you want the details, I can give them, but the main point is that the rumor back then was

that Rachel's father was the oldest son of the family who owned the Adams family.”

There was anger on both Brew's and Shadae's faces, but no surprise.

“Kathie's family is descended from Deborah's daughter, Rachel,” I continued. “I wasn't hired to prove that Rachel's father had been a white slave owner. That discovery just...well, it supported the claim I had been hired to research. The claim was that Zachariah and Ester Adams – Deborah's parents – had both been free when they married in 1771. Free, and they owned a fairly large farm. At the end of or shortly after the Revolutionary War, a white family stole everything from the Adams family, including their freedom, forcing them into slavery until after the Civil War freed them all.”

“Damn.” Brew breathed the word.

The fact that Shadae didn't scold him for cursing was proof of how shocked they were.

“I don't see what good knowing that's gonna do,” Shadae said finally. “Not like we can hold people accountable now for something their ancestors did. If we could, most of the whole country would be sent 'back where they came from.'”

“You're right,” I said. “And I'm not a lawyer, so I don't know all the legal terms and stuff, but I wasn't just sent here to confirm the theft. I was sent to find out which family did it, and if that family continues to have knowledge of what happened. If they are aware of what their ancestors did and have actively covered it up, it makes it an ongoing crime.”

“And you found it?” Brew asked. “Shadae and I both agreed we hadn't wanted to go digging.” He scratched at his chin. “I guess we didn't want to find out if people we know had owned our families.”

My expression must've given me away because Shadae spoke before I could make the words form in my mouth.

“You did.” The very tips of her fingers covered her parted lips. “You figured it out, and it's someone we know.”

I nodded. "I'm sorry, but yes. Now, I don't have to tell you, but it's going to come out anyway. My advice would be to hear it from me now so you're not surprised by it in the future."

"All right." Brew pulled Shadae even tighter to his side. "I'd rather hear it from you."

"Their name was Calvert." I paused, seeing something flicker in Shadae's eyes. She knew, but I said it anyway. "In 1898, the last Calvert from this specific line, Martha, married a man named Jeremiah Traylor."

Silence.

They simply stared at me. It was almost like they expected me to suddenly start laughing and say it was all a joke Bradyn and I had set up. I didn't know what to do, though. I couldn't tell them what the Traylor's knew or didn't know. I couldn't tell them that there would be legal justice for what had been taken.

And I couldn't tell them that this was a joke.

There was, however, one thing I could tell them for certain.

"I have no idea how things came together to put me here." My heart started pounding harder again. "I didn't know Kathie had relatives in this area or that they would be a part of this case. I didn't know who you were. I swear."

"We believe you, sugar." Shadae smiled at me. It didn't quite reach her eyes, but I didn't blame her.

It had been a shock for me to find out about Bradyn's family. I couldn't even imagine what it felt like for them. I didn't know when they'd first met him, but I had no doubt they knew who Clancy was...and probably knew Clancy's 'family story.'

"Does Bradyn know?" Brew asked. "All of it? Some? Any?"

"I'm not sure," I said honestly. "Whatever he does know didn't come from me, though. I haven't talked to him about my case."

Shadae and Brew exchanged one of those glances that some couples used to have a whole conversation without saying a single word.

“Are we allowed to talk to anyone about this?” she asked.

“That’s one of those things I don’t really know.” I lifted a shoulder. “But I have a video conference with the Douglasses and their attorney tomorrow morning. I’d like to have you join us. That way, if there are any questions I can’t answer, maybe they can.”

They exchanged another glance before Shadae nodded. “All right. Now, sugar, tell us all about that weddin’ you went to, and I wouldn’t say no to some pictures.”

Eight

Bradyn

I should've stayed at the ranch and made sure Nyx didn't take advantage of Shadae and Brew. Who knew what she'd been telling them while I was gone? This morning, she'd apologized for jumping to conclusions, but she hadn't answered any of my questions about what she was doing at the ranch.

If she wouldn't give me answers, then I'd go to the source.

My chest tightened as the driveway curved, and the house came into view. I had a love/hate relationship with this place.

On the one hand, it had been the center of every family gathering going back to before the Revolutionary War, but on the other hand, it was full of memories I'd rather forget. Like the one where I'd walked into my father's office and found my girlfriend riding him in his chair. The hurt from Antoinette's betrayal had all but disappeared, but my dad...

I sighed as I pulled up behind a blue Honda I assumed belonged to one of the employees. My parents either drove expensive sedans or electric hybrids, depending on who my dad was currying favor with that particular week. Well, technically, their drivers drove. They rode.

My older sister, Ashley, would've walked right in, certain of her welcome. She was four years older than me and had already been molded into the perfect Southern belle by the time I came around. She'd never argued with any of the rules we'd had growing up, never questioned anything or anyone.

Well, except me. Not only was I the younger brother, I also didn't like to do what other people told me to do without a good reason. That had made me fair game for her sharp tongue.

I'd thought her dating a man twelve years her senior when she was only eighteen would've moved her out of favor just a bit, but since Warren Lester worked for the law firm that handled the family business, he'd been welcomed with open arms. I'd heard later that, the day after they'd met for

the first time, Warren had gone to my dad and said that he wanted to ask Ashley out after she turned eighteen. That would've stroked Dad's ego to no end, being asked for permission to 'court' his daughter.

Ashley and Warren had gotten married shortly after she'd turned nineteen, and she'd continued with her parental approval streak by having three kids. Warren Jr., Betsy, and Clancy. Naming the last one after Dad had ensured that Ashley would always be the favorite. As if she'd needed anything to win that award.

Yes, she would have walked right in like she owned the place. And since I'd been disinherited, she sort of did. This house stayed in our family, which meant it originally would've been passed down to me, but because I didn't toe the line, it'd go to her now.

As I made my way to the door, I wondered what Ashley would do with it once it was hers. The sprawling three-story house still sat on the same six acres it had been built on when my first ancestor came to Savannah in the mid-1700s. The house itself, however, had changed quite a bit. My ancestors had added to it over the years until it had been transformed into a three-story house of nearly seven thousand square feet. The barn was the same size it had been before, but in the 1930s, it'd been converted into a garage.

All of it was very impressive, and I supposed that was what annoyed me the most. It seemed like my family always had to show how important they were, how long they'd been here. Our grand Traylor slash Calvert legacy was drilled into us from birth, and it wasn't just only because of Dad's political ambitions.

I was just a teenager when Papa and Mama Traylor died a year apart. Both of them had quizzed Ashley and me constantly about our heritage. I'd been able to answer their questions, but only Ashley had shared – or maybe mimicked – their pride.

I didn't recognize the young woman who opened the door after I knocked, and she didn't offer her name when I gave her mine. A new employee, but definitely one who knew her role.

I followed her into the sitting room, grateful to be out of the humidity while I waited to hear if my parents would grace me with their presence. While the

woman went to fetch my parents from wherever they were, I paced around the room. Nothing much had changed since the last time I'd been in here. It still made me as uncomfortable as hell, as if my presence could somehow ruin the aesthetic.

“Bradyn, this is a pleasant surprise.”

I turned when I heard my mother's voice. It'd been a couple years since I'd seen her last, at least in person anyway. Her hair was still the color of champagne and as perfectly done up as it would have been if she'd come straight from the beautician. I wondered if she was dyeing it yet. Her older sisters had all been mostly gray since their early fifties, and Mom was fifty-six now.

The number surprised me for some reason. It wasn't like I didn't know how old she was, but maybe not being around her had made time stand still in my head.

“Good afternoon.” I smiled, even though I could read the tension around her mouth and eyes.

She didn't want me here.

I crossed to her and kissed her cheek, anyway. I wasn't here to reconcile. In fact, I suspected that the conversation I wanted to have would end with me being thrown out of the house. When I hadn't fought back about the disinheritance, we'd had an uneasy truce where we all pretended that the other side didn't exist. At least, that's what I'd thought. Sending Nyx after me proved otherwise.

“Would you like something to drink?” Mom asked as she crossed over to the same high-backed chair she always sat in when she was in this room.

“No, thank you.” I went to the sofa and sat. I would've preferred to stay up and moving, but I wanted my parents to tell me the truth, and if I aggravated them from the beginning, we'd never get to the reason I was here.

“Millie, darlin', will you get a sweet tea for Jaylin and me?” Dad didn't bother to turn from where he stood in the doorway, simply expecting his command to be carried out.

I stood up again and held out my hand, determined to maintain my composure. I wouldn't give either of my parents the satisfaction of knowing anything about how I was feeling or thinking unless I chose to. Besides, if offering general courtesies would help me catch them off guard, so much the better.

We exchanged the usual pleasantries about health and weather until Millie brought in two glasses of sweet tea and left again. The moment she was out of sight, Dad crossed one leg over the other and gave me a smug smile.

"I'm surprised it took you this long to come crawlin' back."

Of course, that was what he'd think I was doing here. I let him keep going, though. He liked the sound of his own voice, and I'd learned young that if I kept quiet, he'd give me more information than if I asked outright.

"Everyone has their rebellions," he continued. "Well, except your sister, but we all know you and Ashley aren't anythin' alike. I suppose you got all the negative that was supposed to go into her too."

This wasn't the first time he'd tried baiting me by pointing out the ways I failed to live up to Ashley's standards. I hadn't fallen for it since I was a teenager, but he never stopped trying.

"Now, I can't give you back everythin' I gave her. That just wouldn't be fair. So, she'll keep the bulk of the estate, includin' the house, but I'm willing to reinstate your ability to withdraw from the general account. Plus, I'll leave a quarter of your previous inheritance to you again. That's all I can do, though. Your sister deserves a reward for never havin' been disloyal to this family."

Dad looked pleased with himself, but that wasn't going to last long.

"I'm not here about money," I said, keeping my tone even. "Or you putting me back in your will."

His smile froze, like he couldn't understand what I was saying, or he'd understood it but had no idea how to respond because he'd never imagined I'd turn down his offer of reinstatement. I was leaning toward the latter, and it made me wonder if he'd ever really understood me at all.

Either because she knew me better and wasn't surprised or because she was better at hiding what she was thinking, Mom recovered first.

“Why, son, if you're not here for that, then why are you here?”

There's a certain sugar-sweet tone that women in the South use for phrases like 'bless your heart' that lets anyone familiar with the culture know that they're only a minute away from being bitch-slapped either literally or figuratively, depending on the severity of the offense and the relationship to the person speaking.

As a kid, I'd gotten a hand across the face more times than I could count after hearing Mom say something in that tone. Not hard enough to leave a mark, but definitely enough to make my eyes water. Still, it didn't intimidate me the way it once had.

“I'm here to tell you that your ruse with Nyx Phoenix won't work.”

I'd spent the entire drive here trying to figure out the best way to word this conversation. I needed to make it a statement rather than a question since my father saw asking questions as a weakness. Better to pretend that you're certain of something even if you're not one hundred percent than to give someone a way to circumvent the answer. I didn't necessarily agree with his way of thinking, but one of the other things I'd learned growing up in this family was how to use a person's character traits to steer them in the direction I wanted.

“What is a 'Nyx Phoenix?’” Mom asked, frowning. Well, frowning as much as her Botox and other fillers would allow.

I suppressed a sigh. “All right, maybe you don't know her name, but how many other private investigators from New York have you hired to prevent me from making my film?”

My parents exchanged glances that looked puzzled, but I didn't buy it. Conversations like this with them weren't verbal brawls, beating each other bloody with words. They were chess matches. Moving forward, then back, sidewise, sacrificing pawns for the end goal.

“Why would we hire a private investigator from New York?” Mom asked.

“I asked myself that same question.” I shifted my attention from her to my father. “At first, I thought she must’ve lied about where she was from, but that would’ve been too elaborate a set-up, even for you. Now, I think you did it because I wouldn’t believe anyone from this area since you have your fingers in every proverbial pie.”

Dad folded his hands on his stomach. He was still an impressive six feet, four inches, but his once athletic build was now softer, giving him a bit of a paunch. He’d hurt his knee two years ago and exercising had been difficult ever since. He’d told reporters that he’d had an accident while playing basketball with his grandson. I suspected it’d been something more along the lines of trying to keep up with whichever twenty-something he’d been sleeping with at the time.

“That’s an interesting accusation,” he said. “Did this PI say she was workin’ for us?”

“No, but I’m sure you paid her good money to keep quiet.”

“If she didn’t name us, then how can you know that we hired her?” The question came from Mom this time.

“You aren’t denying it,” I pointed out.

Dad shrugged. “Let this be my official declaration then. Neither your mother nor I hired anyone to do anything to you.”

“You’re both mad that I’m making this film.”

“We’re...*unhappy* that you want to damage the names of so many prominent families in Savannah,” Mom corrected. “Many of whom are your friends.”

I didn’t point out that those people were *their* friends, not mine. That detail wasn’t important at the moment. “Too many families try to sweep the past under the rug, try to pretend that there aren’t any skeletons in the closet.”

Dad leaned forward, his blue eyes cold. “Listen here, young man. You can’t just go around spreadin’ rumors to get attention.”

I shook my head. They’d never really understood what I was doing or why. “I would never say that things are facts unless I have the proof to back it up.”

“It won’t matter,” Mom said. “We all know how fast things spread, whether they’re true or not. If people get wind of what you’re doing, it’ll be a disaster.”

“You need to let this go.” Dad gave me his best ‘I’m in charge’ tone.

“I already shelved a film because I didn’t want to hurt our family,” I reminded him. “And like I told you when you asked me to put aside my film on Deacon Miller, once was enough.”

A dark flush crept up his neck. “You ungrateful little bastard.”

“Careful.” I let the word hang in the air for a few seconds. “We don’t want a rumor going around that I’m illegitimate.”

His hands clenched into fists. “You will not go diggin’ around in our family’s past. Everythin’ worth seein’ is already out there.”

“I don’t know what you thought Nyx was going to do, but whatever it is, it won’t work.” I brought the conversation back around to the reason I was actually there. It didn’t matter what Dad said. He’d already disinherited me. What else could he do?

“You’re right that we don’t want you to make this film,” Mom said, “but we didn’t take any measures to stop you. Certainly not hiring some random woman from up North.”

“Why should I believe you?”

Dad smirked at me. “Because we don’t need to prevent you from releasin’ your film, just make it not worth your while to do it.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked warily.

“If you finish your movie and release it, the press will want to know our side of the story,” Mom explained, lifting her perfectly manicured hand to her chest in a show of fake surprise. “Of course, we’ll tell them that we told you what parts of the story were false, but you refused to change anything, claimin’ that you don’t need proof. That you can say whatever you want.”

If I didn’t know how well she could put on an ‘innocent’ act, I might’ve called her bluff, but what she was saying had the ring of truth to it.

“It’d be sad,” Dad took over, “tellin’ people that you were so upset about being disinherited that you’ve made up these lies about our family in an attempt to hurt us. Just like how you made a film on my political rival when I wouldn’t let you create a propaganda film for my campaign.”

“Bullshit.”

“Watch your mouth in this house, young man.” Mom pointed a finger at me. “Just because you don’t like somethin’ is no reason for foul language.”

“Your mother and I would be forced to sit down with the biggest news outlets, needin’ to set things straight. Instead of being the villains in your story, we’ll be the victims.” Dad looked pleased with himself. “Hiring a PI to come after you would give credence to your story that we were tryin’ to discredit you. So, whoever this Nyx is, look elsewhere for who holds her leash because it isn’t anyone in the family.”

Shit.

That made sense.

Shit.

Nyx

Brew and Shadae had loaned me their living room for the video conference, which I appreciated. They were going to be part of the call, but they could've insisted we bring in their own lawyer, do the call from his or her office.

I'd actually advised them to have legal counsel there, but they'd said that they wanted to hear what Min and the Douglasses had to say before they made any legal decisions. Since it wasn't like they were in trouble, I figured it wouldn't be an issue, but I'd still called Min to make sure. She and the Douglasses had been fine with it too.

"You need to sit down, sugar," Shadae said from her spot on the couch. "You're hoverin' around like a nervous butterfly, and I'm getting' dizzy just watchin' you."

"Um, yeah, okay." I turned in a circle, looking for anything out of place. Not that Shadae's house was ever anything but pristine.

"I mean it, sugar." She gave me one of those stern looks I'd seen her give Isaac and Bradyn. "Sit."

I settled on the couch on the other side of Brew. Since this was about his family, we'd agreed that he should sit in the middle. Well, Shadae and I had agreed. Brew hadn't been happy about it since he didn't like the idea of being the center of attention, but then Shadae had given him a cousin of the look she'd given me, and he'd shut right up.

My laptop dinged, indicating an incoming call. I answered the call, and three people appeared on the screen. It looked like Min was at the Douglass's house with them, which I thought was a strange choice for a lawyer, but what did I know? It wasn't like I'd gone to law school. For all I knew, the Douglasses had requested it for some reason or other.

"Good morning." I gave them my most professional smile. "Mr. and Mrs. Douglass, it's good to see you again. You too, Min."

She acknowledged me with a single nod. “Nyx.”

“Everyone, this is Brewster and Shadae Huxley.” I gestured to the couple.

“I’m Min Wu, and I represent Carmine and Kathie Douglass.”

The couples exchanged greetings, and then we all turned to Min to begin the conversation.

“Nyx shared with me, and I’ve since shared with my clients everything that she’s discovered, including the conversation she had with the two of you yesterday, Mr. and Mrs. Huxley.” She gestured toward the woman at her side. “Brewster, you and Kathie are distantly related, far enough back that trying to figure out exactly how far you’re removed would take someone better than me at genealogy.”

“The site our son used gave some sort of number of cousins or however that works.” Shadae waved a hand. “If you’re interested in that kind of thing.”

“Oh, uh, thank you.” Min looked startled. “I’ll look into that. That probably won’t be necessary until we’re actually filing a lawsuit.”

“What, exactly, are you thinkin’ of doin’ with that lawsuit?” Shadae asked.

I smothered a smile at the expression on Min’s face. Maybe I should have warned her about Shadae’s forceful personality, but I wasn’t sure how I could’ve done that. Shadae was a force of nature that needed to be experienced. A simple description wouldn’t have done her any justice.

Min looked at the Douglasses, who nodded.

“The ultimate goal is to get some financial compensation for what was taken from your ancestors.”

“You’re tellin’ me you’re gonna get the Traylor family to pay us ‘cuz their people – white people, mind you – took things from black folk way before we were anythin’ but property?” Shadae crossed her arms. “I didn’t go to no fancy law school, but I’d think if that was the sort of thing you lawyers could do, it’d be all over the news. Black people’d be all up in that.”

Kathie laughed. “I said almost the exact same thing when Min told me what she thought we could do.”

Shadae turned her focus from Min to Kathie. “Did she come to you, or did you find her?”

“A little of both,” Kathie answered. “We were at a birthday party for Carmine’s mother, and we started talking about the research I was doing. His brother-in-law is a law student and mentioned that we should talk to a lawyer. I didn’t think anything of it. I mean, you hear about things like ‘statute of limitations’ and how people feel about the idea of reparations...” She shook her head. “I didn’t think there was anything we could do but have an interesting story to tell people. Carmine had other ideas.”

He gave her a fond smile. “I’m the steady one in our relationship. Kathie needs all that enthusiasm to teach all those junior high students, but she can sometimes be...impulsive.”

She glared at him, but even I couldn’t deny how much love I saw between them. “What he means to say is that he likes to analyze everything to death while I prefer to actually *do* things. I mean, it took him two years to figure out what phone he wanted, and by then, it was obsolete, and he had to start all over again.”

Carmine rolled his eyes. “Anyway. Back to the point. I took a little longer to think about the ins and outs of the situation and decided that maybe talking to a lawyer would be a good thing. After some research, we found Min.”

“All right, then.” Shadae sounded satisfied. “Now that we know the name of the people who stole the land and made slaves of your ancestors, how does this work? I’m assumin’ there’s more Calvert and Traylor people than the couple people we’ve still got here in Savannah.”

“That is one of the things we have to decide,” Min said, inserting herself into the conversation again. “But first, I’d like to offer my services to you, Mr. Huxley. While your wife is welcome to be part of all the proceedings, just as Carmine is, you would technically be the one I would represent alongside Kathie as it’s your ancestors who had been directly wronged by the Calverts.”

Brew looked at Shadae, and they had one of those silent communication moments again.

He nodded and focused back on the screen. “I still have some questions before I can give you an answer.”

“All right,” Min said, setting her hands on her lap and straightening her spine. “Ask me anything, and I’ll do my best to answer, as long as my clients are still giving permission to me to share.”

“Go right ahead,” Kathie said. “You can tell them anything.”

“Thank you,” Brew said to her before turning back to Min. “How can you sue people hundreds of years after somethin’ bad was done. I don’t like the idea of me bein’ responsible for somethin’ my great-grandfather did. We all got bad apples somewhere in our family trees.”

He had a good point.

“You’re right,” Min said. “Even if we can prove what the Calvert family did to the Adams family, the actual people involved are long dead. Some attorneys might try for restitution anyway, but those cases never turn out well, even if the case is found in their favor. Bad press that turns into threats and vandalism. What makes your case different is that there is a possibility that one or more members of the Traylor family know about what happened and are covering it up in present time. That could make it an ongoing crime, which may make it possible to file a civil lawsuit. There’s a good chance they might offer to settle if we sign a non-disclosure agreement and promise to keep things quiet, especially with Clancy Traylor being involved in politics.”

“And if they don’t know anything?” Brew asked.

“We’ll have to see where things go from there.” Min glanced at me. “Nyx will be looking into what the Traylor’s know, how long they’ve known it, and what actions, if any, they’ve taken to keep it hidden.”

When Min and I had talked last night, she’d asked me to extend my investigation, and I’d accepted. I still wasn’t entirely sure why I’d said yes, especially since it was clear things between Bradyn and I wouldn’t get any better.

No, that wasn’t entirely true. One of the main reasons I’d agreed to stay a little longer was because I actually liked Shadae and Brew. They’d been good to me. Leaving them hanging because I’d fucked things up with a guy

would've made me as bad as Bradyn clearly thought I was.

“One of the first things we're going to do is prove the Mae-Traylor connection,” Min continued. Another thing she and I had talked about. “We plan to get a DNA sample from one of the Traylor and match it to Kathie. After that, we'll work toward who knew what.”

“I think I'd like to see what Nyx turns up then,” Brew said. “Before I make a decision.”

The conversation continued on, but my mind had shifted focus. I didn't know how I was going to get Traylor DNA. I didn't want to ask Bradyn, especially since I doubted he'd give me one without demanding an explanation. I didn't want the Huxleys to have to do it either, though. It wasn't their job. It was mine.

Well, I was the one who'd decided this was the job I wanted. That meant I had to do the shitty work as well as the stuff I liked.

Dammit.

Ten

Bradyn

All day yesterday I'd waited for something to happen. I'd been sure that when I returned from my parents' place that Shadae would find me for answers about why Nyx had left.

I'd prepared myself to give a vague but realistic answer, for having to explain why Nyx would've left without talking to them, or even flat-out lying about whatever excuse she'd given them. Except neither Shadae nor Brew had seemed to notice when I arrived home.

For hours, I'd had thoughts running through my head about all the possible ways Nyx could've messed up the Huxleys's lives. When I'd showed up at the big house for dinner, however, Nyx had been helping Shadae with the food as if nothing had happened. As if I hadn't told her to leave.

The weirdest part, though, was that they'd all stopped talking the moment I walked through the door. I'd heard their voices as I'd come up the steps but hadn't been able to make out any words. Then they'd stopped. Dead silence for several seconds before Brew had greeted me.

This morning at breakfast, the same thing happened. As soon as I'd set foot in the kitchen, whatever conversation they'd been having ceased. No one had looked at me either. Yeah, they'd looked in my direction, but it hadn't actually been *at* me. No eye contact at all.

If this kept up, I was going to get a complex. Clearly, there was something going on that no one wanted to tell me, which meant I would have to get to the bottom of it myself.

I needed to find out who Nyx Phoenix really was.

The first step would be to talk to the Huxleys alone. I'd tell them about the phone call I'd overheard, the argument Nyx and I'd had in New York, what'd happened between Nyx, Isaac, and myself, all of it. Hopefully, that would get them to realize that whatever information she was feeding them – probably

about me – wasn't the whole story.

And I'd also tell them the whole reason I was working for them. I couldn't expect them to believe me over Nyx if I was hiding things. Besides, nothing about what I was doing would negatively affect them. I wanted to show the truth about the most prominent families in Savannah, and when it came to knowing the real character of people in the spotlight, it usually wasn't their 'peers' who had the answers. The Huxleys had been around as long as some of the families I was focusing on – longer than a couple, actually – and could offer me a unique perspective I wouldn't be able to find elsewhere.

Once I realized that Nyx hadn't left, I hadn't expected to be able to talk to them at breakfast since Nyx also ate with us. My schedule was booked solid with lessons, so I'd asked if I could take them out for dinner at the Cotton Exchange. A 'thank you' for everything they'd done for me. I'd always intended to do something like that when I finally told them about my film. This clusterfuck with Nyx had just moved up the timetable.

When I went out to my first lesson, I was determined to put everything else out of my mind and concentrate on teaching my students. Unfortunately, that was easier said than done.

Nyx had gone back to her cabin after breakfast, and I'd assumed I'd see her getting a ride into the city, off to do whatever she did there. I was just glad it'd keep her from filling the Huxleys's heads with even more bullshit before I could talk to them.

At the end of my first lesson, however, I was walking back to the stable with Melodee and Starbright when I caught movement out of the corner of my eye. It was Nyx, walking back to the big house, a bag in hand. A rectangle sort of bag that looked like it probably held a laptop and some papers. Shit. She was up to something, and I had no idea what it was. No way to find out, either. Not without making a bigger mess of things.

Deserting my work and interrupting something I hadn't been invited to wouldn't do any good for anyone, which meant I stayed where I was. Even so, I couldn't stop myself from looking over at the house all morning, waiting for her to come out.

I really needed to get this damn woman out of my mind.

* * *

“Thank you for this, sugar,” Shadae said as she settled into her seat next to Brew. “How’d you know I’ve been cravin’ seafood all week?”

“You know you didn’t need to do this,” Brew said, even as he opened up the expansive menu. “You’ve become more than just an employee while you’ve been with us.”

We chatted about mundane things, and I waited until we’d gotten our meals and taken a few bites before bringing up the first reason we were here.

“I have to be honest. I can’t say my motives for dinner were completely selfless. I really did need a job when I came to the ranch, but I’ve also been working on a new film, and I think you both could be important contributors.”

“Us?” Shadae looked surprised. “What sort of things could Brew and I contribute to a movie?”

“For the past two years, I’ve been gathering information for a documentary about Savannah’s oldest and most prominent families, but I want to show the truth of who they are, not just the face they present to the public.”

Brew wiped his mouth and chin with his napkin. “Now, we might both come from people who’ve been here for a long time, but I don’t think we can be called one of the city’s most prominent families.”

“That’s actually kinda my point,” I said. “Your families have done more for this city than some of the other ones that get all the credit. And I think some – if not the majority – hide the...less savory bits of their past to make themselves look better, my own family included.”

Shadae sniffed. “I imagine your daddy doesn’t think too much of that.”

“He doesn’t,” I agreed. Without even knowing it, she’d given me the perfect in-road to talk about Nyx. My parents had denied having anything to do with the PI’s presence in Savannah, but no matter how much sense their denials

had made, I knew there were things Nyx was keeping from me.

“Speaking of your family,” Shadae and Brew exchanged a strange look, “Brew and I need to talk to you about somethin’.”

I considered asking if I could bring something up first, but manners had been one of the few good things my parents had drilled into me as a child. I disagreed with them on a lot, including when and where to abandon social niceties, but this is one time I would’ve agreed with them that interrupting would’ve been unnecessarily rude.

“Nyx came to us yesterday to talk to us about the reason she was in Savannah,” Shadae began.

Now, I was glad I’d waited. With them taking the initiative, I’d be able to learn what she’d told them without coming across like I was making baseless accusations. There was one thing I wanted to know first, though.

“I thought she couldn’t talk about her case.”

“She got permission from her clients,” Brew said. He glanced at Shadae. “Turns out, we’re related. Her clients and me.”

I frowned. That wasn’t the direction I saw things going.

Shadae picked the conversation up. “We can’t give you all the details ‘cuz it’s not all our story to tell. But we told the Douglasses – that’d be the clients – that we had to tell you at least part of it. You’re a good man, Bradyn, and it wouldn’t be right, springin’ this on you or you hearin’ it from someone else.”

So, Nyx *had* brought up my family. I hadn’t been completely off base about the meaning behind that phone conversation I’d heard half of in New York. Except neither Shadae nor Brew were talking about my film.

“You said you know your family history isn’t exactly what it claims,” she said. “Well, there might be some noise comin’ up about some of those lines. The Douglasses got a lawyer. We talked to her too, but we didn’t give her an answer about whether we want to be part of this or not ‘cuz we don’t rightly know. We need more than a day to think on it.”

“So, she didn’t tell you what she thinks my family did?”

Brew and Shadae exchanged another one of those looks.

“We know a few things, but—”

“You can’t tell me,” I finished Shadae’s sentence. “You do know I’d never tell my parents anything, even if they were still speaking to me.”

“We know, sugar,” Shadae said. “It’s not that we don’t trust you. If it was just us, we’d tell you everythin’, but we have to think of the Douglasses.”

They were right. I couldn’t expect them to share other people’s secrets. And it wasn’t like the Huxleys were my family. Not that I expected my family to keep me updated when whatever this went public. I couldn’t hold that against Shadae and Brew. They’d always treated me as more than an employee. Expecting anything more was unfair of me. I just hated feeling like I was the only one out of the loop.

Especially since being out of the loop apparently made me jump to conclusions.

“I understand.” I forced a smile that I hoped looked better than it felt. “If there’s anything I can do, just let me know. I don’t have much research done specifically on my family yet, but anything I can get for you or for the Douglasses, say the word and it’s yours.”

I felt like I was completely overplaying things, but I didn’t really know what else to say. I’d come here thinking that I’d have to ease into the idea of Nyx not being who she said she was and using them to get to me. Then they’d completely flipped everything on its head, and I felt like a complete ass.

“Let’s just see how things go,” Brew said. “Now, how about we get to the business of eatin’ and leave the jawin’ for a time when I ain’t so hungry.”

I reached for my fork. “I whole-heartedly agree.”

I was going to need time to think over everything I’d learned and decide where to go from there. I still wanted to know more about Nyx, but now, I needed to take into consideration what was going on with the Huxleys and how my investigation might affect them and whatever might happen between this kind couple and my parents.

I also owed Nyx an apology. I supposed there could've been ways for her to deceive Shadae and Brew about who her clients really were, but there was too much evidence that she really hadn't been here for me.

I was more than a complete ass. I was the biggest kind of asshole, and I wouldn't blame Nyx if she never wanted to speak to me again.

At least my steak was good.

Eleven

Nyx

I'd half-expected Bradyn to barge into my cabin and tell me to get out, especially after the Huxleys went to dinner with him. Actually, I thought they'd all come straight here after he convinced them that I'd come to the ranch knowing who they were and what I wanted from them. Just because they'd met Min and the Douglasses didn't mean they had to believe that I hadn't been intentionally dishonest when I first arrived.

When no one came, I kept working. I'd stay out of Bradyn's way, and he'd stay out of mine. I'd finish what I was doing for the case and then go home. This would all just become my first big case, the jumping-off point for a great career.

And maybe one day I'd be able to think of this case without thinking about Bradyn.

I sighed and closed my eyes.

I was grateful that this case gave me the opportunity to make a real difference in people's lives. I never took cases where I thought I'd be hurting someone who either didn't deserve it or who had asked me to discover something potentially painful. Finding a cheating spouse or biological parents made up a big chunk of PI time.

I appreciated the importance of doing those things, but this case had the potential to be huge on a national scale if it got out. I didn't want publicity – though it wouldn't exactly hurt my reputation to be able to count on this as a good reference – but I liked the idea of helping right some of history's wrongs.

No one could go back in time and prevent what'd happened to the millions of people who'd been wronged, and the passage of time made it virtually impossible to hold any specific people responsible. If Min could build a case that proved the Traylor not only knew about what their ancestors had done,

but had been continuing to cover it up to prevent anyone else from finding out, it'd be a big deal.

Which meant I needed to make sure everything I had was checked and double-checked. Every piece of information was recorded clearly so that Min could put together all the relevant information.

What I'd been doing since I'd left the Huxleys's house yesterday had been researching the Traylor family, but not focusing on their past. I'd already connected the Calverts to the Huxleys and the Douglasses. Now, I needed to see if I could find any proof that they'd been covering things up.

The problem was, I didn't exactly know what I was looking for. Finding biological parents meant census records, birth certificates, hospital records, that sort of thing. Hospital records were tricky when it came to legalities, but the others were available to anyone if they knew where to look.

While I'd had a different goal looking into Carmine's background, it'd been the same type of research needed. A DNA test would tie things up for Kathie once I figured out the best way to get a sample from one of the Traylor.

What I was looking for now wouldn't be that simple. I had to prove that current members of the Traylor family knew what their ancestors had done and were actively working to keep it a secret. If all they were doing was not talking about what they knew, it'd be impossible to prove, and I wasn't even sure if silence could be considered a cover-up, anyway.

Maybe they could be held accountable for not offering the information, but I wasn't a lawyer, so I didn't know. I needed to find something I could give Min as physical proof, something she could use in court, if it came to that.

I didn't want to think about what it would do to Bradyn if this came out in a big public way. I had a feeling the Huxleys wouldn't let him be surprised by it, though. I didn't think it'd be a good idea to tell him what was going on, but that wasn't my decision to make. Either way, it wouldn't be pleasant.

But that wasn't my business. He wasn't my business, not anymore. Not ever. I had a job to do.

Dewey Cardinal, the PI I'd trained under, had said to follow the money when it came to relationship cases, so if it'd been a cheating spouse, I'd be going

through bank account info and phone records that the person who hired me could get or at least give me permission to get. If it was a divorce case where one spouse wanted proof of infidelity or criminal behavior or that sort of thing, I'd look for hotel charges, money being transferred to offshore accounts or in another person's name, life insurance policy changes. I'd follow them, see who they met with and talked to, what types of appointments they'd have, like if they'd been preparing for a divorce by speaking to a lawyer...

Yahtzee.

The Traylor's might have had a shit ton of character flaws – some big ones if they were holding onto this secret – but they weren't stupid. They'd created a huge legacy without this ever getting out. Successful politicians and businessmen didn't stay successful by being dumb. Even if their IQs weren't that high, they were smart enough to hire the right people. If I was going to try to hide something that could potentially destroy everything that generations of my family had built, I'd want to know as much about all the different consequences as I could.

Which meant I'd need to speak to a lawyer.

Conversations between a lawyer and their client were privileged, and I doubted the Traylor's would hire someone who'd easily break that confidence, but it was a place to start. A family like theirs wouldn't just want any lawyer, especially not for something this delicate, which meant they probably had the same lawyer or, at least, the same firm, for as many generations back as possible.

That particular lawyer and/or firm would have almost as much stake in things as the Traylor's if they had a history of being retained by that family. Losing them would hurt their own bottom line, and that was the last thing any smart lawyer would do.

All right, maybe not *any* lawyer, but I'd yet to meet one who was a decent person.

I pushed aside that thought before it could go any further.

I just needed to figure out how to find out who their lawyer was. If I'd still been on speaking terms with Bradyn, I might've asked him. I would've lied about why, but I could've gotten the information. That wasn't possible now, which meant I'd need to get a little more creative.

Stretching my arms over my head, I stood up. My spine and other joints popped, and my muscles groaned. I'd been sitting in the same position for too long. I glanced at the clock and was surprised to see that it was after noon. I'd completely lost track of time.

My stomach growled, like it'd suddenly remembered that I'd barely had breakfast and had skipped lunch. Making myself something to eat would give my brain time to work while my body was busy. I'd solved more than one case while cleaning or cooking or exercising, that sort of thing.

I'd taken two bites of my grilled cheese sandwich when it hit me.

Probate.

I didn't know how long wills had been around, but I figured it had to be ever since there were lawyers. Whenever it'd started didn't matter. What mattered was that most people – especially most rich people – had lawyers draw up wills for their estates. I didn't know all the lingo or the process, but what I did know was that probate records could tell me a lot.

I'd used it as a source before. Two years ago, I'd been hired to find the birth father of a co-worker's girlfriend. I'd ended up using probate records to track him down. I hadn't thought of it with this investigation, though. After all, I was going so far back in time that the Douglass family hadn't *had* property. They'd *been* property.

The historian I'd contacted to help with my research had found that Camilla Lake, ancestor to Kathie Mae, had been listed as an employee of the Calvert family in an old newspaper article he'd sent me the picture of. I hadn't looked past that because I'd already had the rest of the Mae family tree from the birth and marriage records I'd found in other ways.

I couldn't believe I'd missed the most obvious path to the information I needed. If I could find probate documentation that listed the Adams family as property, passed from one generation to the next, it'd help Min's case.

It might also get me the information I needed about the Traylors family's knowledge of it. I had the names of Clancy Traylor's parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents, which meant I could get more names of people, of items...and the name of the law firm or lawyer who'd handled the estate.

I hurried back to my laptop and immediately started searching probate records in Savannah, Georgia, for Verne Traylor, Clancy's father. I'd found his obituary from 2016, when I'd worked on the original family tree, and gotten other names and dates from that. Since only a few years had passed since then, the chances were that the same lawyer who'd handled Verne's estate would still be the Traylors's attorney for that sort of stuff.

It didn't take long for me to find it, but when I did, it was as if all the air in the cabin had been sucked out, leaving me suffocating, vision blurring, darkening, until the world shifted.

The smells.

Tobacco smoke.

Lysol.

Irish Spring.

I gagged. Coughed. Choked. Couldn't breathe.

Couldn't breathe.

The world shifted.

"Please, don't." My voice was thin, weak. I wanted to shout at him, but he said I had to be quiet.

"We've talked about this, darlin'." His hands were on me, bunching up my nightgown.

I tried to wear pajama bottoms two weeks ago, but he got mad and said little girls wore nightgowns. I hadn't seen those PJs since. I think he threw them away, and Mom got mad when I asked for more. She said ladies wore nightgowns. When I asked what she wore, she told me to mind my own business.

“Give me your hand.”

I shook my head, stuffing my fists behind my back. I was gonna be thirteen in two months. A teenager. Almost a grown-up.

“Delia. Give me your hand.”

I made a sound I didn’t like, but he smiled.

I didn’t like his smile. It just made my stomach hurt more.

He grabbed my wrist and pulled my hand to him. I closed my eyes, but he told me to open them. He didn’t like it when I didn’t look at him. Sometimes, he made it hurt more if I tried to look away.

“I know you’re gonna be a teenager soon, but you’re always gonna be my little girl, Delia.”

I pressed my lips together, but I wanted to say I wasn’t his little girl. I didn’t care what a piece of paper said. He wasn’t my dad. My dad had been a good person. Art wasn’t a good person.

“Are you gettin’ attitude, darlin’?”

I shook my head. I felt like I was gonna throw up now, and if I did, it’d just make things worse.

“I think you need a little remindin’ of how good girls behave.” His grip on my wrist hurt now. “Good girls are what?”

“Quiet. Polite,” I recited the list automatically. “Smiling. Agreeable.”

He lifted my hand and kissed it. I wanted to pull away, to tell him to stop, but I couldn’t. I must not have hidden my thought good, though, because he gave me a mean look.

“You aren’t thinkin’ of doin’ somethin’ bad, are you, darlin’? Like maybe tellin’ someone about our secret?”

I shook my head, new fear spiking through me. “No. No. I won’t tell anyone.”

“That’s good. Why?”

I knew the answer to this one too. “‘Cuz it’ll make Mom mad at me because I’m supposed to obey you like you’re my father.”

“Because I am your father,” he corrected.

I never liked to say that. I didn’t know a lot, but I was old enough to know that fathers didn’t make their daughters do stuff like this. Not good dads.

“Your mom will think you’re lyin’ too, you know.” He put my hand back on his lap. “No one would believe you. And then you’d get in more trouble for lyin’. You know why?”

“Because you’re a lawyer,” I said automatically. “You can make them put me in jail, and I’ll never see Mom or Dara again.”

“Not just me,” he said. “My whole family is lawyers. We’re important people, and you should feel special I chose you.”

I didn’t feel special. I felt dirty and sad and angry. It was worse when he was hurting me, but it never went away completely.

“Now, I think you owe me an apology.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, darlin’. I want a special apology.”

I couldn’t stop myself from whimpering. He’d talked about something really bad – something special – he wanted to do to me, but I’d told him I’d be extra good if he didn’t do it. I didn’t really understand what would happen, but it couldn’t be good if it made him smile that much.

He told me what he was going to do, and it was worse than I thought, and I couldn’t stop from crying, begging him not to make me do it. That just made him mad and tell me I was being a brat. A brat was worse than a bad girl. That meant he had to punish me.

The world shifted.

I screamed.

And screamed.

I couldn't breathe.

My pillow was suffocating me.

No one could hear me.

I was dying.

I was dying, and no one cared.

Screaming.

Dying.

Screaming.

Dying.

The world shifted.

I was on the floor, huddled in the fetal position, my hands over my mouth. My throat hurt, and I thought I might've been screaming for real. My body shook, and I wrapped my arms around my knees and pulled them tighter against my chest. It'd been so long since that night, but it felt like it'd just happened yesterday. I could still feel him...

"No..." I moaned the word. I wanted to close my eyes, but I knew if I did, I'd see him again.

My chest was tight, my heart painfully pounding against my ribs like it was going to come right out of my chest. Everything hurt. Logically, I knew it was me remembering the pain from that night, remembering how I'd had to tell Mom I was sick the next morning because I'd been in too much pain to go to school.

The memory hung in the back of my mind, threatening to overtake me again, to make me relive the entire night. Knowing it was still there only spiked my panic. I could taste it coating the back of my tongue.

I was going to throw up.

The thought of having to either clean up or explain a mess in my cabin was enough to get me to my feet. I staggered, my legs wanting to buckle. I caught

myself before I fell, but I wasn't going to sit down. I needed out. I couldn't stay here, not with those words still on my laptop. I couldn't see them again. I'd have to at some point, but not right now.

Check & Sons.

The law firm that Bradyn's family used was Check & Sons.

The firm Art's family ran. The firm where he'd gotten his start before moving to Rochester.

The firm that had been responsible for trying to have me tried as an adult and put into an adult prison as a thirteen-year-old.

The world started to go gray around the edges, and I pushed it back. I needed air.

I pushed open the door, breathing in the thick, humid Georgian air. It should've made things worse, but it didn't. The tightness in my chest had nothing to do with what I was breathing.

I closed the door behind me and started toward the barn. I didn't even realize I hadn't put on shoes until I was halfway there, and by then, I refused to go back. I knew what I needed to do to get through this. The only thing I could do. The only person who could make me forget, even for just a little while.

I needed Bradyn.

Twelve

Bradyn

When I was done with Starbright, I'd go see Nyx and apologize. I might even grovel. I couldn't believe I'd fucked up this badly. I wanted to justify it, say that I'd had a right to be suspicious because she really had lied about why she was here.

Except she hadn't. Not really. She'd said from moment one that she had to keep her client's confidence. And as soon as she'd found out about the Huxleys being involved, she'd gone to her client for permission to tell them everything.

The worst part of all of this was that I'd known how hard it was for her to trust people, especially men, and she'd put her faith in me only to have me let her down in an awful way. I doubted she'd even accept my apology, but I had to try. At the very least, she deserved to hear me say that I'd been wrong.

I put Starbright in her stall and then used the hose to wash some of the grime off my hands and face. Maybe taking a shower before going to see Nyx was the best way to go. Or maybe I was trying to come up with excuses to put off seeing her because I knew she probably hated me right now.

I was still trying to figure out what to do when I heard footsteps coming toward me. I opened my mouth as I turned, ready to tell Melodee that I wasn't interested in her increasingly vulgar propositions...then stopped with my mouth hanging open when Nyx appeared.

My surprise lasted only as long as it took me to register her body language. Her face was pale except two flushed spots high on her cheeks. Her mouth was a flat line, and her eyes were wide. The expression in them was one I recognized.

Shit.

She'd either just had a flashback, or one was coming on, and she was trying to fight it.

Concern overpowered everything else I was feeling, and I moved toward her. She crashed into me, and my arms went around her automatically. Her hands locked behind my neck as she pulled me down to meet her. I barely processed her intention before her lips were on mine.

I had a brief moment where all I wanted to do was follow her lead and forget about the things I needed to say, but my conscience refused to let me enjoy the kiss for more than a few seconds before it reminded me that I needed to stop being an asshole.

I held onto her shoulders and took a step back, trying not to compare this to the other night when I'd caught her kissing Isaac, and he backed away because she'd had too much to drink. At least I could say with fair certainty that she was sober. She tasted like coffee, not alcohol.

"Nyx, what are you doing?" I kept my voice as gentle as I could manage.

"Please." She grabbed the front of my shirt. "I need you."

My eyes met hers, and I could see the same desperation I felt in her hands. Her body practically vibrated with it. Something had triggered her, and it'd been bad enough for her to come to me despite the things I'd said to her.

I put a hand on the side of her face, my thumb brushing back and forth across her cheek, skin soft against mine. A jolt of desire cut through my worry, and I pushed it back. I would take care of her however she needed, my own desires be damned. I was tempted to apologize before asking what she wanted of me, but if she was willing to look past my behavior because I could give her what she needed right now, I wouldn't put my own issues on her.

She came first, and then we'd talk.

"Tell me, firebird." I touched my thumb to the corner of her mouth. "You're in control."

She shook her head, her fingers tightening on my shirt. She leaned into me, shoulders shaking. "I-I can't think. Too much...I just...*need*..."

I went still, giving myself a few seconds to decide how I should ask the question. It was a delicate dance and one I'd never had to deal with before. Vanilla stuff had always been the usual give-and-take between equal partners,

but I'd never been submissive in BDSM until her.

I didn't want to say anything that might make her think I was pushing her into something she didn't want, but I also didn't want to assume that she wanted me to take charge and care for her the way I would a sub...no matter how much I wanted to do exactly that.

"Do you want me to take charge?" My voice was steady, but my heart had started pounding. The previous times we'd had sex had been amazing, and it hadn't cost me anything to submit to her, but I'd be lying if I said I hadn't ever thought about what it'd be like to be the Dominant one with her.

I'd never ask for me, though. Not after learning what she'd been through. I wasn't that much of a bastard.

"I'm just trying to figure out what you need." I brushed the back of my knuckles across her cheek. "Talk to me. Do you want me to take charge?"

She hesitated before offering a slow nod. "Please."

I kissed the top of her head. "I'll take care of you."

Neither of us talked as I led her to my cabin. As much as I wanted her, that wasn't my priority. Some people saw being Dominant as controlling and pushing and bossing, but good Doms knew when to push and when to hold back, when to be tough and when to care. The right ways to be tough or caring.

I sat her on the couch. "I'm going to get you something to drink."

When I took a step away, she grabbed my wrist. "Don't go."

I crouched down in front of her. "Listen, little firebird, I'm going to get you some water, and I want you to drink it, all right?"

She nodded and let go of my wrist. I hated the walk to the kitchen, even though I knew water would do her some good. I grabbed a bottle from my fridge and took it over to her. I went back to my knees in front of her to put us on the same level.

"Drink."

She did, taking half the bottle in a single go before handing it back to me. Some color had returned to her cheeks, and her eyes had lost some of that haunted look. Not enough, though. I hated seeing her like this.

I reached out slowly, giving her the chance to tell me to stop. She didn't. My fingers traced down her cheek and then across her jaw until I cupped her chin. Heat grew in her eyes as I ran my thumb along her bottom lip.

“You remember your safe words?”

She nodded.

“Do you still want me to make you forget?”

She nodded again.

I smiled at her. “Then your wish is my command.”

As our mouths came together, my hand moved to curve over the back of her head. She made a soft sound and leaned into me. Her tongue pushed against my lips, and I tugged on her hair, a quick little reprimand, both to remind her that I was in control and to judge how well she'd listen. For a brief second, I thought she'd pull away from me, but instead, she seemed to relax, to respond rather than push.

It was my turn now, and I deepened the kiss. My free hand slid from her knee to her thigh, teasing under the hem of her shorts. My fingers moved back and forth across the soft skin, featherlight touches that made the muscles under my fingers jump and twitch. Her knees parted, making room for me to move closer.

The hand in her hair slid down her spine and then under the back of her shirt to move up again. She shivered, and her teeth scraped my bottom lip. I growled and bit into that soft flesh, hard enough to make her gasp. The time for gentle had passed, and I plundered her mouth until we were both out of air and had to stop. Even then, I didn't let her go, just moved my lips down her jaw and throat, sucking and biting until her fair skin was marked.

A surge of possessive satisfaction went through me. She was mine, even if only for right now. I frowned. I didn't like thinking that this would be it, but I'd messed up with her, and I didn't know if I could fix it. Hell, I didn't even

know if things would've gone anywhere with us if we hadn't argued. Still, I'd try. She'd put herself out there and had been stung. It was my turn to risk being hurt.

But not at this exact moment. I had other work to do here and now.

I slid my hand around her ribcage, and she caught her breath, making me smile. She was ticklish. I didn't explore that more, but I did file it away for future consideration. Her skin was silk under my palm as I explored every inch of her body.

It was the middle of the afternoon, and I had another lesson before supper, but I wasn't going to rush, even if it got me in trouble. Nyx needed more than just a quickie, and I had a feeling the Huxleys would understand that, even if they didn't understand the exact nature of what Nyx needed.

I leaned back on my heels and pulled her toward me. If we hadn't both still been wearing clothes, I could have slipped inside her right then. My stomach clenched at the idea of skin-to-skin contact. I'd always been careful when it came to sex, even more so after I caught my dad and Antoinette together. I honestly wasn't sure I'd ever want to go without protection, no matter how serious things got between myself and my partner. But the idea of taking Nyx bare made my dick ache.

Fuck. What was this woman doing to me?

She rocked against me, the zipper from my jeans pressing painfully into my cock. Not enough to turn me off, but it gave me the edge I needed to keep from rushing. I put one hand on the small of her back, the other on her hip.

"Lean back," I ordered. "I want to see you come like this."

A momentary hesitation and then she did as she was told, trusting me to keep her from falling. Her face was flushed, pupils wide enough that the brilliant green of her irises was reduced to a thin ring.

"Hold on to my arms."

She grabbed my forearms, nails scratching hard enough to make my cock twitch.

Fuck. If I wasn't careful, I was going to come in my pants like some horny teenager.

"You can close your eyes if you want." I pushed up against her, and she gasped. "Whatever you need to let go and let me take care of you."

I rolled my hips, and at the same time, pulled her toward me. The moan she let out told me everything I needed to know. I repeated the movement once, then twice.

Her head tipped back, eyes closed, lips parted. My own pain and pleasure fell into the background as I focused everything on making her come. Her body moved with mine, guided by my hands, and her nails bit into my skin. She let out a little cry, her muscles tightening, and I jerked her hard against my cock, letting out a hiss of pain as the metal teeth of my zipper pressed through the cotton of my underwear into sensitive flesh.

"Bradyn..."

Her whimpering my name as she came almost undid me. I gritted my teeth and pulled her up to me, wrapping my arms around her to hold her while the aftershocks of her climax washed over and through her.

I took out her braid and combed my fingers through the soft waves before massaging the back of her neck. When her trembling stopped, I kissed her temple and asked a question.

"More?"

She pressed her face to the place where my neck and shoulder met, her breath hot against my already overheated skin. "Yes, please."

* * *

I held her hips as she came – again – my mouth still pressed against her, my tongue moving across her clit in light strokes that drew out her pleasure until she begged me for a reprieve. Giving her one last, long lick, I finally raised

my head, unable to stop a smile that I knew was smug.

I propped myself up on my elbows and let myself have a minute to enjoy the visual of Nyx's naked body. When she was aroused, her chest flushed and her light pink nipples became tight and hard. The way her breasts moved as her breathing began to slow was enticing enough alone. I'd marked those too. There was also a matching bruise-like mark on the inside of her thighs.

"Fuck." Her voice sounded almost rough, probably because she'd been screaming my name not too long ago.

I really hoped none of the Huxleys had been outside.

I climbed off the bed and bent down to brush my lips over hers. I started to turn away, but she reached up and grabbed my wrist.

"It's all right." I took her hand and raised it to my mouth for a kiss. "I'll be right back."

"Promise?"

"I promise." I leaned over her again, but this kiss lingered. "I need a condom." I took two steps toward my dresser and then looked back at her. "Unless you want us to be done..."

She shook her head. "I want more."

Her eyes no longer had that haunted look, but there were still shadows.

Giving her a smile that I hoped would chase some of that darkness away, I winked at her. "Your wish is my command, firebird."

"You do know that's a car, right?"

I picked up a condom from the top drawer, and on a whim, grabbed a length of rope too. As I turned back to her, a question popped out. "Are you giving me attitude?"

Shit. I hoped that wasn't something her bastard abuser had asked her. I hadn't even thought before I'd said it. I'd just been in Dom mode. Then she shivered, heat flooding her eyes.

Fuck.

I hadn't thought it was possible for me to get harder.

"I'm going to punish you for that." I paused, waiting to hear her safe word.

"Yellow." Her voice was soft, but I didn't hear any fear in it.

That was her signal to take it slow, that she wasn't sure how she felt about what I wanted to do. Not all subs or Doms have two safe words, one for proceeding with caution and one to stop immediately, but I always thought it made things easier because 'punishment' could be such a broad subject that what I had in mind might or might not bother her.

I held up the rope. "Roll over and put your hands behind your back."

Her lips curved into a smile, and she did as she was told, crossing her wrists at the small of her back automatically.

"I take it you've done this before," I said as I climbed onto the bed.

I straddled her legs and let muscle memory set up a quick release column knot. It wasn't as complex as some knots I'd used in the past, but it'd hold her, and if she used her safe word, I'd be able to get her out of it easily. The entire point of this was to help her, not trigger another attack.

"From your side of things, yes." She turned her head so her voice wasn't muffled.

"Good," I said. "Then you know how to get out of it if you need to."

Satisfied that she wasn't going anywhere unless she had to, I moved back down her body and pulled her legs apart. I had to grit my teeth as I rolled on the condom. I'd handled this much foreplay without coming before, but Nyx tested my self-control like no one else ever had.

I put my hands on her ankles and let them leisurely make their way up her long legs, appreciating each curve of her calves, the dip into the back of her knees. Her butt was perfect, two firm globes that fit right into each of my hands. I ran my thumbs along either side of the crease as my hands slid up over her ass to her back. I leaned down, kissed the fire inked at the small of her back, and then did what I'd wanted to do from the first moment I'd seen her tattoo.

I traced it with my tongue. The fire first, and then followed the smoke up her spine to where it turned into feathers. By the time the feathers became a phoenix on the back of her neck, she was squirming and making the sexiest little gasps and moans.

“My little firebird,” I whispered in her ear before lightly biting down on her earlobe. “Are you ready for me?”

I reached back and slid two fingers inside her. She yelped in surprise, but there was no pain in the sound. She was wet as she pushed back against my hand. I bit her shoulder, and she cursed.

“I’m in charge,” I reminded her. “You take what I give you.” I kissed the middle of her back. “I’ll get you there again.”

She made a frustrated sound but stopped moving. Well, she stopped trying to control how I was working my fingers into her. She didn’t stop squirming, but I wasn’t sure if she even could.

It didn’t matter. I wasn’t going to make her wait any longer because I couldn’t wait either.

I tipped her hips up to give me the angle I wanted and then slid inside with one smooth stroke. Her body shuddered under mine, muscles tensing, squeezing, and it was all I could do to keep from losing it. My fingers curled into the sheets on either side of Nyx’s waist, my knuckles turning white. I exhaled between clenched teeth and closed my eyes.

Starting line-up, Chicago Bulls, November 1, 1996. Ron Harper, Michael Jordan, Luc Longley, Scottie Pippen, Dennis Rodman. Playing against the Boston Celtics. Final score, 107 to 98.

Some guys recited baseball stats to get their minds off coming.

I liked 1990s basketball, specifically the Chicago Bulls. I didn’t have to use it very often, but it worked.

I opened my eyes and pulled back until just the tip remained inside her. Without a pause, I surged forward again, bringing us to that place where we were as close as two individuals could physically be. Keeping one hand on her hip, I grabbed her bound wrists to give me leverage and then took her

with deep, relentless strokes that had her crying out, her fingers curling and flexing. Over and over, I drove into her, the angle letting my cock drag over her g-spot with every thrust.

“Bradyn, please!” Her voice shook with desperation. “I can’t...I can’t...I can’t...”

“You can.” I growled the words, the pressure inside me almost too much to stand. “Come again. Let me feel it.”

She shook her head, curses and unintelligible sounds pouring out of her, but not her safe words. She pulled at her restraints but didn’t do anything that would actually get her free, even though she knew what to do if that was what she really wanted.

She trusted me to get her where she wanted to go.

“Fuck.” I could feel myself losing it.

I slid the hand on her hip around and down until I could slip my fingers between her legs. Two circles around her clit, and then two taps were all it took to send her over the edge.

And not a moment too soon, either. I buried myself deep and followed.

Thirteen

Bradyn

Well, damn.

I stared up at the ceiling and tried to catch my breath. Even through the post-orgasmic haze, I was aware of Nyx next to me. I wanted to reach over and pull her to my side, but I wasn't sure how she'd take it. As a Dom, it was my responsibility to take care of my sub, but I didn't know if she'd consider that crossing a line or just being part of aftercare.

I was thinking too much.

"I'll be right back," I said as I pushed myself up. I grimaced as I pulled off the condom and dropped it in the trashcan next to the bed.

In the bathroom, I quickly cleaned myself off, then got a clean washcloth and wet it with warm water. I grabbed some lotion out of the closet and took that back into the bedroom with me. As I sat on the edge of the bed next to her, I held up the washcloth.

"May I?"

After a moment's hesitation, she nodded. I didn't say anything as I ran the cloth over her body, or even when I rubbed lotion into her wrists where the rope had been. She didn't have any marks, and the rope itself was soft, but pretty much anything would chafe if you pulled at it long enough.

Only after I finished and crawled back into bed, this time pulling the sheet over us both, did I break the silence.

"Before you showed up in the barn, I'd intended to come find you." I lay on my side, facing but not touching her. I didn't know how this conversation might go, and I didn't want her to feel trapped in any way. "I need to apologize."

A little crease formed between her eyebrows, and I was tempted to smooth it out. Still, I kept my hands to myself. It shouldn't have been so hard not to

touch her. Fuck, I'd just been *inside* her. How could I feel like I hadn't touched her for days?

"To start with, I behaved like an ass in New York," I began. "I only heard half of a conversation and jumped to conclusions. I should have asked what was going on and let you explain as much as you could. And I should have been more understanding of your need to keep your client's confidence."

"I think we can both agree that we both did things wrong that morning," she said, one corner of her mouth tipping up.

"Thanks." I reached out and tucked some hair behind her ear, contenting myself with that small contact for now. "But I have more to apologize for than that. I behaved like a jealous ass the other night with Isaac. I didn't have any right to get involved. I knew Isaac wouldn't take advantage of you if you weren't sober enough to consent, but I hated the idea that you wanted him."

She laughed. Her eyes were still guarded, but at least I got a laugh rather than a curse. "Well, I was drunk and kissed Isaac because I was jealous of the woman I'd thought you'd just slept with, so I guess we were the same there too."

"In case there's any doubt," I said, "I didn't sleep with anyone while you were gone. In fact, I hadn't slept with anyone in months until we got that room at Hades."

"I haven't either." She paused, then added, "The first part, I mean. I didn't have sex with anyone but you since that time at Hades, either."

I was tempted to ask when she'd last slept with someone else, but I wasn't sure I actually wanted to hear the true answer.

"Well, this next apology is all me," I continued. "I accused you of using Shadae and Brew, of using me, even after you apologized for getting mad about Antoinette and told me as much as you were allowed about why you were here. I was an idiot. I thought my parents had heard about the film I've been working on and were worried that I would embarrass the family. It wouldn't be the first time they'd done something underhanded." I forced myself to hold her gaze. If she could look at me while I confessed how shitty I'd treated her, the least I could do was take it. "I am so sorry."

She reached out and ran her fingers over the stubble I hadn't shaved this morning. "Thank you."

"Do you think we can move past what happened?" I felt like I was literally holding my breath. "Put it behind us?"

Her eyes slid away from me, following her hand as her fingers ran from my shoulder to my elbow. "If anyone can understand wanting to forget about the past, it's me."

Shit. "I'm sorry, that was completely thoughtless of me—"

She put her fingers on my mouth and met my eyes again. "I wasn't talking about...well, not exactly about that."

I caught her hand, pulling it away from my mouth but not letting it go. I threaded my fingers between hers and squeezed. Something on her face made me think she was about to share something else about her past that wasn't easy.

"When I was at the jail, the reason I...the reason why that happened..." She shook her head and sighed. "I was in juvie as a teenager and people who know about it, that's all they can see when they look at me."

Okay, that hadn't been even close to what I'd thought she was going to say. I said the first thing that came to mind. "Not everyone. Kaimi doesn't treat you like a criminal."

Nyx laughed, and it was a real laugh, one that lit up her whole face. "Where do you think Kaimi and I met?"

"Well, shit. I just can't say anything right, can I?" I shook my head.

She squeezed my hand. "It's all right. We don't talk about it much, but we don't hide it either. Sitara and Rose know about both of our pasts."

I waited for her to explain why she'd been incarcerated for five years, but she didn't offer. As good as she was at masking what she was feeling, I could read this. She was waiting for me to decide if I could let it go without asking what'd happened, or if I would insist on hearing the details.

“If you ever want to talk about it with me, I’ll listen.” I released her hand and curled my fingers around the back of her neck, my thumb resting on her jaw. “But I’m not going to push or assume. I may fuck up, and I’ll never be perfect, but I try to learn from my mistakes.”

Relief flooded her face, and I knew I’d made the right call.

I’d gone about this whole thing wrong from the beginning, made assumptions in a lot of different places, not just when it came to why Nyx had come to Savannah. I thought I’d understood having trust issues because of what had happened with Antoinette and my father, but one bad relationship couldn’t begin to compare to the abuse Nyx had gone through.

While anyone being hurt like that was monstrous, she’d been hurt by someone who should have protected her, and when she was able to share what had happened to her, no one had believed her. Not her mother, not the cops. I still didn’t understand what had sent Nyx from that to juvie, but I didn’t need to. She’d had her trust betrayed in a horrible fashion.

I’d always prided myself on caring for the women I’d been with, whether as a ‘vanilla’ girlfriend or as a Dom/sub relationship, but I’d completely fucked that up with Nyx. How could I have expected her to feel safe when I was so focused on myself that I failed to see that she needed my protection much more than I needed it for myself?

“You look like you’re thinking way too hard for someone who just got laid,” Nyx pointed out. “If you have something on your mind, I can go.”

She started to roll over, and I reached out, pulling her back to me for a kiss. I didn’t drag it out, but I did make it thorough enough that she looked a little dazed when I pulled back.

“Um...thanks?”

I brushed the back of my hand down her cheek. “I like seein’ you blush like that, firebird.”

She rolled her eyes and sat up, holding the sheet to her chest. “Don’t you have a lesson you need to be getting to?”

“That eager to get rid of me?” I smiled as I asked the question, but it wasn’t all a joke. She’d come to me for comfort and distraction. I wasn’t foolish enough to think that just because we’d had sex and I’d apologized for my previous behavior that she and I were going to waltz off into the sunset.

The only fairytales that happened in real life were the ones that resembled the original versions rather than the Disney ones.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Should I be?”

She was trying to make light of it, but I could see the caution under the good humor. She wasn’t sure where things were going to go from here, wasn’t sure what either of us wanted. I wouldn’t put that on her. It was time to put myself out there.

“If you don’t want me around, I’ll go,” I said. “But I need to say something first.”

I sat up, letting the sheet keep me covered from the waist down. This wasn’t a conversation I really wanted to have naked, but I supposed the lack of clothes would keep Nyx from running out before I was done.

“All right.” She seemed to be steeling herself.

“I told you before that I didn’t just want to fuck you, and I meant it, but it’s more than that.” I wanted to take her hand but decided it’d be better if I didn’t touch her while I was telling her that sex wasn’t all I wanted. “I care about you, Nyx. A lot.”

Her eyes widened.

“I’m not asking you to say anything like that back to me,” I added quickly. “But you deserve to know how I feel. Especially since I’m also saying that I want us to spend time together for as long as you’re here in Savannah.”

“And then?”

“I don’t know,” I answered honestly, “but I’d like to find out if we have something between us. Something that could be real. More than just sex.”

She looked away, fingers moving to twist in her hair. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea...”

“I’m not going to make demands or set rules or anything like that. I want to get to know you. Spend time with you. But I’ll take whatever you’re willing to give me. You’re in charge.”

Silence settled between us, but I wasn’t going to be the one to break it. She had to decide what she wanted, and I would live with her decision, even if I didn’t like it.

“I don’t know,” she said finally. “This is...new territory for me.”

“Me too,” I admitted. “But I think new territory means we get to be the ones to set the rules.”

She gave me a half-smile. “I like the sound of that.”

“But you’re still not sure.” I made it a statement. “That’s okay. I meant what I said. I’m not going to push.”

“Thank you.”

She got out of bed, and I grabbed a pillow as the sheet went with her. I wasn’t embarrassed by nudity, but I didn’t want her to feel awkward. Sitting on my bed with my dick out while she picked up her clothes was probably an NC-17 definition of awkward.

I couldn’t figure out what to do with my eyes. Watch her get dressed? Stare at a wall or something? Get dressed myself?

“I can’t make any promises,” she said.

At least I felt like I could look at her now. It was only polite since she was talking to me.

“I understand.”

Her eyes met mine. “But I’ll think about it.”

Hope flared bright inside me before I could tamp it down. It wasn’t a *yes*, but it wasn’t a *no* either. If she said she’d think about it, then she would. I had to trust that if she felt this connection as strongly as I did, she’d want to see where things went too.

Until then, I’d be waiting.

Fourteen

Nyx

What had I done?

I closed my eyes and stepped under the warm spray of water to rinse the conditioner from my hair. I'd gone straight from Bradyn's cabin to my shower, wanting to get the smell of sex and him off me as soon as possible. Not because I regretted what we'd done, but because I needed to be able to think, and I couldn't do that if everything I could smell made me remember our time together.

I didn't intend to figure everything out on my own, though. No, this was the sort of thing that I needed to talk out, and that meant a call to Kaimi.

Shower. Dress. Dinner. Phone call.

In that order.

And no lingering in the shower, thinking about how many times he'd made me come. Not that I really needed to do anything in particular to call up memories. My entire body still throbbed from how rough we'd both been. I'd found hickeys all over, and the mirror had shown me ones I couldn't have seen otherwise. There were bruises too, from where his fingers had tightened down on me, and pretty much everything between my legs felt thoroughly used.

I had a feeling I'd be feeling those aftereffects for a while, and the idea didn't bother me at all.

I exhaled slowly and tried to empty my mind. A trick I'd learned when I needed to stop circling thoughts – or at least get a break from them – was to focus on some other noise, something repetitive that didn't require any thought. Basically, white noise.

I actually had an app on my phone that played different types of white noise. Running water had always been my favorite, maybe because we'd used it in

juvie when we wanted to have private conversations. Sinks. Showers. That sort of thing.

So, I listened to the water and let its noise fill my head.

When I finally stepped out of the bathroom, I didn't feel clear-headed, but I did feel like I could talk to Kaimi without my thoughts being all jumbled. I made myself my go-to easy meal of two grilled cheese sandwiches, then took them and a beer over to the sofa. After I settled in, I placed the call to Kaimi and waited for her to pick up.

"Aunt Nyx!" Rose squealed as she answered the phone.

I smiled at the pleasant surprise. "Hey, little bee. Didn't expect to hear your voice."

"Mom's in the bathroom," Rose said. "And before you tell me I shouldn't have answered her phone, I only picked up because it's you."

My heart squeezed. "I miss you too. Anything exciting happen since I left?"

"Not really. School's pretty boring right now, but it'll get better because we're having a Halloween dance on the thirtieth even though that's not actually Halloween."

"Are you going with anyone?"

"A bunch of us are going together so no one feels left out. My friends and I promised that we'd never let dating come between us. We made a pact."

"That's good."

I wasn't about to tell her that dating screwed up a lot of friendships. On the off chance she and her friends would actually manage to make it through school without a guy or girl coming between them, I wouldn't ruin it by giving her a harsh view of the truth. Besides, it wasn't like I was some expert on what would or wouldn't break a friendship.

I'd had friends when I was a kid, but when Art started messing with me, I'd closed myself off, and they'd disappeared. By the time I got locked up, I hadn't talked to a single one of them in more than a year. Since then, I'd kept everyone but Kaimi and Rose at arm's length. Sitara would get there

eventually. But I'd never experienced what Rose had, and I'd be damned if I burst her bubble because I was jaded as fuck.

"How's Bradyn?"

I could hear the smirk in her voice and rolled my eyes. "He's fine, thank you very much."

"Oh, he definitely is *fine*."

"Rose!" I couldn't stop myself from laughing. "Way too old for you."

"Doesn't mean I can't look."

"Who are you, and what have you done with the little girl who thought Aladdin and Jasmine kissing was gross?"

She laughed. "Don't worry, Aunt Nyx. I'm not turning into one of those boy-crazy teenagers who doodles hearts on her notebooks."

"I'm glad to hear that," I said wryly.

"So am I." Kaimi's voice came from the background. "Rose, take Nyx off speaker and give me my phone."

"Bye, Aunt Nyx! Love you!"

"I love you too, little bee."

A few moments of silence while the phone changed hands, and then it was only Kaimi's voice on the other end.

"I swear, that girl." Kaimi sighed. "Hey, Nyx."

"Hey." I paused, regathering the thoughts that'd scattered when Rose had answered the phone, and Kaimi waited. "Do you have time to talk?"

"One second."

I heard her say something to Rose about being on the phone for a while, and then a door closed.

"All right. Sitara's at work 'til midnight, and Rose just finished her homework, so she's binging *Riverdale* until she goes to bed. I'm all yours."

“I’m drowning here, Kaimi.” My voice shook, and I closed my eyes, the sudden burn of tears surprising me.

“What happened?” The words had an edge to them. “Did Bradyn hurt you?”

“No. No, that’s not...I mean...fuck.” I took a deep breath and tried again. “I didn’t tell you when you and Sitara got back because I refused to ruin your homecoming, but Bradyn and I had a huge fight when he was in New York.”

“I’m gonna castrate him.”

“You’ll want to hear the whole thing before you decide to assault him,” I said.

Kaimi had known most of what’d happened between Bradyn and me before she called to ask him to come to New York. Without going into the details, I told her about finding a connection to Bradyn’s family and the investigation I was doing as well as the argument he and I’d had when he’d overheard me on the phone. She started muttering curses under her breath at that point, and they became threats when I told her about Antoinette answering his door naked. She didn’t actually interrupt, though, which made it easier.

Then I got to today.

“So, I remembered that probate records could help me find out what type of estate the Traylor’s had left from one generation to the next. From there I realized it could give me the name of their attorney, or at least the law firm they work at.”

If Kaimi thought I’d changed topics, she didn’t mention it. One of the things that made her such a great friend was that she would listen to everything before she started asking questions.

“Turns out, the Traylor’s use Check & Sons.”

“Shit.”

I swallowed hard. “Yeah.”

“Does Bradyn know?”

“No. At least, I didn’t tell him. Not about Art’s family being from Savannah or his last name or his being a lawyer. I guess he could’ve found out if he really wanted to put in the time or money, but I don’t think he did. He has a decent poker face, but he wouldn’t have kept quiet if he knew his family’s lawyer was connected to me.”

“Are you sure? Kinda seems like he’s been an ass.”

“Yeah, well, this is where things get really interesting.”

“You fucked him again, didn’t you?”

Heat flooded my cheeks. “It wasn’t like that.”

“Bullshit.”

“Okay, it wasn’t *completely* like that,” I corrected myself. “I saw the law firm’s name and had a flashback. The kind that put me on the floor and made me want to throw up.”

“Oh, hon.” Kaimi never pitied me, but she also never hid how seeing me hurt made her hurt too. “I wish I could’ve been there.”

“When I came out of it, all I could think about was getting to Bradyn. Even with everything, he makes me feel safe.”

“And he makes you forget.”

“That too.” I rubbed my forehead. “One look, and he knew I’d had a panic attack. He didn’t ask me what it was about, just what he could do.”

“And that’s when you had sex with him.”

“Yes.” I sighed. “But that’s not all. I mean, afterward, he apologized for how he’d behaved. For all of it.”

“I suppose that’s good.” Kaimi’s tone said she didn’t entirely agree with the words.

“I think he meant it. I mean, he jumped to some conclusions, but it wasn’t like he’s lied about anything. Not any more than I did. He’d told me his last name before. I just didn’t know how it connected.”

“But you’re hiding the law firm stuff from him.”

“Yeah, for now anyway.”

Kaimi was silent for a moment, and then said, “If he’s just a one-off, then it doesn’t matter, but you’re calling me, which means there’s more to it than that.”

“There is.”

“Then spill it.”

This was why I’d called my best friend in the first place. She spoke her mind about everything, but she didn’t judge or look down on me, no matter what her opinion was.

“He told me that he cares about me.” Saying it out loud sent a shiver through me, and I could almost feel his hands on my body, the heat and weight of him. “He called me *my little firebird*.”

Silence.

I waited, letting her figure out what she wanted to say. It couldn’t be easy, dealing with my shit all the time.

“Did he say what he wanted? With you? From you?”

“Um...he, uh, said he wanted us to spend time together while I was in Savannah.”

“Is that ‘spend time together’ as in go to dinner and talk or more like a ‘hooking up whenever you get the urge’ thing?”

“He said he wants us to get to know each other, to see if there could be something more than sex between us.” I tucked my feet underneath me. “But he didn’t take sex off the table.”

“Does that mean you’ve had it on the table already?” Kaimi teased.

I laughed. “Not yet, but I won’t say never.”

“Damn. Sounds like he really rocked your world.”

“That’s an understatement,” I muttered. “I’ll be feeling him for days.”

“Shit,” Kaimi whispered, then lowered her voice even more. “Did you just come from fucking him?”

She spoke so low that I barely heard the question. She didn’t shelter Rose, and she swore around the kid from time to time, but when it came to talking about sex, she tried to keep it matter-of-fact, sometimes cliché, but rarely vulgar slang.

“About an hour ago,” I said. “The whole Check & Sons thing happened earlier today.”

“How much earlier?”

I placed my hands over my eyes. “Are you asking about my schedule for the day or wondering about how long he lasted?”

“Both?”

I laughed. “You’re a married woman, and you want all the dirty details from my sex life?”

“I’d share mine if you wanted to hear them.”

This banter between Kaimi and me, mixing the serious with our brand of humor, helped me relax better than anything else could.

I shifted in my seat, and my body gave a painfully pleasant throb.

Well, *almost* anything else.

“I have no idea what I’m supposed to do, Kaimi,” I said, my mind turning back to one of the reasons why I’d called. “I mean, I’ve never wanted a relationship. That’s why I only hooked up with guys at Club Privé. I could tell them I only wanted sex, and they’d get it. I mean, I rarely fucked a guy more than once.”

“Is this thing with Bradyn the same, though?” Kaimi asked. “I mean, you’ve had sex with Bradyn more than once *and* not at a club.”

“Does that really mean anything? There’s a club down here that’s sort of like Club Privé, but he lives right here on the ranch so it just made sense to keep

using him.” I winced. “No. No, not *using*. That’s not the right word.”

“You care about him, Nyx.” Kaimi’s voice softened. “If you didn’t, you wouldn’t be calling me. Hell, you wouldn’t have gone to him after seeing that name if you didn’t feel something for him.”

Dammit.

“Maybe I just wanted to be distracted,” I suggested. “Trust me. Sex with Bradyn is very distracting.”

“I’ll bet it is,” Kaimi said. “But forgive me going a little psychologist here, but I doubt you’d go to someone you don’t trust when you’re emotionally vulnerable.”

I scowled. “‘Emotionally vulnerable’?”

“I know you don’t like that phrase, but even big-bad you can have emotions *and* be vulnerable.”

“Come on.”

I could hear the smile in Kaimi’s voice. “I love you, Nyx, but you’ve got issues when it comes to people.”

I snorted. “Tell me something I don’t know.”

“All right,” she said. “You called me because you wanted me to tell you that you shouldn’t trust Bradyn or that it was pointless to start anything with a guy when he lived hundreds of miles away.”

“I didn’t do—”

“Let me talk now.” Kaimi rarely cut people off, and it surprised me enough that the words stopped in their tracks. “That might not have been exactly what you were thinking, but I know you, Nyx. Better than you know yourself most times.”

She wasn’t wrong.

“You don’t let people close, and you wanted me to give you an excuse to push Bradyn away, so you didn’t have to face the fact that you have feelings for him. Feelings that are more than wanting him to fuck you senseless.”

“Dammit, Kaimi.” I leaned my head on the back of the couch.

“I know you don’t like hearing any of this, but you and I promised we’d never lie to each other. Not about the important shit.”

When I didn’t respond, she didn’t keep talking. Instead, she let me think. She really did know me, because if she’d tried to push or even tried to keep explaining the same thing over and over, I would’ve gotten pissed and just ignored everything she’d said.

I didn’t know if it was a personality trait I would’ve ended up with if I’d had a normal childhood, or if it’d just come from spending so many years having people tell me what to think and believe, but when people got too pushy, it made me want to push back.

Push back like Kaimi said I was doing with Bradyn because he was already too close to me, and I didn’t want him to get any closer. Even if that was true, though, I wasn’t sure it made a difference. Maybe if we lived near each other, I would have a ready answer, but that wasn’t how this went. I could use distance as an excuse, but if Kaimi was right, this wasn’t the sort of thing that’d just go away.

I either had to deal with this shit or face the fact that I’d never have anything more than those random hook-ups at the club.

Shit.

Bradyn

I loved my work. I really did. All the difficulties that came with doing documentaries – people who didn't want to talk, weeding out lies and truth, bad weather, bad food, bad hotels – none of those things could keep me from doing what I was meant to do. It wasn't some type of mystical destiny or fate thing. Just that I was one of those fortunate people whose passion and skillset happened to match up.

Learning what I had about Nyx's case, I was more determined than ever to finish my documentary. Even though I didn't know all the details of what sorts of things my family was being investigated for, my gut said that our two investigations would end up with a lot of the same information. Nyx wouldn't have to worry about hiding things from me or breaking her clients' confidentiality if I figured it out myself.

Being in the loop wasn't my main reason to step up my own research skills, though. I'd let myself get distracted over the last few weeks, and I couldn't do that. If I truly wanted to have a relationship with Nyx, a *real* relationship, I needed to find a balance. I'd had girlfriends in the past, and there'd always been a period at the beginning where I'd found myself thinking about them when I was doing other things – the 'honeymoon' phase – but I'd never had a problem maintaining work or just normal life stuff.

Nyx was different.

She invaded every part of my life. No matter what I was doing. Like how I'd been washing my dinner dishes last night when I'd glanced toward her cabin and wondered if she'd gone to the house for dinner. If she and the Huxleys had talked about me. What she'd been thinking about the things we'd talked about earlier this week.

It was Friday now, and she still hadn't given me an answer.

I'd seen her, so I knew she wasn't actively avoiding me. It wasn't like she was ignoring me when we were around each other, either. She'd answer a greeting, make small talk during a meal. She even smiled toward me. *Toward* me. Not *at* me. I didn't know if anyone else made the distinction, but I did.

I knew the difference.

I'd felt what it was like to have that smile focused on me, to be the person she looked to for comfort and safety...and sex.

Yes, I wanted more than a physical relationship with her, but I wasn't dead. Sex with Nyx wasn't like anything I'd ever experienced before. I didn't know if it was because I'd never done the submission thing for anyone else, or if it was that the two of us just had a different connection.

At some point, we'd probably have had sex. That was just how the odds worked. Honestly, I hoped that we'd be together long enough to have had sex. And angry sex. And make-up sex...again. Romantic. Kinky. Vanilla.

I'd take her any way I could get her.

Thunder's hard head hit my back and knocked me into the stall wall. When I glared at him over my shoulder, he gave me the most annoyed look a horse could muster.

"Thank you," I said as I turned around and patted his nose. "You just proved my point. I know better than to go into a horse stall distracted." I dug a sugar cube out of my pocket and held it out. "I know, I know. I should have given you the treat right away, and I let my mind wander."

I patted him again before leaving the stall, latching it behind me. My last lesson of the day had canceled, allowing me to get the rest of my work done more than a half-hour early. I'd spent the past few evenings collecting information. I hoped to sort it tonight and then spend the weekend seeing what I needed to confirm and where to find that information.

For every dozen rumors I'd collected, more than half would prove false with only a few facts. Half of those would fall apart with more dedicated research. What I had left, however, would be exactly what I needed for my film. After I finished with this bit, the only thing I'd have left to do was look into my family. I'd done a little here and there, but I couldn't put it off anymore.

I'd gotten some recognition for the last film I'd produced, but I had a feeling this one was going to be explosive. Before, the interest had been fairly localized. Around Savannah, it'd been big because people had known the family history, but it had still been local politics. Exposing the lies of the upper class, the wealthy, that was the kind of thing that garnered national attention.

I wasn't in it to make a name for myself, but people needed to see the truth. How could we evolve as a people, move past hatred, if we denied its existence? No one was perfect, and I completely believed in forgiveness and that people could change, but the only way it could happen would be for us to be honest about where we'd come from.

The fact that I'd be exposing my own family also added an element of scandal that people would love. For some, it'd be proof of my authenticity, my willingness to betray family. For others, it'd just be the juicy, soap opera type shit that people just couldn't seem to get enough of.

The work I was doing was important, but it didn't stop me from looking over at Nyx's cabin as I walked back to mine. It didn't stop me from wanting to see her or wanting to hear her say that she wanted us to spend some time together before she left.

"Pathetic," I muttered as I went inside.

I stripped as I walked to the bathroom, leaving a trail of clothes behind me. Shower. Work. That's all I should've been thinking about.

That damn woman had me tied up in knots, and there was only one way I could think of to clear her out of my head long enough for me to get absorbed into my work.

I stepped into the shower and ducked under the spray, closing my eyes as I did so.

I'd get off, then get working.

Maybe at some point, I'd figure out why the hell I was waiting around for someone who clearly didn't want to be with me. Maybe I'd figure out why I thought she was worth all this...and probably more.

It didn't take much to get me hard. Just the thought of Nyx joining me in the shower, drops of water beading on her skin, rolling down the slope of her breast to hang on the tip of one tight nipple. Another making a path down to her belly button, and then lower to disappear into dark curls.

I wrapped my hand around my cock and put the other on the wall to keep me balanced. The last thing I needed was to fall in the shower while jerking off. That would've been beyond embarrassing.

My grip was loose as I moved my fist over my dick and felt it thicken with the friction. I would've preferred her hand. Her mouth. Anything of hers she'd offer. The fantasy spun off from there.

She took my hand away and put hers in its place. A shiver ran up my spine as she ran her neat, short nails over my skin. Her thumb swiped across the top of my cock, taking a drop of pre-cum with it. Our eyes met, and she lifted her hand, licking her thumb clean.

I gripped her ass as she leaned into me, my fingers digging into her flesh as she licked a path from my bellybutton to my chest. When her hot mouth closed on my nipple, I cursed. Then she bit down, and the jolt of pain made me growl. I buried my hand in her hair, yanking her head back to give me access to her mouth.

Pulling her body flush against mine, I ravaged her mouth without an ounce of gentleness. Her nipples were hard little points, and she writhed in my arms, nails scratching down my back deep enough to mark me. I ran a finger between her ass cheeks, stopping to rub that puckered ring. She gasped, and I swallowed the sound.

I lifted her, and she wrapped her legs around me, my cock sliding into her with one smooth stroke. She threw her head back, begging me to take her, own her, make her mine. Our bodies moved with and against each other as I kissed my way down her throat. I wasn't going to last long, not when we were skin-to-skin like this, but she'd come with me. I'd make sure of it.

Harder and harder, I drove into her, using gravity to my advantage. I couldn't have filled her any deeper, but it wasn't enough. I needed to make it so that she'd never be with any other man without thinking of how good this was between us. I wanted her to feel me for days, to know that no one would

ever make her as complete as I did. She whimpered, and her body tightened around mine, warning me of her impending climax.

At the same moment I pulled her down on my cock as hard as I dared, I pushed the tip of my finger into her ass. She screamed my name, every muscle clamping down, and I followed her, losing myself in her as surely as I'd filled her with my release...

“Fuck,” I groaned as my cum disappeared down the drain.

This woman was going to be the death of me...and I'd never regret it.

Sixteen

Nyx

Coincidence versus fate.

No one could believe in both, right? They were opposites. Either things just randomly happened, or they were *meant to be*. Except, where did assholes and manipulation come in? Was that a third option?

This philosophical shit had been running through my head ever since I'd left Bradyn's cabin earlier this week. The high I'd gotten from the orgasms he'd given me had lasted long enough for me to put away my stuff for the night. I'd managed to fall asleep thinking about sex, but I'd been up at dawn, trying to figure out what it meant that my case, the man I'd been fucking, the people who own the place where I was staying, *and* my stepfather's family's law firm had all somehow managed to come together in fucking Savannah, Georgia.

I stared at the wall where I'd made my new list, like if I looked at it hard enough, the answers would magically appear.

'Cuz that sort of shit had worked in other areas of my life.

Point one. I'd been hired by a law firm in New York to look into one of their client's family history, which took me to Savannah, where her family had been from generations ago.

Point two. The first person I met, the person who'd gotten me out of jail and found me a place to stay was part of the family my clients were going after.

Point three. My clients were connected to the people who owned the ranch where I was staying. The same ranch where that same man worked.

Okay, all of that had three connecting points. A triangle, I supposed.

I'd worried that I'd been set up, that Bradyn had known who I was and why I'd come. Now, I didn't. I'd been prepared to write that off as coincidence. Just one of those things that happened.

Except those points weren't all that I had.

Point four. The law firm employed by that family – *Bradyn's* family – was the same law firm that my abusive asshole of a stepfather had come to New York from. One that his family had started three generations ago.

It was that point that made me wonder what I was missing.

Was it possible that *all* of those points could be coincidences?

Or was it fate? Destiny? The universe?

Was that what had brought Bradyn and me together each of these times? Some higher power that wanted us together?

I had a hard time believing that anyone or anything actually cared about two random people hooking up a few times.

Except that wasn't all he wanted anymore. Or, honestly, not what he'd wanted in the first place. For all I knew, it'd never been some one-off for him. It wasn't like we'd really spent much time talking that first time, and after that, all sorts of shit kept coming up. It was hard to have a conversation about where we saw our future if I kept having flashbacks to my shitty past.

Not that I would've had an answer for him then any more than I did now.

Then again, maybe I would've been able to tell him no at that point. One night with him at Hades could've been it. I wouldn't have told him about my stepfather or about being in juvie. I wouldn't have cared that he'd set himself at odds with his family.

I shook my head and sighed. I didn't know why I bothered with the *what if* shit. It never did anyone any good. I couldn't change the past and all thinking about it did was give me one more headache to deal with.

The whole *coincidence-destiny* question, however, was one that I still needed to figure out. Mostly because there was a third option.

Manipulation.

I hadn't mentioned anything to Bradyn about my personal connection to Check & Sons because I hadn't wanted to risk him finding out what I'd done

as a teenager. I wasn't in his head, though, so I didn't have a way to know for certain that he didn't already know. That he hadn't been orchestrating this from moment one.

Even as I thought it, I rejected it. I'd already thought once that he'd had some ulterior motive, that he'd known my identity when we first met. I couldn't go through that all over again, especially since I knew it'd be a lie.

Hard as it was for me to admit, there was only one reason I was even considering the idea that Bradyn had been responsible for everything that'd happened in Savannah. I was terrified.

I'd gone to him automatically after my flashback a few days ago, like it was some sort of instinct to reach for him. If I'd been thinking, I probably would've talked myself out of it, but I'd been too freaked out to make a logical choice. If I hadn't felt safe with him, I wouldn't have gone. What happened afterward was what had me scared and looking for excuses.

The fact that I couldn't find distance a good enough excuse was another warning that I was in deeper than I liked. But, if he'd lied and manipulated, I'd feel justified in pushing him away.

I couldn't do it. I couldn't falsely accuse him just to make myself feel better.

I also couldn't spend the rest of my time here hiding, if for no other reason than the fact that this investigation was too tied up with Bradyn's life. Avoiding him wasn't the answer, and it wasn't fair to him. No matter what happened between us from here on out, he was a good guy. Not perfect, not without faults, but he was a good man.

I rubbed my burning eyes and wondered if I'd be able to get much rest tonight. I'd been having dreams ever since Tuesday night, the vivid, intense dreams that made sleep not very restful. They weren't nightmares, though, and it wasn't fear making me wake up sweaty and with a pounding heart. And it wasn't being scared that had made me come more than once while I'd been sleeping.

Just thinking about them made my pussy throb.

"Dammit." My head thudded against the back of my chair. "I don't need to fuck him again."

My body disagreed.

Hell, every part of me disagreed. As much as I was tempted to write things off as purely physical, I couldn't do it without lying. Sure, there'd been stuff we hadn't talked about, but it wasn't as if we'd only ever spent time having sex.

When it got down to it, that was what bothered me the most. It'd hurt when he'd made those accusations. It'd be worse if I chose to get to know him better, and then things imploded.

That was the same reason I'd tried to keep Kaimi at arm's length back when we first met, but I'd barely been a teenager, and I'd needed someone to watch my back. That had pushed me into trusting her much faster than I would have under other circumstances.

I needed a drink.

I got up and discovered that I'd apparently had my last beer at lunch, which left me with water or apple juice. At least Shadae had remembered that I didn't drink sweet tea, and I hadn't even needed to explain why.

I pushed the thought away as soon as it came. No good would come from falling down that particular rabbit hole.

Juice it was.

Except I didn't really want the juice. And, honestly, I didn't actually want a beer. I wanted to keep pretending that if I just ignored everything, my life could keep moving on the way it always had. Then again, my "*always had*" had never included being in Savannah and trying to figure out what I wanted with the smoking hot cowboy next door.

I closed my eyes and rested my forehead on the freezer door. I knew what I wanted to do with Bradyn. That was the problem. I knew it but was too chickenshit to do anything about it.

Rose's text tone pulled me out of my thoughts before they could get too X-rated. I went back to the desk and opened her message.

I got asked to the Halloween dance!!!

Half a dozen gifs followed, all of them showing one form of excitement or another, and each one made me smile.

I thought you and your friends were going as a group?

We are, but they still asked! They're going to come with all of us, but they really wanted it to just be them and me.

I tapped out my reply and added a few gifs of my own. *Who is it?*

Ty Gilmore.

I knew that name. Ty was a year older than Rose and had moved into Rose's neighborhood around Christmas last year. A few months after they'd met, Ty had told Rose that they identified as non-binary, and that was why they'd had to move. Ty's dad had beaten them when he'd found them trying on eyeliner. He was in jail now, and Ty's mom had moved the two of them to New York City, hoping Ty would be able to find a place here. It'd been no surprise to any of us that Rose had immediately declared herself their protector.

I'm happy for you. I smiled as I wrote the message. Rose wasn't one to go all weird around someone she liked, but the last couple months, I'd suspected she'd had a crush on Ty.

All of us decided we want to go as Guardians of the Galaxy now that we have enough people. I know you already bought me that zombie costume, but I really want all of us to match. Is it okay if I get something else? I won't be mad if you say no.

Leave it to Rose to make her good news into her worrying about my feelings. I loved that kid so damn much it scared me sometimes. I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to handle being a mother.

Not that motherhood was really an option for me at this point. Hell, I didn't even know if I'd ever want to have kids. I needed to get my own shit together before I started worrying about anyone else.

That was a thought for another time, though.

Of course it's okay. I'll bet Sitara can use the zombie one at the shop for decoration.

That's a great idea! I'll ask her. Now I just have to decide if I want to be Rocket or Gamora. Ty is going to be Groot.

I settled on the couch as I sent my response. *I guess it depends on if you want to paint yourself green or wear fur.*

Back and forth the conversation went. Rose told me all the pros and cons of both characters. A phone call probably would've been faster, but I was more like Rose in the fact that I generally preferred texts to talking. I liked having time to think things through, to re-read what I'd written. Sure, there was always the problem of not having inflection and all that, but when I was texting someone like Kaimi or Rose, they knew me well enough to know when I was being sarcastic or whatever.

By the time Rose and I finished, it was evening, heading into night. I'd finished my dinner and was considering showering and turning in early, maybe with a book or binge some *Fear Thy Neighbor*, but Rose's last text changed all that.

How's Bradyn?

Rose's question caught me off-guard, but I should've expected it. She'd asked about him when we'd talked to each other earlier this week. I was still trying to figure out how to answer her when another text came through.

I really like him. Is he coming home with you, or are you waiting to see where things go? I don't want you to move to Savannah, but I want you to be happy more. If you do move, I'll miss you, but I can come visit, right?

Shit.

She'd be picking out her bridesmaid dress if I didn't say something.

You're getting way ahead of things. He's not my boyfriend so I don't think we need to be worrying about where we'll be living. I'll be back home as soon as I finish what I'm doing here. We'll see what happens then.

I couldn't believe I was explaining my love life to a thirteen-year-old. Better than trying to explain my sex life, I guessed.

I'm young, but I'm not an idiot. I saw the two of you dancing at the wedding. He looks at you the way Sitara looks at Mom. And you pretend to be all hard and stuff, but I know you like him too.

Fuck.

She was right.

Still...

Liking each other isn't always enough.

Her reply was quick, and I could almost see her rolling her eyes.

Duh. I know that. You have to work at it.

Fuck again.

I shook my head. I wished I could say that this was the first time Rose had put me in my place, but I couldn't. She had a way of seeing and saying things that no one else could or would. She was the best person I knew, and Kaimi agreed with me. Rose was better than either of us had ever been or ever would be.

And I couldn't disappoint her.

I'll talk to him.

I didn't have to explain to her what was going on. Those words would be enough for her to know that I'd heard her and that I wouldn't give up.

Good. I'll send you pictures of the costumes when we decide.

I didn't let myself look at the time or try to keep a conversation with Rose going. It would've just been me trying to put it off because I was still terrified of what would happen if I followed through.

But I'd be damned if I let Rose down.

With that in my mind, I got up, put on my shoes, and headed for Bradyn's cabin. My stomach was tied in knots, but Rose was the best motivation I could have. I wanted to try this with Bradyn, but fear might've kept me away, anyway. Not now, though.

I just hoped I wasn't too late.

I knocked on the door and put my hands in my pockets to hide that they were shaking. My chest was tight, my face flushed. I almost felt like I might pass out.

Then the door opened, and Bradyn was standing right in front of me.

Seventeen

Bradyn

I was in the middle of a *Say Yes to the Dress* binge when someone knocked on my door. I briefly considered putting on a shirt but decided if someone had decided to come by without calling or texting first, they'd get what they got. Besides, it wasn't like there was anyone at the ranch who hadn't seen me without my shirt at one point or another.

Nyx was the last person I expected to see on my porch, but there she was. Faded jeans and a fitted black tank top told me she hadn't been out on a date, but that didn't tell me why she was here. That hopeful little voice in my head wanted to believe that she was here because she'd decided that she wanted to see what this thing between us could be.

I reminded myself that making assumptions had gotten me into enough trouble and that I needed to stop reading into things. I needed her to actually say the words.

“Can I come in?”

The uncertain look on her face made my stomach twist. The urge to protect her was almost too strong for me to resist...but I did resist it because common sense told me that holding Nyx right now wouldn't be the best idea.

“Please.” I stepped out of the way and wished I'd grabbed a shirt. I didn't want her to think I was trying to seduce her or something, but it was too late now because if I went out of my way to get a shirt, she'd think that I didn't want her to see me without my shirt...

Dammit!

“So, um, I was just talking to Rose – or texting her, actually – and she was telling me about going to a Halloween dance...” She waved a hand and blew out a very long breath. “That's not important. What is important is that she said she liked you.”

I blinked, confused. “Why don’t you sit down? I’ll get you something to drink, and we can talk.”

She shook her head. “I’m not thirsty, and I don’t want to sit down.”

“All right,” I said. I still had no idea what she was doing.

She reminded me of a skittish horse or a wild animal, the sort that couldn’t be rushed. I had to stay calm, let her speak at her own speed. Let her take the lead. Have control. This hadn’t been easy for her, and what I was asking her to do wasn’t going to be easy either.

“Look, I don’t do this,” she said with a sigh. “I fuck. I don’t talk or go on dates or get to know people.”

I didn’t point out that she’d gone on more than one date with me and we’d talked...and gotten to know each other.

“But Rose pointed a few things out to me, so I’m here to...*try*.”

I swallowed hard and tried not to show how eager I was. “I don’t want to make any assumptions here, Nyx. Please spell things out for me.”

She came over to me and took my hand, uncurling the fingers I hadn’t remembered making into a fist. “I don’t know how to do this, and I don’t plan on staying in Savannah. When my job here is done, I’m going home.” She looked up, her eyes meeting mine. “But I want to do what you asked. Spend time together while I’m here.”

It wasn’t exactly what I wanted to hear, but I would take whatever I could get. If we really were as connected as I believed we were, then whatever time she and I would have would serve to show her how good we could be together. I’d worry about the rest of it after we made the relationship official.

I didn’t tell her that, though. I didn’t want to scare her away, not when she was finally here and willing.

“I’m really glad to hear that.” I brushed the back of my hand over her cheek. “I know it’s only been a few days, but I’ve missed you, firebird.”

Color flooded her cheeks, but she didn’t look away as she caught my hand and kissed my palm. “I missed you too.”

I didn't know which of us moved first, but we were suddenly on each other, mouths fused together, tongues battling for dominance. Her hands were all over me, bare skin burning up my arms and down my back as my muscles tensed and bunched under her touch. My hands did their own exploring, under her shirt to trace the lines of her tattoo, the skin still slightly raised under the ink.

She bit my lip, and I hissed in surprise before pulling her tighter to me and dropping a hand to squeeze her ass. Stinging pain broke out down my spine as she raked her nails across my back. Her hair was in a braid, and I caught it, wrapping it around my hand to give me control. I pulled her head back, and she glared at me, but the only heat in her eyes was lust. She wanted me as much as I wanted her, and I ground myself against her so she could feel how my body reacted to her.

"This is crazy," she said, her voice breathless. "You know that, right?"

"I don't care." I scraped my teeth over her jaw, and the next breath she took was shaky. "Unless you tell me to stop, I'm going to make you come with my fingers." I pressed a kiss over the fluttering pulse in her throat. "And then I'm going to take you right here, against this wall."

She shuddered, her nails digging in where her fingers had crept under the waistband of my pants. I was probably going to have bloody nail marks on my ass by the time we were done, but I didn't care.

"I'm not in the mood to be gentle," I warned her as I bit the spot I'd just kissed. "So, tell me now if that's not what you want."

I sucked in a breath as she nipped the top of my ear.

"I want it." Her nails dug deeper. "I want you to fuck me so hard that I can't see straight."

I smiled, and Nyx must've liked whatever she saw on my face because she leaned forward and ran her teeth over my nipple. I cursed, my eyes closing for a moment as she latched on, sucking hard before tugging on it with her teeth. Bursts of bright, pain-pleasure raced in a line down to my groin. My cock had been hard before, but now it pushed against the front of my pants, an aching throb pulsing in time with the pulls of her mouth.

“Dammit, Nyx,” I groaned, then swore as she grabbed my cock through my pants. I opened my eyes and stared down at her. “You’re gonna make me come in my pants.”

“That would be a shame.” She grinned at me, humor dancing in those gorgeous eyes of hers. “This is too nice a cock not to get used as much as possible.”

I grabbed her arms and spun us around so that her back was against the wall. I gave her a bruising kiss, then parted her lips with my tongue, delving into her mouth, exploring every inch of her even as I pushed my hand past the waistband of her pants. My fingers moved over the damp cotton between her legs, pressing against her cleft.

She whimpered, and I pressed harder, rubbing her through her panties. Her hips moved, trying to control the pressure and friction, but I held her where she was, using what I’d learned of her body to push her to climax.

Her body tensed, and she gasped, grabbing my arm with a grip hard enough to hurt, but she didn’t ask me to stop. In fact, the only thing she said was my name, crying it out as she came.

Fuck, I loved hearing her say my name like that.

“There we go, little firebird.” I pulled my hand out of her pants and slid it under her shirt. Her eyelids fluttered as I pinched her nipple. “That’s one. You stay right here while I get a condom, and then it’ll be my mouth’s turn to get you off.”

She gave me a sleepy sort of smile and let her head rest on the wall. Her eyes, however, followed me. I could feel the heat of them on my skin as I hurried to my room. I grabbed a condom from the drawer and was back in the living room before she had a chance to recover enough to move. I’d told her to stay put, but I hadn’t been sure she’d actually do it. Besides the fact that she wasn’t the most submissive woman in the world, I hadn’t known if her legs could hold her.

I went to my knees in front of her and reached for her waist. I watched her face as I undid the button and slowly pulled down her zipper. She ran her fingers through my hair, the expression on her face different than anything

I'd seen before. Softer. Not gentle, but like some of the guards she'd had in place weren't there anymore.

I pulled down her underwear with her pants, then helped her step out of them, baring her long, shapely legs, the curve of her hips, and that oh-so-tempting juncture between her legs, with those dark auburn curls. I didn't waste time on admiration, though. I wanted to taste her, and I wanted to make her come again.

She gasped when my mouth pressed against her, then cried out when I ran my tongue along her slit. The taste of her burst across my taste buds. Salty and so much her. Her thighs rested on my cheeks, and I felt those muscles quiver as I flicked my tongue back and forth across her swollen clit.

"Fuck, Bradyn." She squirmed, pulling at my hair until my scalp burned.

I tightened my hold on her hips and put my teeth on her clit, giving her a hint of danger. As I toyed with that sensitive bundle of nerves, I pushed two fingers into her pussy, the passage already slick and wet.

"More...please...more..." she begged. "I need...I need..."

I knew what she needed, and it wasn't me talking to her. Without moving my mouth from where I was now alternating licking and sucking her clit, I moved my fingers inside her, twisting and curling until they pressed against her g-spot. I rubbed the tip of my finger over the sensitive flesh, and she keened. I didn't let up, even as she curled her body over mine, holding me in place as she came.

I didn't plan to go anywhere, but I didn't mind her enthusiasm.

"Shit." She sagged against the wall and would've hit the floor if I hadn't been holding her up. "Where the hell did you learn how to do that?"

I eased back, taking my fingers with me. I grinned when she made an annoyed sound at the loss of my hand between her legs, but I wasn't teasing her. If I waited any longer to be inside her, I would explode. Honestly, I was surprised I managed to get the rubber on without blowing.

As I stood, I slid up her body, letting her feel every inch of me. I hated that we were still wearing clothes, but there'd be time for me to worship every

inch of her...*after* I fucked her right here and now. My cock bumped against her, and she shifted, hooking one leg around my hip.

My world narrowed down to simple movements.

Tip dipped inside.

Hands under her ass.

Lifting and sliding.

Her back against the wall as I sunk into her balls deep.

My breathing caught, and the world froze for a moment.

Then she was rocking her hips, and everything started again.

I pressed my face against the side of her neck, thrusting up into her with short, brutal strokes. She moved with me as best she could with little leverage, using gravity to take me deep. Each time we came together, she made a sound somewhere between a sob and a moan.

I pulled skin into my mouth, tasting sweat and the faint tang of soap. I worried at it with my teeth, sucked on it until I'd marked her. Nails scored my shoulders, and I knew I'd have marks of my own to show off the next couple days.

"Bradyn..." Her entire body trembled, and a roll of my hips made her scream.

She clenched around me, and I was done, my world exploding around me.

The next thing I knew, I was on the floor, leaning against the wall, and Nyx was next to me. We were both still half-undressed, our breathing still harsh, but the tension between us had broken. For now, anyway. Once my brain started working again, I planned to ask her to stay the night so we could take our time once my cock was up to it again.

My phone went off before I could say anything, the tone telling me it was my mother. I was tempted to ignore it, but I couldn't think of anything short of an emergency that would get her to text me.

I yanked my pants up as I stood and stumbled the couple feet it took me to get to where I'd left my phone on the table. My mind was still more than half-distracted, thinking about getting the condom off and whether Nyx and I should take a shower before or after we had sex again...and then I saw the message.

Your nephew Clancy's just been rushed to the hospital. I thought you'd want to know.

“Fuck.”

Eighteen

Nyx

Bradyn's expression when his phone went off made me think that it wasn't someone he wanted to talk to, but he got up anyway. Curious, but not wanting to seem nosey, I focused on getting my clothes all straightened around. I'd barely finished zipping my pants when Bradyn cursed.

"Fuck."

The expression on his face made me go to him without even thinking about it. "What's wrong?"

"I-I have to go." His eyes darted around the room, not really landing anywhere. "My...I mean...I need...fuck."

If he hadn't looked so upset, I might've thought that he was trying to figure out a way to rush me out of his place. Considering that he'd been the one to initiate the whole 'spending more time together' thing, common sense would be that something had happened, but anxiety didn't always listen to common sense.

Actually, it never did.

I put my hand on his arm, trying to ignore the red lines I'd made all over his torso. "Tell me what's wrong."

This time, he saw me, and the pain in his eyes made me flinch. "That was my mom. My nephew's been taken to the hospital."

Shit.

All of my selfish thoughts fled.

"Does he live here? In Savannah, I mean." I mentally cursed myself. I needed to be better than this. "Is it somewhere you can drive, or do you need to get on a plane?"

Okay, that was a little better.

“Drive,” Bradyn said. “My sister and her family live in the city.”

He still looked dazed, and I couldn’t blame him. If I’d just gotten a text from Kaimi that Rose was in the hospital, I wouldn’t be handling it well. And that definitely meant driving would’ve been out.

“Do you need someone to drive you?” I asked. Not for the first time while I was in Georgia, I wished I’d gotten my license.

“No, I can do it myself.” He started toward the door, but I caught his arm before he’d gone more than a couple steps.

“I’m pretty sure they’re not going to let you into a hospital wearing only a pair of pants.” My gaze dropped to the noticeable wet spot on the front of his pants and then realized I probably looked just as bad.

He realized what I was looking at and actually blushed. Under other circumstances, that would’ve made me want to jump him again.

“Here’s what we’re going to do.” I kept my voice calm and even. “I’m going to run back to my cabin and make myself decent. You do the same and meet me by your truck. I’ll go with you to the hospital. Help you stay focused on driving. I can get a ride home from there.”

“Okay.” He ran his hand through his hair, still looking like he had no clue what to do.

I reached up and put my hands on his cheeks, waiting until his eyes met mine. “Hey, it’ll be okay. Get cleaned up, and I’ll meet you at the truck.”

He nodded. When I started to move, though, he grabbed my wrist. “Will you stay with me at the hospital?”

Talk about the definition of *not* taking things slow. A lot of people fucked early in a relationship, especially if that’s how things started out, but I’d just agreed to spend some time with him while I was in Savannah, and now he was asking me to meet his family, not just at some random thing either, but during a family emergency.

Every instinct I had that worked at protecting myself should have been screaming at me to make some excuse why I could only drop him off, but my head was weirdly quiet. Almost like my mind was waiting to see what sort of decision I would make without all that shit causing chaos.

“I’ll stay as long as you need me,” I said.

The relief on his face told me I’d made the right choice. Even if this blew up in my face, I was glad I’d agreed. I’d gone through too much shit by myself, and I knew from personal experience what it was like to finally have someone to stand by my side when something bad happened. Kaimi and I had been that for each other for more than a decade. Tonight, I’d be there for Bradyn.

“Go.” I gestured toward his bedroom. “It’ll only take a few minutes, and it’ll be worth it.”

I only waited until he took a step in the right direction, and then I hurried back to my cabin. I wished I had enough time to shower, but I made do with a wet washcloth, clean clothes, and pulling my hair back. I didn’t look great, but at least I looked more like someone who’d been working all day rather than someone who’d just been fucked into three orgasms. Maybe four.

Bradyn was waiting by the truck when I got there, but he didn’t look impatient so I assumed that meant he hadn’t been there long. His face still wore that slightly dazed look of someone who’d been caught off guard, but he’d managed to change his clothes, and everything was on the right way, which was honestly more than I’d expected when I left him a few minutes ago. That made me feel better about him driving, at least.

“Ready?” I asked as I walked around to the passenger’s side.

The first part of the ride to the hospital was quiet, but not that nice sort of comfortable quiet. Bradyn gripped the steering wheel hard enough for his knuckles to turn white, and his entire body was stiff with tension. The muscles in his jaw were tight, his lips a flat line.

I didn’t know how to do this, how to comfort or help. If he’d been Kaimi or Rose, I’d know what to say or do. Bradyn, I was still learning who he was. What I could do, though, was ask.

I reached across the seat and put my hand on his arm. He startled, as if he'd forgotten I was there. "Will it help to talk to me?"

After a few seconds of silence, he said, "Clancy." He glanced at me. "That's my nephew's name."

My research into the Traylor family had told me that Bradyn had an older sister, but I hadn't really looked into her much yet. I'd been focusing my attention on their father.

"My sister, Ashley, is four years older than me. She's the golden child, can do no wrong, you know?"

I did know, but his question was rhetorical. Not that I would've answered it, anyway. Bringing up my sister would just lead to a whole other shitload of questions and baggage.

"She's always done everything our parents wanted, which means she and I aren't really close. I've never really understood how she fell in line with their rules and regulations, and she never understood why I wouldn't." He slowed to a stop at a light, his fingers drumming against the steering wheel as we waited for it to change to green. "Her husband's basically the same way. Warren's twelve years older than her."

A memory popped up. The name *Warren*. A man named Warren Lester was a junior partner at Check & Sons. I hadn't looked into him, though. I'd barely even registered his name.

"She was seventeen when they met. He works for the law firm that my family's always used."

That answered a few of my questions. The name I'd read and Bradyn's brother-in-law were the same person. Check & Sons had been the Traylor's lawyers for a long time. And Bradyn knew the law firm's name.

"My parents had been thrilled, but I never understood how they'd been okay with a man who was almost thirty pursuing their teenage daughter. I really wonder sometimes if he'd been the one to insist on waiting until Ashley was eighteen before they went out. Makes me think better of him, but I've never asked."

I heard the part of the statement Bradyn wasn't making. He hadn't asked because if he was wrong, it would change how he looked at his brother-in-law.

"They got married right after she turned nineteen, and their oldest, Warren Jr., was born a year later." Some of the tension in him had gone away, and as he turned into the hospital parking lot, he seemed much more in control of himself. "Betsy came along three years after that, and then Clancy."

The way Bradyn's voice cracked on the name told me how much he loved his nephew. I felt sick to my stomach, wondering what had happened to the kid. The part of me that fought to put myself first, to run away from anything that could possibly hurt me, begged me to leave. It'd be easy to call a cab and go back to the ranch, leave Bradyn with his family. I didn't belong here.

As he parked the truck, I thought of what I'd say, how I'd get myself out of my promise to stay with him. Before I could say a word, he reached over and grabbed my hand, his grip painfully tight.

"He's only six years old, Nyx."

Fuck.

I couldn't leave him. Even if this thing between us never went any further than the rest of the time I was here, I'd never forgive myself if I abandoned him. My life was full of enough regrets. I didn't need to add one more, especially one like this. I knew all too well what it was like to be thrown away by people who should have been there.

"If something happens to him—"

Bradyn shook his head, unable to continue, but I understood. If Rose had been the one in the hospital, I'd be just as lost. I leaned over and kissed him. Just a brush of my lips across his, comfort not sex.

"Don't start in on the *ifs*. Let's see what's going on, find out the facts." I kissed him again. "All right?"

He inhaled slowly and then let the breath out the same way. I watched him steady himself and then he nodded. As we walked across the parking lot, he reached over and took my hand, our fingers lacing together as if we'd been

walking like this for years.

If the situation had been different, I'd probably have been reading into it, wondering what it all meant, but right now, all of that was pushed to the back of my mind. Pushed back and then down into boxes. Bradyn was the priority.

The woman at the desk directed us to the elevator and gave us a floor number. It wasn't until we stepped off the elevator that we realized where we were.

Surgery.

Shit.

We followed the arrow directing us to the waiting area, anxiety growing with each step. I gritted my teeth, reminding myself that I was here for Bradyn. Whatever he needed from me, I'd give, even if it meant suddenly having six people staring at me.

"What are *you* doing here?" A tall man with steel gray hair and bright blue eyes was the first to speak.

Clancy Traylor. Even if I hadn't seen a picture of him, I would've known who he was. The resemblance to Bradyn was strong.

"I told him Clancy was here." The oldest woman in the room spoke up. Jaylin Traylor had the same stubborn set to her jaw that Bradyn did.

"That wasn't your decision to make."

"Daddy, please!" The words came from a blonde woman with a sugar-sweet Southern accent and tears in her light brown eyes.

A tall, lean man with thinning hair almost the same shade as mine put his arm around the blonde. Ashley and Warren Lester. The red-haired boy in one of the seats behind them was Warren Jr., and the strawberry blonde with the sour expression was Betsy.

At least I didn't need Bradyn to introduce me to everyone. Between the research I'd done and the information he'd given me on the way here, I had names for faces without needing to ask.

“What happened?” Bradyn asked, his hand tightening around mine.

After a few uncomfortable seconds of everyone exchanging glances, Mrs. Traylor answered the question.

“Clancy’s appendix burst. He’s in surgery right now.”

Bradyn glanced at his niece and nephew, then moved closer to his mother. “How bad is it?”

She crossed her arms, not in a stubborn way but more like she was trying to hold herself together. “We don’t know. He’s only been back there for about twenty minutes or so.”

At least she hadn’t waited hours to tell Bradyn what’d happened. I found myself disliking her a tiny bit less.

I waited for someone else to say something. What they were supposed to say, I had no idea. It wasn’t like I’d ever done this before. Not just the specifics, but all of it. I had no clue how I was supposed to help someone who was experiencing this type of emergency.

Did I say something to his family? Tell them I was sorry? Or was that the sort of thing that only apply to a death in the family? I’d lost my father when I was eight, and everyone who came to see us said they were sorry. I hadn’t been old enough to really understand that kind of *sorry* wasn’t the same as when I had to apologize for doing something naughty like stealing my sister’s toys.

By the time Mom married Art, I’d learned the difference, but I’d never really had to use it. I’d been a bit of a loner, even before all the shit that happened with my stepdad. Going to juvie didn’t do much to make me more sociable. Saying I was socially awkward when I finally got out was an understatement.

“You’ve made an appearance,” Clancy – Mr. Traylor, obviously, not the grandchild named after him – finally said. “You and your...*friend* can go now.”

I moved a little closer to Bradyn, hoping he’d understand that I would support whatever he wanted to do. Any doubts I’d had about being here with him were gone. His family would’ve pissed me off even if I didn’t care about

him like I did.

“We’re not going anywhere.” Bradyn’s voice was quiet, but there wasn’t anything soft about it. “No matter what’s going on with all of us adults, I will be here for the kids.”

“I’m not asking you to be,” Ashley snapped.

I didn’t like her tone, but her kid was having surgery so I didn’t say anything to her. Plus, there was the fact that I didn’t think it was my place to mouth off to Bradyn’s sister, or any of his family members, for that matter.

“Doesn’t matter,” Bradyn said. “I’m staying.”

As if to prove his point, he went over to the empty chair next to Warren Jr. and pulled me after him. Ashley glared at both of us, but absently, like it was more of a reflex than her actually doing something consciously. It didn’t make me like her, though.

“Hi, Uncle Bradyn.” The kid glanced at me and smiled, raising a hand in a little wave. “I’m Les.”

“Hey, kiddo.” Bradyn ruffled his nephew’s hair.

“Hi, Les. I’m Nyx.”

His eyes widened. “Nyx? I’ve never heard that name before.”

I grinned at him. “It’s not a common one.”

“It’s weird.” The little girl leaned over from the other side of Les and gave me one of those annoyed looks that spoiled little girls seemed to perfect.

“Betsy.” Bradyn gave her a stern look.

“It’s okay,” I said, squeezing his hand. “Everyone’s a little on edge. And my name *is* weird.”

Betsy didn’t seem to appreciate me sticking up for her. She leaned back in her seat and glared at nothing. I couldn’t say that I wouldn’t have been pissed off if I’d been her age and stuck at the hospital, but she looked old enough to understand that her brother was sick. Any child of—

I pushed the thoughts away. I was in no position to judge any kids or their parents. This was not about me.

“Is Clancy gonna be okay?” Les asked. The worried expression on his face looked too old for someone his age.

“An appendectomy is a pretty common surgery,” Bradyn said. “And the doctors here are really good.”

“How do you know that?”

“When I was in high school, I had to have my appendix out, and I had it done here.”

The kid’s eyes went wide. “Really? I didn’t know that.”

As Bradyn continued to talk to his nephew, I let my attention wander. This wasn’t a date or even a family function. I was here to be whatever Bradyn needed me to be. Someone to talk to. Someone to stand or sit with. If talking with Les made Bradyn feel better, then I’d sit back and let them talk.

Mr. Traylor kept throwing me dirty looks, but I didn’t respond. If he thought he was the most intimidating person I’d ever met, he was dead wrong. He wasn’t even on my top five. Maybe not on my top ten if I really stopped and thought about it. I wasn’t going to do anything about it, though. Sometimes it was a good thing to be aggressive when it came to bullies, but sometimes it was better to just ignore them.

I wasn’t sure how much time passed, only that the Lesters and the Traylor had paced and sat and then paced again. Finally, a short man in scrubs came over to where we were waiting.

“Clancy Traylor’s family?”

“Yes, I’m his mother.”

Warren followed Ashley over, and the rest of us came behind them. Bradyn reached for my hand again, and Les grabbed the other one.

“The surgery went well,” the doctor said. “We were able to get to the infection before it spread too far. He’s on antibiotics and will need to stay here for at least several days so we can monitor him.”

It was like everyone sighed at once. As much as I didn't like their attitudes or how they treated Bradyn, they loved the kid.

"We've moved him into recovery," the doctor continued. "I can take you back to him." He looked from Ashley and Warren to the rest of us. "Only the parents. The rest of you can come back tomorrow during regular visiting hours."

Mr. Traylor stepped forward, knocking his son-in-law out of the way. "I want to see my grandson."

The doctor looked from Ashley to Mr. Traylor and then back again. "I can take two people into recovery, Mrs. Lester."

Without even looking at her husband, Ashley took her father's arm "Daddy and I will go. Warren, why don't you take the kids and Mom to the house and then bring me back a bag of things so I can stay the night."

I waited for Warren to speak up and tell his father-in-law to stay put, that *he* was going to see his son and the grandparents could take the kids home.

Warren's shoulders slumped. "Yes, dear."

Ashley and Mr. Traylor followed the doctor through the double doors, and Warren turned back to his kids. Mrs. Traylor went over to Betsy and shook the girl's shoulder.

"Wake up, darlin'. Time to go home."

"Warren, is there anything we can do to help?" Bradyn asked.

Warren looked at me and then at Bradyn, but it was Mrs. Traylor who spoke. "This is a family matter, Bradyn. We don't need to be airin' our laundry in front of a stranger."

The expectant look on Warren's and Mrs. Traylor's faces made me think they were waiting for the same thing. For Bradyn to tell them who I was and why I'd come with him. I was kinda curious myself about what he'd say, but I wouldn't press him to give an answer. It wasn't like I'd be able to answer it any better. And honestly, I didn't know what I would've wanted him to say. It was all still so new.

It seemed like everything between Bradyn and me just kept getting crazier. It should've made me wonder if anything was worth all of this, but for once, all those voices in my head kept quiet.

Nineteen

Bradyn

“I. Said. I. Want. Ice cream.”

Betsy had her dad’s teal eyes, but when they were narrowed and annoyed like they were right now, she looked exactly like her mother. People rarely took into account how much attitude came into play when it came to resemblances between family members.

“And I said that you have to eat your lunch first.” I kept my tone calm but firm.

I was still a little confused as to how I’d gotten here, but kids were like horses. They could smell fear. I had to pretend that everything was as normal as possible. Les was a good, compliant kid. It was Betsy I had to watch out for.

She crossed her arms and gave me a pout that was all Ashley.

I understood why she thought she could test me. I’d never babysat for them before. Even before the shit hit the fan with my parents, I’d avoided family time as much as possible. I loved my sister and parents, but I didn’t like them very much. Ashley and I had been butting heads since I was old enough to talk.

That was one of the main reasons I was completely baffled by the fact that I was at Warren and Ashley’s house, watching Les and Betsy while their parents were at the hospital with Clancy. I assumed my parents were there too. I couldn’t think of another reason why I’d be with the kids. It made sense. Me watching the kids kept the adults from having to deal with bored kids and also kept me from showing up at the hospital uninvited.

“Uncle Bradyn, when did you say Clancy was coming home?” Les spoke up from his seat at the table. “I want to write it on the calendar.”

I doubted Les actually needed me to remind him. He was the sort of kid who came up with schedules of his own and followed them to the minute. The quick glance Les shot toward his sister confirmed what I was already thinking. He was trying to change the conversation, either to distract me or to distract Betsy. The way he did it made me think that he'd done it before, probably on a regular basis.

I wasn't going to call him on it, though. I was a one-time babysitter and an uncle. Dealing with stuff like this was his parents' department, not mine.

"It all depends on how quickly he recovers. It'll probably be at least a week. He won't be playing right away, either. Your parents might have a specific date when they get home."

Les nodded. "Do you think he'll be better in time to go trick-or-treating? We already got our costumes."

"I don't know," I answered honestly. "Maybe you two can come up with a way he can still have some fun even if he can't go out."

"We can give him some of our candy," Les suggested.

"I ain't givin' Clancy nothin'." Betsy's scowl deepened. "It's my candy."

"We can share with him," Les said. "It's not like Mom and Dad can't buy us candy."

"It's not the same," she insisted. "I'm a princess, and I keep my candy."

Damn.

She really was a little mini-Ashley.

"That's her costume." Les rolled his eyes. "Clancy was going to be Spiderman. Betsy was a princess."

I had a feeling she would've said the same thing even if she'd been going as a ghost. I kept that thought to myself and asked instead, "What's your costume?"

Being here with Les and Betsy just drove home how little time I'd spent with my niece and nephews. No matter what my issues were with my parents and

sister, I never should have let it keep me from knowing these kids. Even the princess.

He smiled, pleased that I'd asked. "Sherlock Holmes."

"Fan of mysteries then?"

The kid's entire face lit up. "I love them. All kinds of mysteries, but Sherlock Holmes is my favorite."

"I. Want. Ice cream." Betsy thumped her fist on the table, but she didn't raise her voice.

Not surprising. One of the 'rules' Mom had drilled into us kids growing up was that a Southern lady never raised her voice, no matter how insistent she needed to be. It seemed Ashley had passed that lesson down to her daughter.

"Are you done with your lunch?" I asked. "Because you haven't finished your apple."

"I'm done." As if to emphasize her point, she pushed her plate away.

"You're not hungry?"

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Only for ice cream."

"That's not how this works, Betsy. You know that." I glanced at Les, and he shrugged. "If you don't finish all of your lunch, you don't get dessert."

"She's going to throw a temper tantrum," Les said matter-of-factly. He ate the last apple slice. "May I be excused?"

"You don't want your ice cream?"

His eyes went wide, and he shook his head. "Not if she's not getting hers. You don't want to have something she wants."

Damn. The kid was scared of his little sister. Not like 'pee-your-pants' scared, but he definitely wanted to be away from Betsy when she threw a fit.

Ashley had moved past the tantrum thing fairly young, so I didn't really have any memories of her like that, but for as long as I could remember, she'd mastered the art of manipulation and cutting, backhanded insults. I had no

doubt her tantrums had been just a more immature version of that.

“Wait a minute,” I said to Les before turning back to Betsy. I gave her my best stern expression. “I don’t know what your parents do when you’re like this, but I’m in charge right now. If you don’t finish your lunch, you don’t get ice cream, but you won’t be in trouble. But if you throw a fit, you’re gonna spend some time sitting on the couch doing nothing.”

I didn’t say anything as Betsy glared at me. I could see the gears working in her mind, trying to figure out if I would actually do what I said. I could feel Les watching me too, apparently fascinated with the fact that I wasn’t going to let Betsy do whatever she wanted.

After a minute, she picked up an apple slice and ate it. I waited until she ate the second one to get up and go to the fridge. “Les, why don’t you come help me get your bowl ready, and then when Betsy’s done, she can help me get hers.”

A couple minutes later, Betsy and I took our bowls over to the table to join Les. I didn’t know if Betsy would behave for the rest of the afternoon, but I’d take this as a little win. I used the time to chat with them a bit more, asking about school and friends, basically trying to get to know them better.

It didn’t take long for Betsy to get bored once she finished her ice cream, but because she’d been good once I’d given her the ultimatum, I wasn’t going to make her stick around just to talk to me. She went straight back to her playroom, leaving Les and me at the table, finishing our dessert.

“Do you like history stuff?” Les asked suddenly.

“I do.”

“Mom got a whole bunch of boxes from Papaw and Mamaw’s house, and she said they have bunches of letters and papers and stuff in them. I can show you if you want.”

Well, damn. I hadn’t even been thinking about my film right now, but it looked like something might’ve just fallen into my lap. I just hoped whatever was here would be relevant.

“That’d be great.” I ruffled his hair. “Do you like history?”

He nodded. “Dad says I can go to college to become a history professor or a detective, but Mom says I have to become a lawyer like Dad or be in politics like Papaw.”

I was honestly surprised that Ashley had even given Les that much of a choice. Then again, having a law degree often led to a political career. I couldn't see Les having the temperament for it, though. He'd inherited his father's quiet personality, but having a career as a white-collar lawyer wouldn't be enough for my ambitious family, not for the number one grandson. Warren gave Ashley a comfortable lifestyle that she controlled. She'd want to control Les too, but she'd see our father paving the way for whatever they wanted for Les as being as good as her personally controlling him.

Betsy, on the other hand, had the potential to be as cutthroat as her grandfather. If someone didn't curb those entitled tendencies of hers, she'd end up as President...or a reality TV star.

I didn't share any of this with Les, though. When the time came that he needed someone to support him for something outside what the rest of the family wanted, I'd be there. I wouldn't prompt the conversation, though. If he wasn't ready, it wouldn't matter if I pushed him to follow his dreams. Besides, not many kids really knew what they wanted to do when they were only twelve.

“The stuff's in the library,” Les said as he put his things in the dishwasher.

I followed him out of the kitchen and down a hall. Ashley's house wasn't as big as the one we'd grown up in, but it wasn't small either. I was fairly certain the first floor alone was bigger than my cabin, but I wouldn't have traded my freedom for any of this.

“Here they are.”

Three boxes that looked like the kind that held files sat on a table in the center of the room. The two high-backed chairs on either side of the table made it look more like it belonged in a public or college library than a private home.

I wondered how much time Warren spent in here, working on cases instead of being at the office. I imagined Ashley kept him on a pretty tight leash, wanting to make sure he wasn't 'staying late at the office' while he was staying late at the office. I could see her telling him that he had a perfectly good library at home, so he could be there for her and the kids while he got work done.

Not that Warren would ever cheat on Ashley. I didn't know if he actually loved her too much to do it, but he sure as hell was too scared of her to stray. And even if he hadn't been scared of her, then he'd have been terrified of our father. She was Daddy's Princess, and heaven help the man who hurt her. Despite the age difference between them, Warren had never even got close to taking advantage of her.

I pushed thoughts of my sister's marriage aside and took the top off one of the boxes. It was full of file folders, and a quick look at the first couple ones showed them to be various speeches and flyers from political events over the years. I didn't bother reading any of them too closely, but I did the whole due diligence thing and pulled out the entire stack to go through.

Les opened one of the other boxes and took out a single item to study. Him being meticulous didn't surprise me. He was the most careful kid I'd ever met.

I left him to it, going with my instinct that he didn't mind silence, and worked on my box. I'd skimmed the contents of half a dozen folders when Les tapped on my arm.

"Take a look at this, Uncle Bradyn."

I put aside my folders and turned to see what had caught his attention. It was an old picture, old enough to have that yellow tinge that some black and white photos got. I recognized the estate immediately, even though there had been remodeling done in the century and a half since the picture had been taken. Despite not having seen this picture before, I recognized a couple people in it from family 'lessons' I'd had as a child.

"That says 1843." Les gestured to the year written on the corner of the picture. "That's before the War."

“By almost twenty years.” I didn’t have to ask which War he meant. Down South, there was only one War that sounded like it was always capitalized. I pointed at the bride and groom, who were front and center. “That would be Obadiah Calvert and Charlotte Davis. They’re your five-times great-grandparents, I think.”

“That’s a lot of greats.” Les leaned closer, squinting in a way that made me wonder if he needed glasses. “Are you sure that’s them?”

“You mean your mom hasn’t made you memorize all of your ancestors?” I grinned at him.

“Come on.” He rolled his eyes.

“I wish I was joking,” I said. “Your grandfather used to test me at dinner, and if I didn’t answer right, I didn’t get dessert.”

His eyes widened. “Betsy would throw a fit.”

“I don’t doubt that.” I turned my attention back to the picture. “Yeah, those two are Obadiah and Charlotte. Married in the fall of 1843.”

“Mom says it’s important for us to know our family’s history.”

“It is,” I agreed.

I wanted to tell him that it was more important to know the truth about our family’s history than it was to memorize whatever rhetoric his mom and grandparents were giving him, but I kept my mouth shut. Sharing what I suspected but couldn’t prove to a twelve-year-old about his family would’ve been wrong on a lot of levels. If, once my film came out, he and I got the chance to talk, I’d be a little more open with him about what I’d found.

In all honesty, from what I could tell, he was a smart kid who paid attention to things. If my film exposed my family’s lies like I thought it would, he’d probably remember us going through these boxes and start putting things together. What he’d do when the family started bad-mouthing me was anyone’s guess, though. He was only twelve and seemed to have his father’s non-confrontational personality. Of all people, I could understand the position he’d be in.

None of that mattered if I was wrong, though, so what I needed to focus on now was using this information to figure out exactly what the truth was about my family and our history here in Savannah.

“My history teacher this year says we’re going to do family trees and find out if anyone in our family fought in the War.” Les set the picture down next to the box. “It wouldn’t be anyone in this picture, right?”

I shook my head. “Obadiah wasn’t quite forty when the war started, so he probably could have if he’d been in better health. If I remember my history right, he was in some sort of accident as a kid and lost one of his eyes. The other only had partial vision.”

“He doesn’t have an eye?!” Les sounded equal parts horrified and curious. He looked more closely at the picture. “How come he doesn’t have an eye patch? It doesn’t look like he’s missing an eye.”

“He’s probably wearing a glass one.”

Les’s head snapped up, and he stared at me. “*A glass eye?*”

I chuckled as I reached into the box for a folder. “It’s not as uncommon as you’d think. It probably would’ve drawn less attention than a patch. Either way, he would’ve been fairly old to enlist, but his sight gave him a better excuse.”

“Did we have any relatives who fought?” Les asked.

“We did,” I said. “Two of Obadiah’s sons were killed in the war. Geoffrey and Robert, I think. Your great-great-great-great-grandfather, Luke Calvert, was too young, though. He missed the war by a couple years.”

“Do you think he minded?” Les leaned against the table, the picture still in his hands. “I mean, I know Pawpaw talks about what an honor it would’ve been to fight for the South, but I don’t think people who haven’t been in war can really know how they would’ve felt, you know? Maybe they’d be good at fightin’ and all that, but maybe they wouldn’t want to kill anyone, and that’s not a bad thing, is it?”

Damn. The kid had good questions.

“I don’t know,” I answered honestly. “I think a lot of it would depend on if you believed in what you’re fightin’ for.”

Les nodded, a pensive expression on his face. “I think I’m gonna go read a book.”

“All right. I’m going to take a look at more of this stuff. If you need me, I’ll be in here.”

Les nodded, and as he walked out, I wondered how much reading he’d be getting done or if he’d be thinking over our talk for a while. When I opened the folder and saw what was on the top of the stack of papers, however, Les was pushed right out of my head.

The yellowed, wrinkled page was inside a plastic sleeve, which made me less wary about picking it up, but it definitely didn’t help with the spidery, faded handwriting. It’d take a while to decipher exactly what information about my family this document held, but the printed letters at the top were clear.

“For sale, one male Negro, ‘Joshua.’”

Shit.

Twenty

Nyx

I'd given up on the coincidence versus fate argument. There were too many factors, too many things that could go one way or the other, too much that relied on whether or not someone was being honest. I had enough going on in my head, and on the list of priorities right now, that sort of philosophical shit wasn't even close to the top.

The fact that I'd completely missed one very important avenue of research was proof of just how much all of this was affecting me. I'd been so focused on whether or not Bradyn had known about all the connections I had to his family and his family had to my clients that I never stopped to think about the possibility of someone else being the connection.

Someone else who could actually be pulling the strings.

Min Wu, the lawyer who'd come to me with Carmine and Kathie Douglass's case, had been the one to set all of this in motion. I had no way of knowing what she knew or how much, if she'd sent me down here intentionally to meet up with the Traylors. She could be the connection between New York City and Savannah...

An idea popped into my head, something so crazy that it just might be possible.

Min Wu never told me the name of the law firm where she worked. I hadn't pressed the issue because it didn't matter to me where the money came from. I hadn't been hired to investigate the Douglass's lawyers so I hadn't even looked. I hadn't even doubted that she worked for a law firm.

This was why I was currently sitting in front of my laptop with Min Wu's name typed in the search bar, trying to get up the nerve to push 'search.' This whole case had been the rabbit hole from hell, and my gut said taking this route would only drag me down more, but I needed to know. I was sick and tired of having shit kept from me.

I clicked and waited. Not surprisingly, several women's information popped up. The third one down had a picture I recognized, and the information underneath it was familiar too.

Min Wu, senior attorney at A. Check & Associates. Rochester, New York.

I slumped back in my chair.

Fuck it all.

A. Check & Associates, the Rochester branch of Check & Sons. That was a name I'd never wanted to hear again, so of course, it made sense that it'd be the final thing linking everything together. My past coming full circle to bite me in the ass.

The world shifted.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

Footsteps. Door squeaking.

Someone was here.

"Nyx, the police want to talk to you."

I forced my eyes open. Well, eye. The other one was too swollen for me to see. Two men stood at the end of my bed.

"Where's my mom?" The words came out funny, and I coughed. "Thirsty." A nurse walked over to me and picked up a cup with a straw. After I took a couple sips, I tried again. "Where's my mom?"

The nurse looked to the two cops. "She's a minor."

"We have permission from the mom to talk to her alone."

The nurse didn't look happy about it, but she left. I drank some more water and tried not to think about why I hurt so much. Or why my mom wasn't here. Or how I'd gotten hurt.

"I'm Detective Shade, and this is Detective Russell. Why don't you tell us what happened?"

For a second, I remembered how Art had said no one would believe me, but then I remembered that it didn't matter anymore. I was here, and so were cops. I needed to tell them everything.

"I was in my room..."

The world shifted.

I shivered, and it made me hurt worse, but I wasn't really cold. When the doctor told me I could leave, I thought Mom was finally coming for me, but she didn't. It was the cops. They said the detectives needed to talk to me again. I told them I just wanted to go home, but they said it'd be better for all of us if I came here first.

The detectives came in and looked just as annoyed as before. They hadn't said a word, but I didn't think they believed me. If they did, they would've been nicer.

"Feeling better?" Detective Russell asked.

"A little." I hated how scared my voice sounded. "Is my mom coming here?"

"It's okay." Detective Shade sat down across from me. "She said we can talk to you."

I was still a kid, but I watched enough cop shows to know that I should have a parent or lawyer with me, but my mom wouldn't come, and I didn't trust any lawyers. I already told them everything, but I guess I'd have to say it again.

"The night after...he adopted my sister and me, he came into my room..."

I didn't make it any further because the door opened, and someone else came in. Someone I knew. My chest went tight, and I couldn't breathe.

"Ambrose Check. I'm Delia's attorney."

"What the hell are you doing here?" Detective Russell asked.

"I'm her lawyer."

I wanted to say that he wasn't. I didn't want anything to do with Uncle Ambrose. He hadn't hurt me, but he wouldn't help me either.

“You’re his brother.”

The world shifted.

“What do you mean my mom’s not coming? Where is she? Where are you taking me?”

My hands were shaking, and no one would talk to me. I was all alone, and I didn’t know what was happening. I couldn’t breathe, and my heart was about to come out of my chest. I’d never been this scared before, not even when he was hurting me. Then, I knew it would eventually stop.

But now, I didn’t know anything.

The world shifted back, and I found myself gripping the arms of the chair, my pulse racing from all the adrenaline that had been dumped into my system. As far as flashbacks went, that one had been pretty mild, but that didn’t mean it’d been fun. I could work through it alone, though, which was good. I didn’t need another long interruption while I got help to deal with my shit.

Less than ten minutes later, I was ready to put down on paper what I now knew: the law firm Min Wu represented was connected to the law firm employed by the family she’d hired me to investigate on behalf of her clients. Whether she’d known that or not, I couldn’t tell, but since Check & Sons had been the Traylor family’s lawyers for a couple generations, Ambrose had to have known when he’d sent Min Wu to me.

Seeing Ambrose’s hand in this made me wonder if he’d been pulling strings other places too. I’d never really understood him, which meant I couldn’t figure out his motives, but no matter why he’d put this case in my path, I’d find the truth.

This wasn’t for him. It was for the Douglasses and the Huxleys and all the other families like them who’d gone so long without justice.

I knew all too well what it was like to be in that position, and if there was anything I could do to help, I would do it. No matter what happened with Bradyn and me, I’d see this through to the end.

Twenty-One

Bradyn

I'd always considered myself a patient person, but my patience was coming to an end.

The kids had actually stayed pretty good for me after the whole ice cream situation, especially after I'd allowed Betsy to paint my finger and toenails a brilliant florescent pink. She informed me in a devious tone that Pawpaw had told her she wasn't allowed to paint her brothers' anymore because men didn't wear nail polish, which gave me an additional reason to let her do it. Being able to play with my niece, get her to behave, *and* annoy my father was the ultimate trifecta.

Of course, I insisted we take pictures of a job well done and send them to everyone in the family. The wicked smile she'd given me when she asked if Pawpaw was going to get one just confirmed that she would be the Lester to look out for. If my father had thought I was rebellious and headstrong, he was going to be in for a big surprise in a few years when Betsy started coming into her own.

The three of us played a couple board games and watched a movie – one with a princess, of course – finishing up not long before Warren and my mom arrived. I got the update on Clancy, who probably would just be getting out of the hospital around Halloween, and then made a little small talk as I gauged how long I had to stay before it wouldn't be rude for me to leave. I hadn't minded watching the kids – Betsy's near-tantrum aside – but now that my help was no longer needed, the files in my car were calling my name.

Without Ashley here, I doubted anyone would notice what I'd taken, but I didn't want to risk Les bringing them up while Mom and I were in the same room. I had no idea if she knew Ashley had those boxes or what was in them, but I had no desire to find out at the moment.

Of course, that meant Mom invited me to stay for dinner. Since it was just her, Warren, and the kids, I really didn't have any good excuse to decline. At

least, not an excuse I could give her without lying. Plus, she had texted me about Clancy even though she'd known Dad and Ashley would both be pissed about it. And Warren wasn't really a bad guy, just a weak one.

If I could ease some of the tension by staying for a meal, it was a small sacrifice to make. Besides the fact that it'd ruin this tentative truce I had going on with Mom at the moment, I would've had to be a real dick to act like what I was doing was more important than my nephew.

All of this meant that it was nearly seven-thirty before I was able to get away, and that was after at least a half-hour of practically biting my tongue to stop myself from telling them that I had work to do.

Once I was home, I kicked off my shoes, got a beer from my fridge, and sat down at my table to start going through what I'd taken from the house. I'd pretty much emptied the entire box, then split the contents of the other two boxes so they were all full about the same amount. If Ashley knew what had been in the boxes, my ruse would only last until she actually looked at what was there, but I doubted her attention would be anywhere near those boxes while Clancy was in the hospital.

My sister had a lot of negative character qualities, but the one thing I'd always admired about her was how much she loved her children. Even if she spoiled Betsy or tried to control the direction Les's life went, it was because she wanted what she thought was best for them.

I had a bad feeling that would bite me in the ass in the near future because I had no doubt Ashley would see my film as being a danger to the well-being of her children.

"She'll have nothing to worry about if I don't find anything," I reminded myself out loud.

I had my suspicions about my family, but no real evidence of any specific skeletons in the closet. Once I started digging in here, though, that could change. And I couldn't brush it off as something I stumbled on. If I took this step, I would be actively searching for lies...or worse.

Maybe it was stupid, but I needed that moment. I needed to know that I could, when my film was done, point to a specific time and place where I'd

made a conscious decision to put my own family's reputation on the line. To put my money where my mouth was, so to speak.

The first thing I looked at more closely was the post about the sale of a man named Joshua. The fact that it'd been in with my family's things in the first place was suspicious. The Traylors always claimed that they'd only had free, paid servants and workers, even before the war. They said they'd kept up appearances for fear of reprisal, but that they'd never actually owned a single slave who hadn't been immediately freed after purchase. What I found on this page might very well prove that to be a lie.

The way the page was laid out made me think that it'd been something written by Joshua's owner and given to a newspaper to have the ad run. Whoever its intended recipient had been, they must've had amazing eyesight because I doubted it would've been much clearer back then.

Still, I managed to puzzle out a little information.

As of 1853, Joshua had been a house slave, approximately twenty-eight years of age, and was described as 'good-mannered and light-skinned.' The paper also said that he was missing a finger from his left hand but was in otherwise good health.

It was impossible for me to tell if this ad had been placed by my family to sell Joshua, or if it'd been something my family had received after purchasing the man, perhaps with the intent to free him.

1853. Ten years after the wedding picture Les had showed me. Joshua would've been close in age to Obadiah, which meant, if my family had been the ones selling him, there was a good chance that he could be one of the slaves in the background of the wedding picture. I hadn't brought the picture with me, since there was a good chance Les might mention the picture to his parents or grandparents. The last thing I needed was for any of them to know I'd been doing anything more than humoring Les's interest in family history. My father would most likely suspect anyway, but anything I could do to deflect attention as long as possible was a good thing.

Fortunately, I'd had the sense to take a picture of it with my phone, just in case it ended up being important.

After putting the photo on my laptop, I pulled it up on the screen. This time, instead of focusing on the bride and groom, I looked for darker faces around them. They stood at the fringes, their clothes marking them as the better-dressed house slaves. Since there wasn't a picture of Joshua on the paper, I didn't really have much to go on, but there was always a chance I could spot a man with a missing finger.

When I didn't see anyone resembling that description, I got myself some coffee and then went through the picture again, this time studying every male. The paper had mentioned Joshua being light-skinned. In this type of photo, it wasn't always easy to tell the different skin tones, especially when there were plenty of white men who tanned dark.

Then I saw it. A hand on the shoulder of a dark-haired girl who looked like she was in her late teens. A hand with three fingers and a thumb. I focused in on the face, confirming a skin tone light enough to tell me that he'd most likely had a white father or grandfather. It was probably why I hadn't picked him out the first time through. Back then, he would've been told that he could 'pass.'

That was when it hit me. Finding Joshua in this picture in 1843 meant that when he was being sold in 1853, the odds were high that it'd been Obadiah Calvert who'd sold him.

"Fuck." I leaned back in my chair, almost dazed.

This shouldn't have been surprising. I'd suspected the lie for a long time, even as a teenager. I wasn't naïve. Many public schools in the South softened the reality of slavery, and there were plenty of people who tried to brush it off like it hadn't been a big deal. Anyone whose family lived in the South before the Civil War and who'd had the money, acknowledged that their ancestors had indeed owned slaves.

The most those families would claim in public now would be that their ancestors at least hadn't been cruel. In private, they might make comments about the 'necessity' of slavery. But I'd never heard another family go so far as to say that they'd paid every single one of the people who worked for them.

I'd never been able to understand why someone hadn't already called my parents out on it. Now, I had a pretty good idea why no one said anything. If my father was willing to disinherit me for something as simple as supporting a different political candidate, I could only imagine the lengths he would go to protect his 'family legacy.' I refused to believe it was because no one cared enough. There were too many good people in this world to think that way.

I gave myself a mental shake. It wasn't my job to judge who did or didn't do whatever they did or didn't do over the years. It was my job to find the truth and present it. Nothing more or less.

I leaned forward again, this time looking at the picture as a whole. I was confident that the man in that picture and the man being advertised as for sale was the same man, but I couldn't just put those two things on camera and come up with a whole new history for my family. That meant more research.

The woman in front of Joshua was too young to be his wife. Maybe. This was the 1800s, so age differences were looked at differently. Still, my gut said they were related, not married. They didn't resemble each other, though. Joshua's features were sharp. High cheekbones and an angular face.

A familiar angular face.

I frowned, my eyes moving from the groom to the slave, then back again. Again. Again.

Shit.

"They have some of the same facial features."

Owners having children with their slaves wasn't as uncommon as a lot of people wanted to believe. Most people knew the story of Thomas Jefferson and his slave, Sally Hemming, though the accuracy of the claim was still being debated, even after DNA testing showed a strong likelihood that someone from the Jefferson male line was in their lineage. Even if it hadn't been Thomas Jefferson who'd done it, the man who'd fathered Sally's children could have been one of his male relatives. And it was impossible to know whether or not Sally had consented to sex.

That was the other reality no one with Southern roots wanted to acknowledge. The majority of owner-slave children came from rape, whether

the violent sort or the more...*subtle* kind where the slave didn't fight it, but they also didn't really have a choice either.

If I was right about the reason for the resemblance between Obadiah and Joshua, I wondered about the *how* as much as the *who*. No family tree was ever perfect, and I was sure everyone had at least a few criminals taking up a branch or two along the way. The one thing I'd had to accept when I'd decided on this project was that I would probably find things about my ancestors that would make me sick to my stomach. Rape would definitely be one of those things I didn't know how to handle.

Nyx's face flashed into my mind.

I couldn't change anything, not in anyone's past, but I could try to bring the wrongs to light, to make sure that those who could be held responsible would be, and those who'd survived got whatever closure they could. Maybe that's what I could do for my next film. Nyx could even help me with the research. It could help her deal with—

Nope.

I wasn't going there.

I wasn't going to do that. My first instinct when it came to her was to protect, but I couldn't decide how or why or what she did to deal with her baggage. Even if we'd been in a real, committed relationship, it wouldn't have been my place. Advice if she asked, but otherwise, I needed to keep my mouth shut and support her.

And do my job.

Back to my research.

Two hours later, I'd gone through everything in the folder, and my mind was spinning. I'd definitely found what I'd been looking for, and it was worse than I'd imagined. In fact, I was now fairly certain that I'd discovered what Nyx was down here investigating.

And why my sister had those boxes in her library.

They knew. At the very least, my dad knew and had given Ashley the boxes to hide, probably giving her more than the one so he'd be able to claim that they were random boxes.

I wouldn't put anything past him.

The real question was, did Ashley know?

I had a lot of problems with my sister, but I wanted to believe that she would do the right thing. If she knew the truth, though, and hadn't done anything about it, then she was no better than our father. And if Mom knew, she was guilty too.

I rubbed my forehead. This was crazy.

But I couldn't deny it. I had too much evidence, and the story was too compelling. Even now, it was running through my head like a film, like *my* film.

Shortly after the Revolutionary War, Matthew and Ruth Calvert were shown in a local paper as being the owners of a rather large piece of property. The property where my family's home had sat for generations. That wasn't surprising. What was surprising was the article just underneath it. An article about the arrest of a slave named Zachariah Adams for assaulting his owner's son, fifteen-year-old Matthew Francis Calvert. Adams claimed that the teenager was harassing the slave's daughter, Deborah.

The next article was from a couple days later, stating that Adams had been hung for the assault.

Next came a record of slaves born on the Calvert plantation roughly eight months later. A list that included a child named Rachel, whose mother was listed as Deborah Adams. No father was recorded. Two of the other babies had fathers listed, and I had a sinking suspicion that I knew why Rachel's father wasn't.

I didn't have a direct link from Rachel to Joshua, but if Rachel was the daughter of Francis Calvert, it would explain why Joshua's skin was so light and why he shared features with Obadiah Calvert. I remembered now that Matthew Francis Calvert had been my ancestor's older brother. When Francis died, the next oldest, David, had inherited everything. *That* I remembered

from family dinners.

Three letters and a journal held the worst of it all. It boiled down to three main points.

Matthew Calvert had stolen everything from the Adams family. Their home *and* their freedom.

Deborah Adams had married a man named Solomon Huxley whose descendants still lived here.

And I knew those things because my family knew them too.

My father had always known.

Twenty-Two

Nyx

The thermometer on the porch of my cabin said that it was close to seventy despite the late hour, but the humidity had to put it to almost eighty. After this case, I'd never complain about New York summers again. The city got hot, but this was like walking in soup. I'd pulled my hair up, but strands of it still stuck to the back of my neck.

Why had I thought it was a good idea to do this?

My stomach twisted, and the sweat on my palms had little to do with the heat. Running to Bradyn when I needed someone to push the dark away made sense. Sex with him was amazing, and for reasons I didn't want to analyze, I felt safe with him.

But this wasn't me running to him. I'd had that flashback, but I'd worked through it on my own. Sure, I was a little worried that if I tried to sleep, it'd come back, but that wasn't why I was only a few feet from Bradyn's front steps. I wasn't bored, either. Or horny. All my usual reasons for seeking sex weren't there.

Well, not exactly anyway.

I wanted sex, but I only wanted it with him.

It was a new sensation and one that scared the shit out of me. There were times back home when I'd gone to Club Privé looking specifically for one sub or another because I knew which one would give me what I needed at that particular time. There, it'd been about who would be the best at doing what I needed done. With Bradyn, it was about *him*. I wanted *him*.

Fuck my life.

I gritted my teeth and made my way up the stairs to the porch. These last couple feet to the door weren't the hardest I'd ever had to cross, but they weren't the easiest either. I was crazy for doing this, but I couldn't stay away.

Whatever it was about Bradyn that drew me to him made it almost impossible to walk away.

Two brisk knocks and my heart thudded as I waited. Maybe I should have called first, but by the time I'd considered that, I'd been out the door, and I'd worried that turning around for my phone would give me an excuse not to follow through. And I wanted to follow through. Just the thought of him inside me again made all those low, tight things inside me twist and turn.

"Nyx." He looked surprised to see me. "Are you okay?"

I didn't like that the first thing he thought when he saw me was that something was wrong.

Bradyn seemed to read my mind and frowned. He reached out, his fingers brushing against mine. "What did I say?"

I shook my head. "This was a mistake."

Bradyn caught my hand before I could do anything more than start to turn. "Don't go."

I closed my eyes. "I don't know what I was thinking, coming here."

"Hey, it's okay. Come inside, and we'll talk. Whatever's wrong, we'll figure it out."

"That's exactly it." I opened my eyes and hoped that the tears that had been burning against my eyelids didn't spill over. "I'm not here because something is wrong."

"I'm confused."

My laugh was bitter. "That makes two of us."

His expression softened, and he stepped out onto the porch, the shadows making his eyes the dark blue of a night sky. "Come inside, Nyx. Please."

It was the *please* that did it. "All right."

The air conditioner cooled my overheated skin, drying the sheen of sweat that had gathered in the short walk between the cabins. Bradyn led me over to his couch, and I sat down, wondering what the point was of me being here now.

“Do you want something to drink?”

I shook my head. “Let’s just get this over with.”

He crouched down in front of me. “Talk to me. You came here for a reason, and then something changed your mind.”

I sighed. “How is this ever supposed to be something with us if the only time I come to you is when there’s something I need you to do or fix?”

He thought for a moment before answering, which I appreciated, even if I didn’t think it’d make a difference. “Let me make sure I’m understandin’ this. You didn’t come here because somethin’ is wrong, and when I asked if you were okay, you felt like I assumed that if you were here, it was because you needed somethin’, not because you *wanted* to be here.”

“Pretty much.” A second bitter laugh burst out of my throat. “So, tell me, how can that be the basis for anything even remotely healthy? And what’s the point, then, of even trying?”

He leaned forward and kissed my forehead, then my cheeks, and finally, my lips. Each was just a light touch, nothing more, but they went through me in a way a deep, sensual kiss wouldn’t have right now.

“Listen to me, my little firebird,” he said as he took both of my hands. “I don’t care if you’re here because somethin’s wrong...” He stopped and shook his head. “That didn’t come out right. I want you to come to me if somethin’s wrong. If you can’t, that’s when I’d question why we’re tryin’.”

It made me feel better that he didn’t just automatically have the perfect thing to say. Less like I was always the fuck up, and he was the white knight. But it didn’t change the fact that I was fucked up, and Bradyn wasn’t. Having sex with someone, it didn’t matter what baggage I carried. It was just sex. But he wanted more. I just didn’t know if he understood what that really meant.

“Let’s try this again,” he said. “Pretend you knocked on my door, and I’ve just opened it.” He winked at me, diffusing some of the tension. “Nyx, it’s good to see you. Won’t you come in?”

“Seriously, Bradyn?”

He grinned. “What brings you here this fine evenin’?”

I rolled my eyes but couldn’t help smiling. “You’re really something, you know that?”

He put his hand on my cheek and ran his thumb over the corner of my mouth. He was still smiling, but the light in his eyes had shifted from humor to something sweeter.

“It doesn’t matter if you’re havin’ a great day or a shitty day, if you need me to help you with somethin’ or if you just want to spend time together. There will be times I’ll have shitty days too or might need your help. That’s what a relationship is, a back-and-forth, give-and-take.” His fingers curled around the back of my neck, a gesture that was oddly comforting. “We’re equals in this, firebird.”

I wanted to believe it could be that simple, that Bradyn and I could actually do this, but I still had doubts. He was being protective now, but how long would that last?

“You haven’t answered my question,” he said. “What brought you over tonight?”

I gave him honesty since I didn’t have anything else to give. “You. I wanted you. Not for a distraction. Not because something’s wrong. Just because I wanted you.”

I couldn’t decide which was sexier. The heat in his eyes or the way his entire face lit up.

“Is that *wanted*, like past tense?” He was teasing me, but I understood what he was really asking.

“Not past tense.”

“Good.”

He pulled me toward him, crushing our mouths together. I grabbed the front of his shirt, letting everything else wash away. I hadn’t come here to use him to get past my mental torture, and I wasn’t going to let my few minutes of insecurity turn this into that.

Fortunately, I had a pretty good idea what to do.

I tugged at his bottom lip with my teeth, then pulled back to rest my forehead against his. “Be in charge.”

He didn’t move, but his eyes widened with his surprise. “Say that again.”

He was giving me an out, but I’d meant what I said, so I did what he wanted. “Be in charge.”

The trip from the couch to his bedroom seemed to both take forever and be over in seconds, but however long it really took, he carried me the whole way. Our mouths stayed fused together until we reached his bed, and he tossed me down with an abruptness that startled me.

I didn’t mind, though, because as soon as I was out of his arms, he was stripping, and I got to watch all that muscle and tanned skin appear like magic. I let my eyes run over a set of abs that looked like they’d been airbrushed, following that line of curls and those v-grooves at his hips down to that thick, slightly curved piece of flesh.

“Clothes off, and then I want you on your knees next to the bed.”

I was tempted to make a smart remark about how it’d been pointless to put me on the bed if I was just going to be on my knees on the floor, but this power dynamic between Bradyn and myself was a new thing for me. We were still feeling things out.

One of the lessons the different rooms at Club Privé had taught me was that, when it came to floors, a carpet might be soft, but you’d probably end up with rugburn. Or it could be like this floor, hard but smooth. It all depended on the type of pain you either wanted to receive or wanted to inflict. I’d used both kinds for myself – knees on either side of a sub’s head for oral – and for my subs – a variety of positions and reasons.

The bed was at a perfect height for me to bend at the waist and lay my upper body flat across it. The feel of the slightly scratchy blanket against my nipples made me shiver, and I wondered if Bradyn had bought it for that reason or if it was just an added benefit. Thinking about why he’d bought it made me wonder how many women he’d brought in here, which wasn’t what I wanted to be thinking about right now.

Then his hand was on my back, sliding down the length of my spine to my ass. He lightly smacked one cheek and then ran a finger between them. When he brushed over my anus, I inhaled sharply, and he stopped.

“You remember your safe words?”

I nodded.

“Good.”

I didn't have to ask what he meant. If I used my safe word, he'd stop. If I didn't, then he'd continue with whatever he had planned.

“I have a toy I'm going to use,” he said as the tip of his finger rubbed over that muscle. “It's only a little bigger than my finger, and it'll slide in there nice and easy.”

When he pushed the tip of his finger inside, I made a whimpering sound that I would've hated if I hadn't been so caught up in what he was saying.

“Once that's inside your ass, I'm going to fuck your pussy.”

Oh.

“Yellow.” The word came out before the memory could surface and that alone was enough to hold back any fear. He knew to be careful, to listen for the word to make him stop.

“Nice and slow, firebird.” His finger came out, and I heard a familiar sound that was easy enough to place, even before the cold trickle of lube hit my skin. One hand settled at the small of my back with just enough pressure to let me know that I wasn't supposed to move...but if I did, he'd stop me.

“You're going to take my finger first.”

He did it slowly but didn't pause, letting his finger sink into me an inch at a time. Well, not an inch. A smaller amount. But it was a gradual push, a steady burn rather than a sharp pain. Without anything else to distract me from it, though, the heat spread through my body, filling me with a promise I knew Bradyn could deliver.

Before the night was over, I would come...hard.

In and out it went, each time making the burn fade a little more than the last. When he added a twist of his finger, the sensation changed, and I gasped. He laughed, a low, masculine sound that did as much for me as his finger. Damn, I loved that laugh.

The hand on my back slid around my hip and underneath me, fingers easily finding my clit. I moaned as they moved in quick circles, sending pleasure out to meet the heat, turning it into a more intense sensation than they had been apart. The two points in my body fought for my attention, but I couldn't focus on one or the other. My fingers curled in the blanket, needing something to hold onto.

“Come like this, firebird.”

A shudder ran through me, and I made a desperate sound. I was vaguely aware that I had the power to stop him, and that kept me grounded enough to let him order me to come. It gave me the sort of freedom that I'd never had as a Dominant.

“I want you to come,” he repeated. “Come with my finger in your ass and your clit being played with. Come, and I'll give you what you really want.”

I tensed, then exploded. The bed muffled my shout, but nothing could stop me from thrashing around, limbs desperate for movement. In the background, I could hear Bradyn telling me that I'd done well, and his pride in me filled me with a different, non-physical pleasure. Something I hadn't even realized that I'd wanted until now.

As I came down, my muscles relaxed, but I didn't move from where I knelt. My knees would be hurting soon, but I trusted Bradyn to finish before the pain canceled out the pleasure.

Something not quite hard, but definitely unyielding, pressed against my ass, and I realized that he'd taken out his finger, which meant this was the toy he'd promised. I didn't look back to see what it was. Instead, I concentrated on letting my breathing even out.

“I promise this will feel even better.”

A hand on my hip helped keep me still as he eased the slender cylinder into the place where his finger had been only minutes ago. He was right. The toy

was a little bigger, stretching me a little more, bringing back that burn, but I didn't mind. I still had that haze that came after a really good orgasm, and I knew I'd have another one soon enough.

"Damn." He let out a low whistle. "Do you have any idea how fuckin' gorgeous you are, firebird? Just the hint of color where the base keeps that toy in place, a reminder of how it's all snug in that tight passage of yours."

Damn. If I hadn't already come, he could've gotten me wet just talking like that.

"Now, let's see if you're ready for my cock."

"I am," I blurted out. The constant pressure in my ass was doing all sorts of weird stuff to me. I could barely stay still. I needed him to fuck me and make me come again.

Another of those sexy laughs slid over my skin and deep inside me.

Two fingers pushed into my pussy, and I cried out, a jolt running through me. I tightened around his fingers and around the toy, such different sensations, but definitely ones I was enjoying.

"I'm tryin' to decide if you're good for my ego or bad," Bradyn said as he drove his fingers into me with fast, rough twists. "Good because you come so pretty for me, or bad because I know once I get my dick inside you, I'm barely gonna be able to get you off before I come myself."

A surge of pride went through me. Pride and satisfaction that I could cause this crazy hot, insanely fuckable man to lose even a bit of his self-control.

Then his fingers were gone, and I heard him open the condom packet. A few seconds later, the head of his cock was right at my entrance. He grabbed onto my shoulder for leverage and slammed into me with a thrust that pushed all the air from my lungs so that my scream was just a breath.

Everything in my head vanished, and at that moment, I couldn't even remember my own name. Still buried balls deep, he wrapped my ponytail around his fist, and all I could do was hold on as he rode me with hard, fast strokes. Him taking me like this would've had me writhing and crying out even without the shaft in my ass. With it, I felt myself pushed to the edge of

consciousness, my mind hovering in that space where everything was just so overwhelming that it felt like the only possible outcome was death because no one could possibly feel all this and live.

“Fuck, you feel so good.” Bradyn curled his body over mine, shortening his thrusts as he slid his hands underneath me to get at my breasts. “Come for me again, ‘cuz I’m not gonna last much longer.”

It was too much. I didn’t think I could. I felt like my mind and body were going a thousand different ways.

Then two sharp pinches, one to each nipple, and everything focused instantly, intensely, and I came calling out his name. The world went white, then gray, and he said my name. His cock swelled even more, and I had the distant thought that he’d come...and then nothing but darkness.

Twenty-Three

Bradyn

My head jerked, startling me out of a rather pleasant dream that involved tying Nyx up and licking whipped cream off her body. I blinked, my brain trying to simultaneously process that I was awake and trying to figure out what had woken me so abruptly.

Dark red hair spilled across my pillow, tickling my nose, and I now recognized the need to sneeze. I pinched my nose shut, not wanting to sneeze on Nyx's head, but also not wanting to disturb her when she was sleeping so soundly. After a moment, the urge went away, and I was able to put my arm back around her.

I didn't try to go back to sleep, though. Knowing what I did about her, I was appreciative and proud that she trusted me enough to sleep with me. *Literally* sleep with me. I didn't need her to tell me that falling asleep next to me was something she didn't do with anyone else.

I wasn't under any illusions that last night's encounter had obliterated all the negatives, and it'd be smooth sailing from here on out, but it had brought us closer together, and not just in a physical sense. Connecting on an emotional level was important, but Nyx needed to see that what we had between us wasn't limited to her coming to me when she was upset and me providing her with a physical distraction. I was determined to make this work, and after last night, I had hope that Nyx was too.

She made a sound and rolled over onto her stomach. I let her go, not wanting to scare her by holding on tight, even though that's what I wanted to do. The sheet slipped down to just above her ass, giving me a view of her entire tattoo, and I took advantage of the moment to really study the work.

Kaimi was a true artist. That much was obvious, even to me, and I'd never been anything close to an art connoisseur. No one in my family was. Every piece of art in my family's home had been selected by the most expensive interior designer in Savannah. She'd given my parents information on each

piece, letting them sound as if they had worked with her on finding every item. Since I'd never seen Ashley show an interest in art, I assumed she'd done the same thing.

As my eyes traced the lines up her back, my hands itched to follow. Hell, my tongue wanted to join the parade, but Nyx was sleeping, and no matter how appealing the idea of waking her up with something sensual, I wouldn't do it. We didn't know each other well enough for me to make assumptions about what was okay or not okay to do when she didn't have the ability to use a safe word.

While that option of waking her wasn't an option right now, there was something else I could do for her. Something that I hoped would make her feel like this morning could become a normal occurrence.

Breakfast.

I carefully got out of bed, not wanting to disturb her, and headed to the kitchen. I was no chef, but I could handle scrambled eggs and bacon. I worked on autopilot, keeping one ear out for Nyx even as I reminded myself not to overwhelm her. Our conversation last night had gone well, but it had shown that she needed me not to push.

"That smells good."

I looked over my shoulder and was struck with an almost painfully intense bolt of lust that made me wish I was wearing something a little more substantial than just the boxer-briefs I'd slept in. They didn't do anything to hide how I got immediately and completely hard at the sight of her in one of my t-shirts. It had less to do with those long, bare legs of hers and more to do with the sudden possessiveness I felt at seeing her wearing something of mine.

"Thanks." I turned back to the stove on the pretense of needing to stir the eggs. "Grab a plate."

"How about I get two?" She didn't quite pull off completely casual with the question, but I went with it.

"That'd be great. Thanks."

As I split the eggs between the two plates, I had a flash of what my future could possibly look like, waking up next to Nyx, having breakfast with her, starting our day with the same routine.

“Have you been up long?” She broke the silence as she put her plate on the table.

“Just enough to get the food and coffee ready.”

“How do you take yours?” she asked as she walked over to the pot.

I would’ve told her that I’d get it for both of us, but I had a feeling that she wouldn’t be comfortable just sitting and waiting. Besides, I was still trying to get my rebellious dick under control.

“Just a splash of the creamer in the fridge.”

“The big, tough cowboy doesn’t drink it black?”

I grinned at the teasing tone, a different warmth settling in my stomach. I liked the idea of this easy banter with her.

“Cowboys are more out West than in the South,” I informed her. “Besides, we don’t have cows on the ranch.”

“Then what are you?” she asked, carrying two mugs of coffee over to the table. “A horseboy?”

I laughed. “You make a fair point.” I sat down across from her. “I suppose ranch hand would be the most accurate job title.”

As we ate, our conversation stayed on my work, but I didn’t mind. When we were finished, I planned on showing Nyx what I’d discovered before she’d come over yesterday. I intended to use it in my film, but if it could help the Huxleys and Nyx’s clients, I wanted them to have it too.

“I have to know.” Nyx stabbed a section of egg with her fork. “How did a rich politician’s son on track to be a documentary filmmaker learn how to give riding lessons?”

I was impressed by the question and let it be heard in my words. “Most people just want to know how I ended working here, not how I was qualified

to do the work.”

She shrugged, a pleased smile curving her lips at the compliment. “It just seems like a weird thing for you to know how to do.”

“After I found out about my dad and my ex, I needed to get out of Savannah,” I broke off a piece of bacon but didn’t lift it to my mouth, “so I went to Statesboro to stay with a cousin of mine, Perenelle. She volunteers at a stable that teaches special needs kids how to ride. That’s where I learned the basics. When Brew hired me, he said I had a natural talent with horses, so he taught me the rest of what I needed to know.”

“Brew and Shadae are great people,” she said, nothing but sincerity in her voice.

“Some of the best I’ve ever known,” I agreed.

She reached over and put her hand on mine. “I understand why you were angry when you thought I was using them.”

“It’s funny.” I turned my hand and linked our fingers together. “I feel more at home here, with them, than I ever did with my family. More myself.”

“I get that.” She rubbed my fingers with her thumb. “When I moved in with Kaimi and Rose, it was the first time I’d felt like I was home since before my dad died.”

We were both quiet after that, and after finishing the last of my breakfast, I got up to put the plate in the sink. It was time to change the conversation so that we weren’t both thinking about how the places we each called home were eight hundred miles apart.

I’d looked up the mileage during the flight to New York for Kaimi’s wedding.

That wasn’t important right now, though. We had other things to discuss.

“I meant to come see you today.” I poured myself a second cup of coffee, then put the pot back on the warmer when she placed her hand over her mug, indicating that she’d had enough. “I found a few things that I think you’ll find...interesting.”

“Interesting?”

“I moved it all over to the couch so we could eat at the table.” I took her empty plate and put it with mine, continuing my explanation as I went. “I was at my sister’s house yesterday, watching the kids while everyone else was at the hospital and—”

“Shit!” Nyx cut in, an embarrassed expression on her face. “I completely forgot about your nephew! How is he?”

“Good,” I said with a smile. “He has to stay in the hospital longer than he would have if they’d caught it before his appendix burst, but he’ll make a complete recovery and should be home around Halloween.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” she said, sitting down next to me on the couch. “If something like that happened to Rose, I’d be a mess.”

“Somehow, I doubt it.” Off her look, I added, “You’d be the one threatening the doctor with loss of limb if they didn’t take care of her.”

She laughed. “Yeah, that does sound about right.” She leaned against me for a moment. “Now, back to what you were saying.”

I was tempted to put my arm around her, but we’d probably get distracted if I did that, so I stuck with simply telling the story. I explained about the boxes and how I’d brought them home. I’d put everything into a pile in chronological order rather than the order I’d found them in, and I handed over each piece as I explained what it said and what I was filling in with educated guesses.

When I finished, I stopped talking, and we sat in silence as she went through everything more closely. It was hard not to watch her face as she read, study the nuances of her expressions. I knew her well enough to know that sort of attention would make her uncomfortable, so I simply sat and waited, looking at nothing.

“Well, damn.”

“If what’s there wasn’t so fucking awful, I might’ve laughed at that response.” I rubbed the back of my neck. “I plan on using what’s there to expose my family’s lies, but I figured your clients could use it too.”

She looked more than a little bit dumbfounded. “It definitely answers some questions.”

“And brings up some other ones.” I rubbed my face with both hands. “Like how my however many greats uncle probably fathered a child with a slave.”

“I have to double-check with my client to give any names, but I can tell you that one of the things I was supposed to be looking for was a way to get DNA from a Traylor to be compared to DNA we already have.”

Shit. It sounded to me that if they’d sent her looking for my family’s DNA, then the odds were in their favor that they’d match.

She licked her lips. “If you’re willing to do it, I’ll reach out to them.”

“I will.”

She gave me a strange look I couldn’t read. “Shouldn’t you talk to your family first?”

I scoffed. “They’d just try to cover it up. Best let the lawyers handle it.”

“Oh shit.” Even though we’d just woken up, Nyx sounded tired. “The lawyers.”

I turned toward her so that our knees touched. “That doesn’t sound good.”

“Yeah.” She sighed. “Yesterday, I started looking into the law firm that hired me, and it turns out they’re A. Check & Associates.”

“Check? Shit. That’s the name of my family’s lawyer.” I didn’t like the direction this was going.

“I know.” She pressed the heel of her hand into her eye. “I looked into that too.”

I frowned. “The law firm that hired you is connected to the law firm my family uses?”

“Oh, it gets better than that.” Her voice had an edge to it. “Two of the sons at Check & Sons – Ambrose and Art – moved to Rochester and started A. Check & Associates.”

Art.

Art Check.

Her molesting asshole of a stepfather.

Motherfucker.

I couldn't say anything for a full minute, but when I finally could speak, only three words came out.

“What. The. Fuck.”

She gave a bitter laugh. “I couldn't make this shit up if I tried.”

“That's an understatement.” I shook my head.

“I'm going to look into whether or not there's a conflict of interest,” she said stiffly. “If there is, I'll advise my clients and the Huxleys to find a different lawyer.”

I reached over and took her hand, squeezing it until she looked at me. “This is about more than your clients, Nyx. Unless you think it's a coincidence that a lawyer from Rochester found you in New York.”

“I don't.” It was her turn to squeeze my hand. “Ambrose never hurt me, but I don't understand why he sent Min to me.”

“Do you want to talk to him? Confront him?”

She thought for a few seconds, chewing her bottom lip before meeting my gaze again. “I don't know yet.”

“Well, if you do, I'll go with you.” I put my hand on her cheek. “You don't have to do this alone anymore.”

Nyx

I'd never expected to go back 'home,' but here I was at Rochester International, walking out of the terminal, my hand tightly held by the man at my side. When he'd told me he'd go with me to confront Ambrose, I'd appreciated the offer, but I hadn't really expected him to do it.

The earliest flight we'd been able to get was for today – Tuesday – which made it even more surprising when Bradyn bought two tickets. He'd assured me that Shadae and Brew wouldn't have a problem with him being gone a couple days, especially once they found out he was going somewhere with me, and he'd been right. We hadn't told them about what he'd found since I wasn't sure how I wanted to handle giving over information now that I knew Ambrose was the one behind hiring me.

Ambrose Check.

He was the reason my mom had met Art in the first place. I'd heard the story a dozen times. Art's older brother, he'd been at Cornell when he'd met a Rochester native, and instead of going back to Savannah to join the family firm like his older brother Abraham had done, he'd decided to stay and open his own law practice. His parents hadn't been happy about it, but he'd stuck with it. After Art graduated from Brown, Ambrose had convinced Art to move to Rochester too. That's where Art and my mom met and where my nightmares had begun.

I'd told Bradyn all that on the flight, and even though he hadn't asked, I'd known he'd had questions. I'd answered the main one, anyway. I had no idea if Ambrose had known what Art had been doing to me. He'd never said anything one way or the other.

Then I'd changed the conversation so Bradyn wouldn't ask one of the other follow-up questions I was sure he'd already been thinking. I knew for certain that Ambrose hadn't kept in touch with his brother because Art was dead. I didn't want to talk about that, though. I had a shit-ton of baggage to deal

with, and right now, I had to focus on the whole Ambrose-Min-Savannah mess. Things were so up in the air, we'd even left our return tickets open-ended so I'd have whatever time I needed.

"How're you doin'?" Bradyn asked. The question sounded casual, but I knew why he was asking it, which was definitely *not* casual.

"Okay for now," I answered honestly. "One of the reasons we're staying where we're staying is that it's nowhere near the law firm or my old neighborhood."

He didn't ask if I wanted to see my old house. Whether that was because he already knew the answer or because he didn't want to risk asking didn't matter. I just appreciated him letting me take the lead with this.

Our appointment wasn't until tomorrow morning so we had some time. I hadn't been thrilled about the wait, but it was the best we could do. I'd been wracking my brains to figure out what we could do that wouldn't freak me out or involve a sex marathon that would leave me sore tomorrow, and I'd finally come up with an idea that made me nervous but not panicking, and the nerves were at least a different type of anxiety.

"There are a couple places I'd like to show you, if you're up for it," I said as we made our way to the next taxi in line. "Places here that have good memories."

He smiled. "I'd like that."

* * *

Taking Bradyn to a few places in the city wasn't just easier than I expected, but more enjoyable too. I liked being able to show him places where I'd been happy. A couple of them had even been from before my dad died.

Staying busy had made it easier to forget why I was there, but by the time we went to bed, my mind had been racing again. Still, I managed to get at least a little sleep so that when Bradyn and I were having breakfast in the hotel

restaurant, I felt like I was as mentally prepared as I could be for what I had to do.

“I think I want to talk to Ambrose alone,” I said as we waited for our check.

“Are you sure?”

“Not really,” I said honestly, “but I think it’d be better. If I go in there with you, that just gives him something to use as a distraction, asking how we met, how long we’ve been dating, that sort of thing. I have enough questions for him. I don’t need him asking me any.”

“That makes sense,” Bradyn said. “But only if you’re sure. You don’t have to go through this alone.”

“I know.” I smiled at him. It was a watery smile at best, but it was still there. “And I’m grateful for it. Knowing that you’ll be at the hotel when I get back is exactly what I need.”

He didn’t look like he was happy about my choice, but he didn’t try to talk me out of it. Instead, he walked me out front where a cab was waiting, gave me a kiss, and said that he’d be waiting for me.

His faith in me gave me the courage I needed to make the ride to A. Check & Associates without freaking out. The sight of the building didn’t trigger anything, but that was probably because I’d never been there before. Art hadn’t believed in taking his family to work. I suspected it would be actually seeing Ambrose that’d do it.

I paid the driver and went inside. A prim-looking woman with frosted hair and horn-rimmed glasses sat behind the welcome desk, and she gave me a tight, polite smile that didn’t reach her eyes. I’d met women like her before. She might’ve been a great secretary or administrator or whatever her title was, but she wore it like a badge of honor rather than a job. I had no doubt she considered herself a gatekeeper of sorts, the person who was in charge of who got to see her bosses.

“I have an appointment to see Ambrose Check.”

“Your name?”

“Josie Pryor.” Since Min had found me in New York, I assumed Ambrose knew the name I was using. The last thing I wanted was to give him a head’s up. For all I knew, he’d bolt if he heard Nyx Phoenix was here to see him.

“Have a seat, Ms. Pryor. Mr. Check is currently on a call.”

I had no doubt the *Mr. Check* was meant for me since I’d said Ambrose’s first name, but I didn’t care. I wasn’t here for a social call.

I moved away from the desk, but I didn’t bother sitting. I had too much nervous energy to be still. While I waited, I paced, moving from the picture on one wall to flip through the magazines in the rack. I’d done that about four or five times before the secretary called me over.

“Mr. Check will see you now.” She pointed down the corridor behind her. “He’s at the end of the hallway. Knock before you go in.”

I was tempted to give her a salute and a smart-ass comment, but I behaved. I wasn’t here to annoy the help.

I found his office easily enough, and the voice that told me to come in was one I recognized, even all these years later. As I reached for the doorknob, I waited for the familiar feel of the world shifting, dragging me down into the past, but it didn’t happen. I opened the door and stepped inside, hoping I wasn’t making an awful mistake.

His hair was grayer than the last time I’d seen him, and there was less of it too. When he raised his head, I saw a few more wrinkles, and then he stood up, just as stocky as he had been thirteen years ago. His eyes were the same muddy brown, and they widened as he recognized me.

“Delia?”

“Hi.” I closed the door behind me and came closer to the desk. “Mind if I call you Ambrose? I don’t think *uncle* has meant anything in a while.”

“I-I...uh...” He shook his head. “What are you—”

I held up a hand. “How about we fast forward past you trying to figure out what to say and go straight to me telling you why I’m here.”

He nodded and motioned to the chair across from him. I didn't really want to sit, but I was honestly worried that I might hit him, and the last thing I needed was to go to jail on assault charges, especially with Bradyn so close. Too much might come out if that happened. I'd told him more than I'd ever told anyone else, but there were still things I'd kept to myself.

I sat, and Ambrose dropped into his seat like all the strength had gone out of his legs.

"What the hell are you up to, Ambrose?" I didn't care how harsh my tone was. "Fucking around with my life? Sending one of your employees all the way to New York to mess with me?"

Ambrose's jaw dropped. "No! That wasn't what I was doin' at all!"

"Then what were you doing?" My hands gripped the arms of the chair hard enough to make my fingers ache.

He pulled a cloth handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed it across his forehead. "I wanted to help you."

A half scoff half snort escaped my throat. "*Help* me?"

"I wasn't there for you when you needed me." The words poured out of him, his accent as thick as ever. "Art messin' with you...I should've known."

I wanted to ask him why he should've known, but I didn't. Maybe I'd come back to it, but right now, I just wanted to hear what he had to say while he wasn't thinking much about the words. More people spilled secrets by accident when the person they were talking to was silent than they did if they kept getting interrupted. Or, at least, that had been my experience.

"Since I didn't protect you then, I tried to do everythin' I could to protect you after. Kept tabs on where you were and what you were doin', even after you changed your name. I worked on gettin' you let out early and made sure you could leave Rochester even though you'd technically been on parole."

My stomach churned, making me regret having breakfast this morning. This was so much worse than I'd thought. He hadn't just sent Min to me. He'd had his hand in everything that had happened to me from the moment I'd made the accusations about Art. Ambrose had claimed to be my lawyer back then,

but I hadn't wanted him anywhere near me. I'd thought he'd wanted to protect his brother by getting me in trouble. Now, I saw it was guilt.

It didn't make things better.

I lifted my chin. "If you're expecting me to thank you, you'll be waiting until hell freezes over."

He shook his head. "No, that's not...no, I'm not expecting anything from you. I never wanted you to know I was doing any of this."

"Now that I know, what happens?"

His hands were shaking as he pressed his palms to the top of his desk. "Whatever you want. I just want to help you. Money. More cases. I can put you on retainer for the firm. Or I can write a check."

I shook my head. "I don't want your fucking money, Ambrose. I never did, no matter what your family's always thought."

He opened his mouth, and the expression on his face made me think he was going to apologize again. I didn't want to hear it. In fact, I was just about ready to walk out. This wasn't helping me at all.

"Just tell me one more thing," I said. "If you're so hellbent on helping me, why the fuck would you send me a case that would take me to Savannah and to your family's fucking firm?"

He frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"The case you gave Min to hire me for, that's what I'm talking about."

He shook his head. "I don't know anything about the case itself. I simply told her to take whatever case needed the most research done and hire you for it."

"So, you had no idea that one of the families I was looking into has had Check & Sons as their lawyers for generations?"

His jaw dropped, and I didn't think he was a good enough actor to pretend to be that surprised. "I swear, I didn't know. I never would've sent you anywhere near my family."

I wanted to believe him simply because it would make things easier for me, but he'd hidden his interference in my life for more than a decade. I didn't think I could believe anything he said.

And where that left me, I didn't know.

Twenty-Five

Bradyn

I didn't like this.

I tossed the remote on the table and pushed to my feet. I understood Nyx needing to do this herself, but that didn't mean I liked the idea of her going through this alone.

My instincts were to protect her, always and from everything, but when I'd agreed to submit to her that first time, I'd seen the need she had for independence, for control. If I tried to hold her too tight, I'd lose her, and it was that thought that kept going through my mind as I waited in our hotel room.

Still, I needed to be ready for however she came back. Depending on how things went, she could be furious or crying or dealing with flashbacks or any number of other things. She hadn't wanted me to go with her to confront Ambrose, but she had wanted me here with her, and I was determined to show her that it hadn't been a mistake.

She needed familiarity, but not here in Rochester. She needed to be around the people and places that had helped her work through her trauma the first time around. I didn't have the financial resources to do something like rent a private plane, but I'd always been wise with how I spent my money, which meant I had enough to do this for her.

We'd do some sightseeing, go to dinner wherever she wanted, even if it was just to stay here and get room service, and then tomorrow morning, we'd go to New York City so she could spend some time with Kaimi and Rose. I was pretty sure that between our tickets, my connections, and some money, I could make it happen.

It was almost noon when the lock in the door clicked, and I immediately leaned against the arm of the chair in an attempt to look casual, though I suspected I just looked like an idiot.

One look at Nyx's face had me straightening and forgetting about how I appeared. Her face was blank, and it was worse than if she'd come in scowling or even crying. Those normally bright green eyes were dull and empty, almost as if she was in shock.

"Nyx?" I took her hand and held it between mine. Her fingers were cold.

"I'm okay."

If her voice had been stronger, I might've believed it. "What do you need me to do?"

She didn't answer, her eyes unfocused at a spot on my shoulder.

"Nyx, what do you need me to do?" I repeated my question, and she blinked, shook her head, then seemed to see me.

"Sorry." She gave me a twisted sort of smile. "Seeing Ambrose was easier than I'd thought it'd be, but it wasn't *easy*."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

She shook her head. "Not yet. Maybe not at all."

"Whatever you need," I promised. I raised her hand and kissed it. "What do you want to do now? We can stay in if you like or maybe do some sightseeing. Do the touristy stuff that non-natives would do."

"I think I'd like that." She blinked a few times and seemed to come out of the fog that had been shrouding her. "Sightseeing."

A rush of relief went through me. I knew her as well as I thought I did. Now for her surprise.

"I planned something for us tomorrow," I said. "A flight to New York City where we can spend a few days together, away from all of this mess."

She threw her arms around my neck. "Thank you."

I hadn't expected the embrace, but I wrapped my arms around her and held her tight. I pressed my face against her hair and breathed in the subtle scent of her white tea shampoo and body wash. Without any effort on my part beyond breathing, my body responded, my cock thickening. It wasn't

surprising. I'd gotten a hard-on in the shower just from it still smelling like her after her shower.

I wasn't going to act on it, though.

If she initiated sex, I wouldn't say no, but I didn't want that to be the only way we knew how to deal with problems together. I wanted something real, something lasting with her, and I refused to let ill-timed arousal screw that up.

Fortunately, another part of my body seemed to agree with my common sense because my stomach growled so loud, we both laughed. She took a step back, her cheeks flushed.

"Lunch?" I asked.

She nodded. "There's a pizza place a couple blocks over."

"Sounds good to me." I patted my growling belly. "We can make plans while we eat."

* * *

"I told you that you'd need a jacket." Nyx laughed as I glared at her.

"It's not even Halloween," I complained, rubbing my arms. "How the hell do kids go trick-or-treating without freezing their asses off?"

Her laughter just got louder, and right then, I knew that I was so far gone on her that I'd have walked around for hours without a jacket, complaining about the cold, if it meant I could hear her laugh like that.

"Haven't you ever been outside Georgia?" she asked.

"I have," I said indignantly. After a pause, I added the rest of the truth, "Just not when it's cold."

She shook her head, a grin stretched from ear-to-ear. “If you think this is cold, you ain’t seen nothing yet. We’ve had snow for Halloween.”

“No shit.”

“No shit.” She reached out and took my hand, pulling it around her body and into her pocket with her hand.

Her body warmth did more to heat me up than any jacket I could’ve worn.

“Thank you for today,” she said as she leaned against me. “I mean it, Bradyn. You being here is important, but you taking care of me...” She turned her face into my arm, but I didn’t need to see her expression to know how hard it was for her to admit any of this. “I can’t tell you how long it’s been since anyone’s taken care of me.”

I had to restrain myself from doing something stupid, like telling her that I’d always take care of her if she let me. That we could take the dynamic that we’d touched on a couple times and move it from sex into real life. Not like a ‘call me master and walk behind me’ sort of thing, but more like her letting me take care of her whenever she needed it.

She was twenty-six, and she’d been on her own since that first night Art came into her room and drove a wedge between her and the rest of her family. That was fifteen years of never having anyone else to lean on, never being able to completely trust another person.

This wasn’t the time to try to scale the walls she’d build up.

I could, however, offer her this one thing. I leaned over and kissed the top of her head. “Whatever you need.”

I reached out with my free hand to open the door for us both, and we made our way to the elevator and then up to our room. The quiet between us was a pleasant one. Not sexually charged, but more like a level of comfortable that we hadn’t had before. Something that made me feel like, even though we hadn’t put a label on what we were to each other, we were really together, a couple.

The two of us chatted about the things we’d seen today, how good the food had been, what time our flight left tomorrow. What we didn’t talk about was

sex. In fact, the thought barely crossed my mind, even as we got into the same bed.

I was a straight man, so of course, I noticed how cute she was in her shorts and teddy bear t-shirt, but when she curled her body to match mine, all I could think of was how good she felt in my arms. How right.

I wanted this every night, and the thought didn't scare me as much as it should have.

Twenty-Six

Nyx

Falling asleep next to someone I hadn't just fucked was strange, and waking up next to that same person was even weirder. Not bad weird, though. I liked it. I liked having Bradyn next to me, his body warm and comfortable. I liked the weight of his arm across my body and the steady thud of his heart under my ear.

I'd liked all of it so much that I was still thinking about it on the flight from Rochester to New York.

"Are you sure you're okay with me staying at your place?" Bradyn asked as we walked through JFK. "I don't have a problem getting a hotel room."

"No, I want you to stay with me." I glanced at him and added, "If you're okay with it. I mean, I won't be offended if you'd rather stay in a hotel."

He laughed. "Nope. I'm looking forward to seeing where you live."

I flushed, strangely pleased. I'd never considered bringing a guy into my home, but then again, I'd never had a relationship like this with anyone else. The only thing that worried me was knowing that he'd come from money.

My apartment wasn't some rattrap or anything like that, but it was definitely *not* what he'd been used to most of his life. Sure, he lived in a cabin on a horse ranch now, but for all I knew, he thought of it more like a temporary vacation home. I was proud of my place, and if he didn't like it...I wasn't sure how well I'd take it.

But I wasn't going to think about that. No assumptions. The same Bradyn who'd bailed me out of jail was the same one whose parents' house was probably bigger than the entire floor my apartment was on. And he was the same man who'd allowed himself to be disinherited rather than compromise his principles.

Since we had luggage, we took a cab instead of the subway, but thanks to traffic, it wasn't any quicker. I had to admit, though, that I was glad to not be packed into a subway car with my stuff. That would've been a pain in the ass.

"Here we are," the driver said as he pulled over in front of my building.

I paid for the ride while Bradyn got the bags – a compromise we'd worked out on the way over – and then we went inside.

"This is my office." I gestured for him to follow me. "And the stairs to my apartment are right back this way."

When I went into the apartment, I flipped on the light and carried my bag back to my bedroom, hoping the short distance would help take care of the nerves I couldn't quite get rid of.

He was looking at a couple pictures when I came back out, his bag on the floor next to the door. "How old are you in this one?"

I came over to his side and looked where he was pointing, even though I already knew which picture he was asking about. The connection that had drawn me to him in Georgia kept getting stronger, and I just wanted to be near him.

"I'm eighteen there." I tried to see my younger self the way he would see me, not the way I saw myself.

Isis had taken this picture a couple days after I'd moved in with Kaimi and Rose. I was the same height back then as I was now, but not quite as curvy. I hadn't been starved in juvie, but for a lot of reasons, I'd been a little underweight.

The t-shirt and jeans I'd been wearing were from a thrift store, and neither of them really fit me that well, which didn't help how I looked. I'd kept my hair short while I'd been in juvie, both because it'd been easier to take care of and because it was one less thing another girl could grab in a fight. I didn't really look younger though, I didn't think. It was the eyes. They hadn't been innocent for a long time.

"Is it a bad thing if I say you look younger now?" Bradyn glanced at me, his eyes twinkling.

“Depends,” I answered, keeping my tone playful. “If you’re going to start calling me jailbait, I’ll have to knock you on your ass.”

He laughed. “Not *that* young. Give me some credit here.”

“I’d only been out of juvie for a couple weeks.” I didn’t look at him as I said it. “I was a little shell-shocked.”

“How long were you there?”

Giving him the answer might lead to him asking what I’d done to get arrested, and I wasn’t ready for that conversation yet. But I was fairly confident that if I told him I didn’t want to talk about it, he’d accept it. I took the risk.

“Five years.”

“Going from being barely a teenager to an adult out in the real world would be more than a little shocking.”

I appreciated the comment but waited for the question. When it didn’t come, I turned back to the pictures on the wall. All of them were from the last eight years, and none were of any of my biological family. Instead, they were of members of my *real* family.

“That Rose looks like she’s been a handful from moment one.” He gestured toward another picture, that one of her on her tenth birthday when she’d asked for a tiara she could wear all the time.

“She has been,” I agreed. “Kaimi’s just hoping that she doesn’t go through a rebellious phase.”

“Speaking of Kaimi, what do you say we pick up some lunch and take it to her and Sitara?”

“I like that idea.”

I’d already called to let them know we were coming, and they’d told us to stop by the tattoo shop when we got in so we could touch base about what we wanted to do. Bringing them lunch would be a nice surprise.

Which was exactly what they said when, forty minutes later, Bradyn and I walked into Polliver's Ink with two bags from Kaimi and Sitara's favorite Indian restaurant.

"Hey! Look who's back!" Kaimi came out from behind the counter, practically bouncing across the floor, and threw her arms around me.

She wasn't even five feet tall, but she was strong enough that her hugs almost hurt, which she always thought was hilarious. Her normally golden skin had darkened while she and Sitara were on their honeymoon, and she looked good. Me giving her an all-over drew my attention to new ink on her ankle.

"Did you get another tattoo?" I asked, leaning down to peer at what she'd added.

"I did." She snatched the food from my hand. "You brought me Tandoori Chicken!"

And then she was off with the bag I'd carried in. I didn't need to ask what ink she'd gotten, though. I'd seen enough to know it was a date, so I felt safe in assuming it was her anniversary.

"Some of that's for Sitara too," I called after Kaimi. "You have to share yours 'cuz I'm not sharing mine."

"Hey, Nyx." Liesel Canon greeted me from behind the counter. She was tall like me, but thinner. Henna red hair with black streaks, multiple piercings, and several tattoos went with her smart mouth and tough personality. Basically, she was a badass.

Maybe she and I could eventually become friends.

Damn. I was actually thinking about making friends. What was next? Voluntarily hugging people?

"I'm guessing Sitara's in her office."

"Yeah. She has an appointment in half an hour. Kaimi's next one isn't for an hour."

"Thanks," I said as Bradyn and I walked past the desk toward the office.

The four of us talked as we ate, but we stayed away from any serious topics, including my case. It was nice to not feel that pressure, especially after how stressful my conversation with Ambrose had been yesterday. I'd talk to Kaimi about that at some point, but not right now. I just wanted to enjoy the day.

Besides, Bradyn was going to get a tattoo, and I had a feeling it would be entertaining.

* * *

"I want to see it." Rose tugged at Bradyn's sleeve. "Please."

"You know that it's covered, right?" I asked, leaning up so I could see around Bradyn.

Rose had insisted on sitting on his other side during dinner, and I was starting to think she had a crush on my boy...my friend...with benefits? Shit. This should have been easier to figure out.

"I know." She gave me a *duh* look. "That clear tape stuff that goes over it helps it heal and keeps out moisture."

"Which looks gross," I added. "Why would you want to see it?"

"Because it's art." She gave me a look like that explained everything.

I frowned at her, confused. "Tattoos as artwork I get. This, you're going to need to explain."

She shrugged. "It's kinda like those artists who take someone else's work and put stuff on it to make something new. Like at art club at school, Jordan Risen brought in this one thing, where he took a print of that Van Gough painting *A Starry Night* and then put all these rocks on it, creating this new design."

I looked at Kaimi and then at Sitara, who looked like she was trying not to laugh. “I honestly have no response to that.”

Rose grinned. “Does that mean I get to see it?”

Bradyn looked to Kaimi first, which gave him major points with both of us. When she shrugged, he looked at me, and I did the same, then we waited to see what he’d do.

“Sure.”

He’d bought a flannel shirt earlier today when he’d finally admitted that it was too cold to be in short sleeves, and I’d told him he looked like a lumberjack cowboy. He also looked hot.

Then again, he looked that way no matter what he was – or wasn’t – wearing.

He shrugged off the flannel and pulled up the sleeve of his white undershirt. He’d chosen the scales of justice on the outside of his upper left arm. Considering what we were both working on, it seemed appropriate. I didn’t know everything about him, but I did know him well enough to see that he cared about justice more than anyone else I’d ever known.

“That is so cool,” Rose said. Her fingers hovered over it, but she didn’t touch. “How much did it hurt?”

“Not as much as mine,” I cut in. “But he didn’t cry, so he did good.”

He lifted an eyebrow at me. “Did you cry?”

“Nope.”

He looked at Kaimi. “Is she lying?”

She mimed zipping her lips, locking them, and throwing away the key. I kicked her under the table. She knew damn well I hadn’t cried.

“Mom says I have to wait until I’m eighteen to get a tattoo,” Rose said. “But I can get another ear piercing for Christmas this year. Do you have any piercings?”

“I don’t,” Bradyn said. “But my older sister, Ashley, got her ears pierced for her sweet sixteen.”

A shadow passed over his face, and I reached over to squeeze his hand. “They’d call if Clancy wasn’t okay.”

He let out a long breath. “I’m not so sure.”

“Your mom told you when he went to the hospital,” I reminded him.

“Who’s Clancy?” Rose asked.

“Bradyn’s nephew. He had to have surgery because his appendix burst.”

Rose’s light brown eyes went wide. “That can be really bad. Is he okay?”

“He is,” Bradyn said. “But he has to be in the hospital for a while.” His expression became serious. “Waiting to hear how the surgery went was one of the worst nights of my life.” He squeezed my hand this time. “I wouldn’t have gotten through it without Nyx.”

“You were at the hospital with him?” Kaimi’s tone was casual, but I knew her too well.

“Yeah, I went with him.” My eyes met hers, and I didn’t look away. “And, yeah, I met his family.”

“Damn.”

Bradyn looked from me to Kaimi and then back at me. Wisely, he didn’t say anything. If he thought about it, he’d figure out that I’d never met anyone’s family before. We didn’t need to talk about it.

“Bradyn, can you help me with my homework?” Rose asked. “Sitara’s going back to the shop, and Mom wants to talk to Nyx about you.”

“Rose,” Kaimi said sharply.

She shrugged. “What? It’s true.”

Bradyn looked at me, his lips twitching as he tried not to laugh. He stood up. “Come on, kiddo. Let’s do some homework.”

* * *

We took the subway home, and that was almost as amusing as watching Rose explaining Common Core math to him. Sure, he'd met my family – my *real* family – at the wedding but spending time with people at something like that was a ton different than hanging out with them at home. I hadn't realized how nervous I'd been about today. If it hadn't been a last minute kinda thing, I probably would've freaked out.

Now though, I was so glad he'd thought up coming here because I knew that the people I loved the most approved of him and liked him. And he liked them.

Today, more than anything else that had happened between Bradyn and me, made me think that this thing with us might not crash and burn after all. It also forced me to admit that I not only *could* trust him but that I *wanted* to trust him. I didn't know if I'd be able to tell him that anytime soon, but I knew how I could show him.

I kicked off my shoes and closed the door, locking it behind me. Then, before I could lose my nerve, I reached out and grabbed the belt loops of his jeans. He'd barely managed to get his shoes off when I pulled him over to the couch. When I pushed him down onto it, his face wore a mix of surprise and confusion. It wasn't until I knelt in front of him that his eyes widened and his jaw dropped.

I worked open his pants before he managed to recover and grab my wrists.

“You don't need to do this, firebird.” His voice was gentle.

My eyes met his and held them as I said, “I *want* to. Let me.”

He groaned. “Fuck, Nyx. How am I supposed to be a gentleman when I've been dreamin' about havin' your mouth on me almost since the moment I set eyes on you?”

“Then don't be a gentleman.” I looked down and focused on tugging his pants down far enough to let me get to his underwear. “Tell me that you want me to suck your cock. Tell me you want to fuck my mouth until you come.”

He cursed but didn't try to stop me as I lowered the waistband of his underwear and freed his dick. He was only half-erect, but just that little bit of talking had gotten him this hard. It wouldn't take much to get him all the way, but before he was too big and thick for me to handle much more than a couple inches, I'd try to get as close to all of him as I could.

I wrapped my fingers around him and pulled on him once, twice. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw his hands curling into fists on either side of his thighs, and I smiled. For the first time, I understood the power I had through this.

"It's okay to put your hands on my head," I said as I bent down and took the tip of him between my lips.

His entire body jerked, and I ran my tongue around the head, getting a taste of him before I took all of him into my mouth.

"Fuck!" His hips bucked, and if he'd been completely erect, I would've gagged.

As it was, he was almost too big like this, and I could feel him swelling. With one hand on his thigh to keep me balanced, I licked and sucked him to the point where I had to back off, an inch at a time, until I wasn't in danger of choking anymore. His hand came up to my head.

"Can..." His voice was rough. "Can I take your hair down?"

I let him slip out of my mouth and glanced up at him. "Yes."

My hand moved over his thick shaft, and I used my tongue to trace the vein that ran along the bottom of it before licking a bead of pre-cum from the tip. As his fingers released my hair, it fell around my face, hiding me until he pushed it back. Strong fingers massaged my scalp and drew a moan. His response was to tighten his grip on my hair, giving me little zings of pain that made my stomach twist with pleasure.

Damn. I was getting turned on by giving him head, something I'd never have dreamed was possible. I squeezed my legs together.

"Are you wet, little firebird?" When I didn't answer, he asked it again. "Are you wet?"

“Yes,” I whispered before returning to suck the tip of him.

“Then touch yourself.” He groaned. “Fuck, Nyx. Touch yourself. Make yourself come with me.”

I didn’t think about it. Didn’t let myself think about any of it. I gave myself over to everything that was building inside me and shoved my hand into my pants. It wasn’t easy working with one hand, but I was able to get my fingers where I wanted them. I rubbed my clit as I pulled him back into my mouth, sucking hard enough to make him squirm.

As he cursed and called out my name, I lost myself in the haze of pleasure, letting the pressure and friction from my fingers mix with the pain of him pulling my hair. The weight of him on my tongue, the taste of him, did something to me, and as he warned me that he was coming, I took as much of him as I could into my mouth, tightening my lips around him.

He came with a shout, and I pressed my fingers hard against my clit, letting the sensation carry me over the edge, even as I swallowed everything he gave me. I kept him in my mouth as my climax flooded over me, sucking on him until he tugged on my hair to signal that he’d had enough.

My muscles were weak as I raised my head to look up at him. He took my face between his hands and pressed his lips to mine in a slow, sweet kiss. Then he kissed my forehead and pulled me up onto his lap.

“Thank you.” He kissed the side of my neck. “Thank you for giving me that. For trusting me.”

As he wrapped his arms around me, and I settled against his chest, I knew things between us had shifted. And I wasn’t nearly as scared as I always thought I would be. I was safe with him.

Twenty-Seven

Nyx

Since we were at my place, it only seemed fair I make him breakfast, but getting out of bed was harder than it should have been. Unlike the double in Bradyn's cabin, my bed was a single, and it'd always been barely enough for me.

Even by himself, Bradyn would've been cramped. With two of us, we hadn't really had an option that didn't involve us being all tangled up together. Surprisingly, it hadn't bothered me. Sure, if I had to sleep like this all the time, I'd probably hate it since stretching out wasn't really possible, but for the here and now, I liked it. Hell, I liked it enough that I didn't want to get up.

But I needed to go to the bathroom, and breakfast wasn't going to make itself.

I stayed in the t-shirt and shorts I'd worn to bed, not even bothering to put on a bra. I rarely wore one when I was alone, and he'd seen me naked. If I felt comfortable enough with him to suck his dick, I could damn well walk around without a bra. The only thing I did do was brush out my hair and pull it back in a ponytail so it'd be out of my way.

I didn't have much in the way of food since I hadn't known when I'd be back, but I had frozen waffles and a bottle of maple syrup I always kept on hand for the times Rose came over. That girl loved her waffles. I'd buy more when I came back for good.

When?

Shit.

Between all the shit that going to see Ambrose had stirred up and then coming here, I'd forgotten that I had a choice to make. This new information changed things. Or, at least, it *could* change things. Whether or not it actually did was up to me.

I shook my head. I wasn't even close to being awake enough to deal with this. I needed coffee and food. After that, I'd start with the decision-making.

I was refilling my coffee mug and pulling waffles from the toaster oven when Bradyn appeared in the kitchen. I was happy to see that he hadn't put on a shirt or brushed his hair, but not just because he was insanely hot when he was all messy and half-naked. I liked that he felt comfortable enough here to come straight from bed to the table.

"Waffles?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Before you start thinking I have some great cooking skills, you should know I bought them. I can toast the hell out of them, but that's the extent of my waffle-making skills." I poured a second cup of coffee and held it out to him. "Have some caffeine."

"That's the sort of mornin' after talk I like," he teased as he took the mug. "I love your place, but that bed was not made for two people."

I laughed. "I agree."

I didn't say anything about buying a new one for future sleepovers, but I also didn't say that I wasn't planning on having two people in it again either, so that was some growth there.

I waited until we were almost done with our food before I brought up the subject I'd put aside less than an hour ago. I trusted Bradyn, and he already knew most of the details of what was going on, which made him the most logical person to talk to about the choice I had to make.

"Can I get your opinion on something?"

He looked surprised but didn't do anything but answer my question. "Sure."

"Ambrose is the one who sent Min to me with this case," I began. I spoke slowly, putting my thoughts together as I went. "He says he didn't know that his family was connected to the case at all or that I'd end up in Savannah because of it. Except, I don't know if I can believe him, and not just because of what his brother did to me. Apparently, ever since I told about Art molesting me, Ambrose has been playing puppet master – or maybe fairy godfather – to me. He says he's the reason I was released at eighteen instead

of twenty-one and why I was allowed to move from Rochester to New York City only a few days after my release.”

“Did he say you owed him?” Bradyn’s voice was tight, and when I looked at him, I saw the anger flashing in his eyes.

“No. He didn’t ask me for anything or even hint that he wanted something from me,” I said. “He feels guilty that he didn’t know what Art was doing to me.”

“Do you blame him? Ambrose, I mean? Do you blame him for not stoppin’ his brother?”

I shook my head. “Not really. Not for that.”

“But you do blame him for somethin’.” Bradyn made it a statement rather than a question.

“I blame everyone for not believing me.” Other than Kaimi, I’d never said that to another person. I hadn’t even said it to any of the therapists I’d been forced to see.

“If Ambrose didn’t believe you, then why would he feel guilty for not stoppin’ Art?”

I opened my mouth and realized I had no answer because I hadn’t thought the question until the moment Bradyn said it. Now that it was in my head, though, I only had one response.

“Motherfucking bastard.”

“I don’t understand.”

Sharp pain in my palms made me realize I’d been digging my nails into my own skin. I put my hands flat on the table as I explained, “If he’s been doing all this for me since I accused Art, why didn’t he tell everyone that he believed me? I was a kid, and everyone said I was lying. My mom. My sister. *Everyone*. I didn’t have a single person on my side.”

Bradyn reached across and rested his fingers on mine, not holding them, just touching. “I wish I could’ve protected you from all of them.”

A lump formed in my throat, and I had to swallow hard before speaking.
“Thank you.”

We sat like that for a minute before I pulled back and returned to the original topic.

“So, Ambrose says he didn’t know that the case Min had would end up in Savannah, let alone connect to a family who employs his family’s law firm, but I don’t know if I can believe him.”

Yeah, I repeated a bit, but I needed my head back into this rather than the new revelation that Ambrose had believed me this whole time but never said a word.

I could be pissed off about that later.

“You think he has an ulterior motive?” Bradyn followed the change smoothly. “For the case, I mean. I can see guilt being the primary motive for him trying to help you, but how would sending you to Savannah and having you deal with his family’s law firm make him feel like he was atoning for something wrong?”

“It doesn’t,” I admitted. “Which is what makes this whole thing more confusing.” I sighed. “I’ve been having this argument in my head about coincidence and fate, and this just makes it worse. I mean, if he didn’t know anything about the case other than it needed someone to research it, then is it coincidence that he sent it my way or is it some fucked-up kind of fate?”

I got up to refill my coffee and then admitted that more caffeine was probably not the best idea for me right now. I rinsed the cup and put it in the sink. As I moved to the fridge, I felt Bradyn’s eyes on me, but he didn’t say anything.

“I think I’m making this more complicated than it needs to be,” I said as I took out two bottles of water, then returned to my seat. “Basically, I’m trying to figure out if I should just stay here and consider my work done, now that I know who it came from, or should I see it through, even if it means I might have to confront members of the Check family, who’d probably like to kill me.”

I had a feeling Bradyn thought I was being overly dramatic with that last bit, but I was serious. The entire Check family, except for Ambrose, wanted me

dead. I didn't plan to get into that, though. I'd shared a lot with Bradyn in the short time we'd known each other, but I wasn't ready to tell him *everything* yet.

"Would the whole coincidence or fate thing make a difference?" he asked.

I gave myself a full minute to consider the question. "Probably not."

"Does the person who sent Min to you change the way you feel about the case? Pick some other asshole to be the one who sent Min. Everything else is the same. Quality of representation would be the same. Cost. Everything but that one element."

I didn't really need to think about it. "I'd see it through to the end. It's about the client getting justice."

"I think that's your answer then."

He was right. Ambrose was a good lawyer, and he'd treat the Douglasses fairly. I was certain about that. With how important this case could be, not just for Kathie's family, but also for the Huxleys, and for whatever precedent it could set, it didn't matter if I had personal issues with the senior partner at Min's law firm. This was bigger than me.

"I'm going back."

He didn't try to hide his relief, and that made me a little worried. Even if I spent another couple weeks in Savannah, I'd still be coming back here. I cared about Bradyn more than I'd ever cared about a guy, but Kaimi and Rose were here. Sitara too. She might've been new family, but she was family. Bradyn and I would have to have a talk soon about the distance between our homes, but that wasn't something we had to discuss today.

One damn step at a time.

If I was going to do this, though, I needed a little more time to wrap my head around Ambrose's involvement. I had to separate my feelings toward him from everything else so that I could work with Min. I did believe that Ambrose hadn't told her the whole truth when it came to why he was sending me work, so I didn't have any bad feelings toward her at least.

“Do we have a specific day for our return flight?” I asked.

“No, I left it open.”

“What do you think about staying through the weekend and going back on Monday? I’d like to spend a little more time with Kaimi, Sitara, and Rose, and it’d probably be a good idea for me to catch up on any messages or mail in my office.”

He was quiet for a moment, then asked, “I don’t want to assume, but is that an invitation for me to stay too?”

“Definitely.” I smiled at him. “I’d like a chance to show you my city.”

I didn’t add that part of my reasoning was selfish. If I could get him to fall in love with New York, maybe distance wouldn’t be a problem for us. Maybe I was getting ahead of myself, but when my eyes met his, I didn’t think so.

Twenty-Eight

Bradyn

When Nyx said she wanted to show me her city, I'd been thinking of things like the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, Central Park, Times Square. The one thing that hadn't even come close to crossing my mind was Club Privé.

She'd told me that she'd worked there and that the owners had given her a membership as part of her 'severance package,' but that had been back when we'd first met. A lot of things had happened since then, and I'd essentially forgotten about it. The fact that I hadn't immediately remembered that Nyx belonged to the hottest BDSM club to the east of the Mississippi just showed how absolutely crazy things had been between us.

She'd just chosen to remind me by coming out of her bedroom dressed to stop traffic.

She'd certainly stopped my brain from working.

"We don't have to go if you don't want to."

The uncertainty in Nyx's voice made me realize that I'd been staring at her without saying a word for an inappropriate amount of time. Not inappropriate because I shouldn't be looking at her that way, but because I'd made her feel like I was second-guessing going to the club with her.

"Oh, I want to." My voice was rough enough that I cleared my throat and tried again. "But I might want to bend you over the couch and fuck you senseless first so every time a man looks at you tonight, I can remember that I've been inside you already, and I'll be inside you again."

Color flooded her cheeks, but she didn't look down. Not for the first time, I was grateful my particular kinks didn't include total, traditional submission. I knew that it was possible she would want to be the Dominant one at the club tonight, and I was fine with it. The Dominant alpha part of me got off on giving my partner what she needed. Whatever she needed. And if that included being in charge, then that would turn me on too.

“I’m going to take all of that as a compliment,” she said, her eyes sparkling.

She wasn’t wearing a lot of makeup, but what she was wearing made her eyes look like emeralds. She’d put her hair up in a style that pulled it back from her face but left the waves falling over her shoulders. Against the soft green color – mint maybe – of her dress, her hair almost looked like someone had spun it from rubies.

The top had a halter tie around the back of her neck and a corset-style front, the combination of which immediately drew attention to those amazing breasts of hers. The rest of it clung to her hips and down to mid-thigh where it ended, leaving the rest of her long legs bare. Her heels put her a few inches closer to my height and did wonderful things to her legs. Then she took a couple steps, and I saw that she had two slits up the outside of each thigh that went almost to her hips and flashed the garters at the top of the thigh-highs she was wearing.

Lust twisted low in my gut, a primal desire that was so much more than want, even more than need.

If we didn’t leave right now, I was going to take her, and we’d never make it to the street, much less the club. As much as I liked that idea, I wanted to see Club Privé, and not just because of its reputation. I understood what Nyx hadn’t explicitly said about it. This place was important to her, probably right underneath her PI business, and I wanted to be a part of it as much for that reason as anything else. It had been the place that had given her the ability to take back some of what had been taken from her.

I held out her jacket like a good Southern gentleman and said, “We’re takin’ a cab.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “I never ride the subway in something this nice. I’m always worried I’ll sit in something.”

I smiled down at her. “Hell, no. We’re not ridin’ the subway because I can’t be held responsible for what I might do if you start flashin’ those garters.” I ran the tip of my index finger just below her full lower lip. “Whether we play tonight or not, if you’re in charge or not, you’re mine, little firebird. It’ll be bad enough havin’ men at the club starin’ at you, but at least there’ll be other women there for them. I’m not sharin’ you.”

Her tongue darted out and caught the pad of my finger. “You’d really be okay following my lead tonight?”

My palm rested on her cheek. “Nyx, haven’t you figured it out yet? I’ll follow you anywhere you want to lead me.”

We stood like that for a minute, me giving her the time to process and hoping that I hadn’t crossed a line. When she took my hand from her cheek, my heart about stopped, but then she kissed it, and I could breathe again.

“Let’s go.”

We didn’t really talk on the way over, but she kept her hand in mine, which I took to mean that she was simply quiet and thinking, not reconsidering taking me to a place that meant so much to her. It wasn’t until we were on our way to the door that she spoke.

“I’m still not used to going in through the front door. Even when I visited on my off days before, I used the employee entrance.” She smiled at the large man standing next to the door. “Good to see you, Gil.”

“You too, Nyx.”

And then we were going through the door, into a small entryway where she handed off her jacket to a young woman and greeted her by name, though I didn’t catch what it was. My attention was on the couple in front of us who’d just opened the door, giving me my first glimpse of the club’s interior.

“You just need to sign this form, and then we can go in,” Nyx said, drawing my attention. “Guests have to sign it when they come in with a member.”

“So they know who to yell at if someone gets out of hand?” I was only half-serious. I skimmed the form, not wanting to sign something without at least a glance at it. I didn’t read it completely, though. I trusted her to know that it was okay for me to sign.

“Something like that.” She smiled at me and handed the form back to the brunette who’d taken the jackets. Then she held out a black and gold pin. “Guests wear these too, so members know not to have any expectations of knowledge of either the rules or the lifestyle.”

“That sounds like it came from a rule book.”

She laughed. “Even security knows all the rules and the reasons for them. Right, Adalynn?”

“First thing you do in job training,” Adalynn agreed. “Gotta know the rules before you can enforce them.”

“Makes sense.” I held out a hand to her. “Bradyn Traylor. Pleased to meet you.”

Adalynn shook my hand and gave me an appraising look. “You’re not from around here, are you?”

“Savannah.” I gave her a charming – but not too charming – smile.

She raised an eyebrow and looked at Nyx. “Damn. You got yourself a genuine Rhett Butler here.”

Nyx wrinkled her nose. “I hate *Gone with the Wind*. Never did see the attraction to Rhett Butler either.”

“I know, I know, you’ve always been a Cary Grant fan.”

“That’s true.” Nyx winked at me. “But I’m starting to see the appeal of a southern gentleman.”

Adalynn laughed and then turned from us to the pair who’d come in behind us. “Have fun,” she called over her shoulder.

Nyx held out her hand to me, and I took it, threading my fingers between hers. “We will.”

I followed her into the club and was immediately struck by the difference between it and Hades, the S&M club back home. For one thing, it was lighter. Not bright, exactly, but more like Hades had been...dingy. I’d never noticed it before, and I doubted I would’ve seen it at all if I didn’t have this to compare it to now. Hades wasn’t a dump, but I could see why Club Privé was considered the best BDSM club on this side of the country.

It was...magnificent, for lack of a better word.

The décor alone was enough to tell me that the members were more in my parents' tax bracket than they were mine. If they'd charged only a reasonable fee, it wouldn't be enough to pay for all of this, even if they packed it in every night. I assumed this was about average for a Friday night, which meant they did good business.

Not surprising when I looked around. They'd done a great job with the design since it didn't feel as crowded as it was, a feat in and of itself. I had no doubt the rest of the place was equally as impressive.

"The first time I walked in here, I was completely overwhelmed," Nyx said as the two of us made our way over to the bar. "I had no idea what this place was or even anything about the BDSM world outside of books or movies."

I watched a mostly naked man being led around by a leash. "That must've been a shock."

"That's one word for it." Her face lit up as she spotted someone she knew, and our direction changed to the far end of the bar.

I followed our path with my eyes and realized she was heading for a tall, dark-haired man who looked close to my size. For a moment, I was jealous, thinking she was taking me to meet one of her previous lovers. Before I could tell myself that she wouldn't do that, I realized that this mystery man had a smaller, blonde woman at his side, and one look at the two of them was enough to know that they were together.

We were only a couple of feet from them when I caught the glimmer of light glinting off a pair of wedding rings. Suddenly, I realized who they might be.

"Nyx! It's good to see you." The blonde beamed at Nyx and then looked at me. Chocolate brown eyes narrowed, shrewd and intelligent as they ran down to my feet and back up again.

Damn. I wondered how many people had underestimated that pretty face and later regretted it.

"Carrie, Gavin, this is Bradyn Traylor," Nyx said. "Bradyn, meet Gavin and Carrie Manning, the owners of Club Privé."

"How do you do." I shook Carrie's hand first and then Gavin's.

“Well, there’s something to be said for Southern manners,” Carrie said with a grin. “And they sure know how to make them down there too.”

My eyes darted to Gavin, sure I was about to meet the business end of his fist, but he looked amused rather than pissed. His smile widened when he saw me looking at him. His eyes were a dark blue, not brown like I’d originally thought.

“She’s been working at earning a punishment all day.”

Carrie blushed, but I had a suspicion that it was from arousal, not embarrassment.

“This isn’t your first time in a place like this,” Gavin observed.

“It’s not,” I said. “Though it is my first time at any of the Club Privé locations.”

“Locations,” he repeated. “You’d heard of us before this.”

I nodded. “There’s a club in Savannah called Hades, and they’re decent, but nothin’ like this. Everyone there who does more than dabble in the life knows about this place.”

He wore a pleased expression. “We’ve been thinking about branching out again, maybe working with an already-existing club. Would we be welcome in Georgia, do you think?”

“Gavin, we’re not working tonight.” Carrie’s tone changed just enough for me to know that she’d stepped out of the submissive role to address something that was a husband-and-wife thing.

“You’re right.” He leaned over and gave her a brief kiss. “I’m sorry.”

“Actually, Carrie, I had a sort-of work question,” Nyx said. “It’s a legal question, and it has to do with the case I’m working on.”

“All right,” she said. “If you’re planning to use a room, Gavin can take Bradyn to one while you and I talk.”

Nyx looked at me, and I nodded.

“Let’s move somewhere a little less crowded,” Carrie suggested.

As Carrie and Nyx stepped away from us, Gavin turned his attention to me. “Did Nyx say she had any preference about which room you’re using?”

“No. We didn’t actually talk much about what we were going to do here.”

“Let me see what’s open.” Gavin took out his phone and flipped through a couple screens. “I created an app that lets members reserve rooms and also see which rooms are in use. It’s upped member satisfaction by eighty-three percent in just a single quarter.”

I’d honestly wondered if Carrie had been the brains of the operation, and Gavin had been just the connection to this world and the muscle. I’d been wrong. I didn’t doubt that Carrie was also highly intelligent. I just hadn’t realized exactly how strong a power couple the two of them were.

“Follow me.” Gavin started toward the far wall of the club, and the people seemed to automatically move out of the way as he walked, Dominants and submissives alike.

Damn.

A series of doors ran along the wall, hidden well enough that I wouldn’t have seen them if I wasn’t right in front of them. The keypad next to the doors was also discreet. Gavin punched in a number, and a light flashed green. He opened the door and went inside. I followed, impressed by how much the sound was muffled even with the door open.

“This is the room Nyx uses the most. She’ll take care of locking the door when she comes in,” he said. “Unless something’s changed and she wants an audience.”

I chose not to comment on his first statement about this being Nyx’s favorite room. Nyx and I had both had sex with other people. Being jealous of the men in her past would be nothing but destructive. I did address the last thing he’d said, though, more to show that I did actually know some things about Nyx as anything else. “Neither of us are exhibitionists.”

Gavin gave me a searching look, as if he was more insightful than I would have guessed. Considering he’d already surprised me, I figured any other assumptions about him would be pointless.

“You’re not a submissive.” He folded his arms, the stance making the muscles bulge.

I decided it’d be in my best interest to go casual with my body language. My hands went in my pockets, and I answered the statement-question. “No, I’m not. Not completely anyway.”

“You switch?”

“I’m whatever Nyx needs me to be.”

He didn’t respond right away, and I just let the silence sit, letting him figure out whatever was whirling through his mind right now. Nyx looked up to Carrie and Gavin, and their opinion mattered to her. Not as much as her family’s did, but if I wanted things with Nyx to work, I had to pass whatever test Gavin and Carrie sent my way, even if Nyx didn’t know they were doing it.

“You know she doesn’t have any family, right?”

“She does. Kaimi, Sitara, and Rose are her family.”

“Good answer.” He smiled. “If you hurt her, they’ll never find your body.”

Something about the way he said it made me think he wasn’t bluffing or exaggerating. He really could make me disappear. Despite the threat to my safety, I was glad he was that protective of her, and I felt the need to make sure he knew where I stood too.

“This isn’t a fling for me,” I said. “I’m all in.”

“And if she pushes you away?”

I gave him the answer I’d already decided on. “If it’s because she truly doesn’t want me anymore, I’ll respect her decision. But if it’s because she’s scared, I’ll fight for her.”

Gavin was quiet for a minute, processing my answers before he spoke again. “Carrie doesn’t betray confidences, so I don’t know how much Nyx has shared with my wife about her past, and Nyx hasn’t shared any of it with me, but I have...experiences from my own past that have taught me how to read people, and they tell me that Nyx has had some serious shit happen to her.

You might have to fight pretty hard to beat back those demons.”

I locked eyes with him. “I will. She’s worth it.”

He nodded, apparently satisfied. “Good.”

Then he left without another word, and I finally looked at the room I was in.

Damn.

A dimmer switch for the lights was right next to the door, as was a color-coded pad that I assumed changed the lighting, and those two things alone made Hades look cheap. An X-frame cross stood in the middle of the room, held up by chains that led to a winch where – I made another assumption – the cross could be raised or lowered.

The straps on the X were leather but might’ve had releases for changing them out. I moved in for a closer look and confirmed that the restraints were replaceable. I was also close enough now to see that there were other places in the beams where things could be attached. I’d been in this world long enough to at least have an idea of what those things could be.

A large chest of drawers sat against one wall, and a decent-sized bed was against the opposite one. Restraints were at each of the four corners of the bed, leather, like the ones on the X. Different ones were most likely in the drawers, along with any other attachments or toys. At the foot of the bed, on the floor, was what looked like a small footstool, but I figured it was probably more for kneeling, either to give a little comfort to the knees or height, if needed.

“What do you think?”

I turned at Nyx’s voice. I considered asking how her conversation with Carrie had gone but pushed that aside. Coming here tonight had been, in part, about showing me this place and talking to Carrie, but I saw a deeper need in her eyes, and even if I was being submissive, I had one Dominant trait that I couldn’t suppress, especially with her. I needed to take care of her.

“It’s amazing,” I said. “Makes Hades look like a poor third cousin.”

She laughed as she came toward me, and I saw that she'd closed the door, completely cutting off any sound from the main part of the club. "We can have music if you want."

"I want whatever you want." She had no idea just how true that really was. "Just tell me what to do."

She stopped a few inches in front of me, a strange expression on her face. "And if I want you to be...Dominant?"

It was like all the air went out of the room. She'd asked before for me to be in charge or in control, and she'd asked if I'd be willing to be submissive, but she'd never specifically asked me to be Dominant. And I knew that was an intentional thing. Asking for it here, in this place where she'd never been anything but Dominant, wasn't something I looked at lightly.

"Is that what you want?" I kept my expression as blank as I could. I didn't want my own desires to push her into something simply because she felt like she owed it to me.

"I think..." She licked her lips. "I think it's what I *need*. At least right now."

It was the uncertainty on her face that did it for me, and I reached out on instinct more than thought, taking both of her hands in mine.

"I'll take care of you." I kissed her forehead. "But if you need me to stop, you know what to say, right?"

She nodded, and the tension in her body shifted to something different. Not submissive, exactly, but more like I'd taken a weight from her that she hadn't even known she'd been carrying.

"Now, firebird, let's get you out of those clothes."

Twenty-Nine

Nyx

I waited for the panic to set in, but it didn't come. I just felt...peaceful.

Which was strange because it wasn't like Bradyn hadn't been in charge before. Maybe it was because being here, the place that had taught me to be Dominant, made everything feel different. Like I'd handed over another piece of myself to him, but it wasn't something I minded, at least not right now.

"Five strokes, my little firebird."

Bradyn's voice was gentle, and his touch had been too when he'd undressed me, but I knew what he was going to do now wasn't gentle. I'd done it to subs myself.

The thick leather strip came down on my ass, and for a moment, I didn't feel anything. Then came the pain. Less than any of the pinching or twisting of my now-aching nipples, less than the bites Bradyn had given me, but it sent heat through me the same way. I closed my eyes and just focused on feeling the weight and the bite of the next four lashes, each one a little more intense than the first.

Then his hand was there, sliding down my spine and over my ass, first one cheek, then the other. I shivered, my skin so sensitive. The movement made my nipples rub against the bedspread, and that sent another rush through me. When I felt his fingers slip between my legs, I made a sound halfway between a whimper and a moan.

"Don't worry, firebird. I'll get you there." Bradyn's voice rolled over me, full of promises. "Let's see if I can make you scream with just my fingers."

"Nyx, we're landing."

I jerked out of the half-sleep daze I'd been in, memories lingering as I tried to get my head together. The night we'd spent at Club Privé had been... explosive.

When we'd gone sightseeing with Kaimi and Rose on Saturday, my voice had actually still been rough from how many times Bradyn had made me scream. And that hadn't been the only thing left from the night before either. I'd been able to hide the hickeys and bite marks since it was cool enough for long sleeves and jackets, but the ache between my legs from how hard he'd fucked me and how overly sensitive my skin still was had been impossible to keep from my friends.

Kaimi had really enjoyed teasing me about that, and since I'd given her plenty of shit when she and Sitara had first gotten together, I'd taken it as gracefully as I could.

"You all right?" Bradyn asked, concerned.

"I'm good." I smiled at him. "I really needed this. Thank you."

He kissed my temple. "I think it was good for both of us."

I agreed. Walking through the airport with him, hand-in-hand, not only felt good, but it felt natural. Savannah might not have felt like home to me, but being with Bradyn was, more and more, starting to feel like home as much as New York did.

Less than a half hour later, we saw a cop car turning into the driveway a few yards ahead of us, and all that peace we'd gotten in New York vanished. The car didn't have its lights on, but there wasn't really a *good* reason for them to be at the ranch. Every muscle went stiff, and Bradyn grabbed my hand.

"They're not rushin', and there's no ambulance."

I wasn't sure if he was trying to reassure himself or me.

Maybe if I'd had a better life growing up, I'd have been more optimistic, but all I could think right now was that something had happened to one or both of the Huxleys. I didn't say anything, though. Bradyn didn't need to deal with my shit right now. I liked Brew and Shadae, but they had been friends – almost family, really – to him.

When the driver got us closer to the main house, however, we saw Brew and Shadae standing outside, and the grip on my heart eased. They were okay. And then I saw Isaac too. I wasn't interested in him, but I wouldn't want him

to have been hurt either, so I was glad to see him standing there too.

“They’re okay.” Bradyn’s hand tightened around mine.

“This where ya’ll want out?” the driver asked as he parked behind the cop car. “Cuz I don’t think I can go around them.”

“This is fine.” Bradyn held out a couple bills. “Here.”

“I’ll get the bags,” I said. “You go to Brew and Shadae.”

“Thank you.”

By the time I got our luggage, Bradyn was hugging Shadae and listening to whatever the Huxleys were saying. I put everything on the grass, out of the way, and went to join them. Shadae was in the middle of a sentence when I got close enough to hear them.

“...we got home, and it was like this.”

And that was when I saw the reason why the cops were here.

Go back to Africa you fucking n-

Fury flooded me. Who the fuck had done this? If the cops couldn’t figure it out, I sure as hell would. This sort of racist bullshit would’ve pissed me off no matter who the victims were. The fact that someone had done this to people like Shadae and Brew made it personal. If I had to stay in Savannah for a year to figure it out, I’d do it.

“I need you to stop right there, miss.” A uniformed officer stepped in front of me. “This is a crime scene.”

“It’s all right, officer,” Isaac called. His expression was tight, and even from where I was standing, I could see rage simmering just under his skin. “She’s a guest here.”

“Are the cabins like this too?” I asked, looking back and forth between Isaac and the cop, figuring at least one of them would answer me.

“I need to ask you a few questions,” the officer said, moving so that he was between Isaac and me. “Your name?”

“Nyx Phoenix.” I wanted to repeat my question, but I kept my attitude in check. The Huxleys didn’t deserve to suffer for me being a smartass.

He jotted down what I assumed was my name. “And you’re stayin’ here?”

“I am.” I put my hands in my pockets and wished I’d thought to wear a dress that could handle the change in weather rather than jeans. “I’m from New York.”

“The state in general or the city?”

Smart question, I’d give him that. Most people, when they heard New York assumed it was the city, even if it wasn’t specifically said.

“City.”

“How do you know Bradyn Traylor?”

It took me a moment to realize that he was asking because Bradyn and I had just arrived together and not because he was being an ass. Well, at least not *all* because he was being an ass. I’d wait until the conversation was done before I decided anything else about him.

“I met him when I first got to Savannah, and he recommended the ranch as somewhere for me to stay while I’m in town.”

“Where were the two of you comin’ back from just now?”

“New York.”

He raised an eyebrow. “The city again?”

“We were in Rochester first and then went to the city for a few days.”

“Why were you there?” He did a decent job of not leering at me, but it didn’t take a mind reader to know what he was thinking.

“Business.” I would’ve enjoyed seeing his surprise if the circumstances had been different. “I’m a PI, and my investigation took me to Rochester. I went to the city to stop by my place and office before coming back.”

“You’re a PI.”

I gritted my teeth and tried not to be annoyed at his surprise. “Yes. My license is in my purse.” I gestured back to where I’d left the bags. “I can get it if you want me to.”

“That won’t be necessary,” he said. “I just need to know how long you were gone.”

“We left on Tuesday afternoon and got in on the one o’clock flight today.”

He closed his notebook. “All right. I didn’t think either of you had anythin’ to do with this, but my captain would have my ass if I didn’t get your alibis.”

Okay, so maybe he wasn’t an ass.

“Can you tell me now if the cabins are covered with the same shit as the house?”

“Pretty much,” he said. “Barn too. And two of the cabins were broken into.”

I went cold. “Which two?”

“Yours and Bradyn’s.” Isaac came up behind the cop. “I don’t know how bad the damage is. I just opened the doors to make sure you two weren’t there and then waited for the cops with my parents.”

“No one was hurt?” It didn’t look like it, but I needed to know for sure.

“No.” Isaac turned his attention to the cop. “Your partner wants to talk to you.”

“Probably wants to see if our stories match,” Bradyn said as he walked over. His tone was casual, but the lines around his mouth weren’t.

“Just doin’ our job,” the cop grumbled as he headed over to his partner.

“I don’t know why they wasted any time thinking the two of you did anything,” Isaac said. “It’s your cabins that are trashed.”

“Wait.” Bradyn’s eyes narrowed. “What about the main house? The barn?”

“Graffitied,” Isaac said. “But not broken into.”

Bradyn’s gaze met mine, and I saw my thoughts reflected there.

Shit.

“My parents told me there’s some lawsuit you’re investigating that has something to do with them.”

I turned to Isaac and tried to pretend that the hairs on the back of my neck weren’t all on end. “I am.” I glanced over to where the cops were walking toward a car that was coming up the driveway. “And I think Bradyn and I need to find out if anything’s missing from our cabins. See if it’s just vandalism or if we need to report a robbery.”

“I’m not going to let some lawsuit put my parents in danger.”

“I wouldn’t have gotten them involved if I’d known something like this was going to happen.” I hoped Isaac knew I was telling the truth. “Hell, I wouldn’t have been staying here if I thought it’d risk your parents.”

Isaac sighed, and he suddenly looked years older. “I know, Nyx. This racist shit just gets old.”

I couldn’t even tell him that it wasn’t about race, even if the vandalism was supposed to cover up a theft. Money or racism alone could be a motive for crime. Together, they were explosive.

“Let’s go see if anything’s missing,” Bradyn said. “Isaac, figure out what’s needed for your parents to be safe. Whatever it is, I’ll take care of it.”

It said something about how shaken Isaac was that he didn’t argue with Bradyn’s offer. Guilt twisted my stomach into knots, making me worry that if I tried to add to what Bradyn said, I’d throw up. It wasn’t as much the things that’d been done, but what could’ve happened if whoever it was had been angrier or hadn’t found what they were looking for.

Sure, it could’ve just been some assholes, but if I had to accept one more thing as coincidence, I was going to scream. My hands curled and uncurled, nails digging into my palms. I needed to move, do something. I started toward my cabin and heard footsteps a few seconds later. When Bradyn made it to my side, he slowed down and matched my steps. Neither one of us said anything until we got to my cabin.

“Want to do this together?”

“No. We should each do our own.” I turned, but he grabbed my hand and pulled me back to him, folding me into a hug.

“This isn’t your fault.” He kissed the top of my head. “Stop blaming yourself.”

“I’m working on it,” I said, pressing my face against his chest. “What really sucks is that I can’t wish that I hadn’t taken the case because these families deserve at least some sort of justice.”

And because I wouldn’t have met him.

But I wasn’t going to say that. It felt too selfish of me to be thinking about what I’d gained out of all this.

“I think you should go back to New York.”

I pulled back, and he let me go. “Say that again?”

“I can’t stand the thought of you getting hurt.” He’d lost all the ease that was usually on his face. He didn’t just look serious. He looked worried and angry. “You can give Min what you have, and I’ll send everything I find to you to look over for your case. I’ll find somewhere else to stay, and that’ll keep anyone from messing with you or the Huxleys.”

“No.” I didn’t snap at him, but I made the word as firm as I could. “I’m not running away. We’ll find out if anything’s gone, file a police report if we need to, and then we’ll make a plan. We see this through, and that’s how we’re going to protect everyone. We make sure whoever did this is exposed.”

I didn’t add that there was a good chance all this shit would be traced back to Bradyn’s family. We both knew it. It didn’t need to be said.

“Nyx, I—”

“When we’re done, I’m going to call the lab we sent your and Kathie’s DNA to and have them send a second copy of the results straight to Min at the firm, just so we’ll know there’s one that’ll be safe, even if the ones to you and Kathie get ‘lost’ somehow.” I looked back up the driveway to where a man in a suit was talking to the Huxleys. A detective, I assumed. “We’re going to need someone in law enforcement we can trust.”

Rather than arguing with me, Bradyn simply nodded. “I know who to call.”

Thirty

Bradyn

This was turning into one of the longest days I could remember.

After Nyx and I confirmed that some of the copies of the files that had been left in our cabins had been destroyed, we knew for certain that we'd been the reason for the ranch being vandalized. Whoever had done it had been sneaky about it too. They hadn't stolen anything, but they'd torn up enough that there would've been no way for anyone but Nyx and I to know exactly what had been destroyed. And none of it could be recovered.

If Nyx and I hadn't decided to put the originals of everything in safety deposit boxes before we'd gone to New York, we would've lost everything. I'd only been worried about my family finding out I'd taken the box from Ashley's house. Someone doing this hadn't occurred to me at all.

I think that was what bothered me the most, that I hadn't seen it coming. Nyx hadn't either, and it wasn't like she was naïve about the way the world worked, but this was my city. I'd been raised in Savannah and knew just how deep the roots of racism ran in the South.

Like how the daughter of one of my dad's friends had a kid with a biracial guy we'd gone to school with. After they'd broken up, he'd gone to see his daughter, and she'd called the cops, telling them that her abusive ex was trying to take her kid. The guy'd gotten arrested and ended up on probation. I'd heard, after the fact, that he'd spent two hours being asked what race to put on the report.

Fucking racists.

And I still hadn't thought that Nyx investigating claims against one of Savannah's proudest white families on behalf of people of color would come back to bite her on the ass.

I should've known something like this would happen.

I was still beating myself up over it when Nyx and I arrived at Zunzi's to meet Maury Nieto, a cop I knew I could trust. The fact that he'd called me when he'd found my card in Nyx's purse after she'd been arrested meant she knew the two of us were friends. I wasn't sure about how much she'd trust him, though.

We'd met when I'd been a junior in college, and he'd been a rookie sent to break up a party on campus. I'd been the idiot trying to make an exposé film about underage drinking in college. An idiot who'd used duct tape to strap a burner phone on the inside of my thigh like I was some hotshot undercover cop in an action movie.

We hadn't become friends because he'd done something like let me go with a warning because I'd been doing something wrong. No, we'd become friends because he'd taken my recording to his superior...and he hadn't laughed when I'd screamed while ripping the tape off. Well, not until I'd started laughing, anyway.

The memory of our meeting flashed through my mind as Nyx and I made our way to the table where Maury was waiting. He was off duty and in civilian clothes, but there was still something about him, that thing that some police officers have where it doesn't matter how they're dressed, they look like cops.

"You two look like shit." He leaned back in his seat, his dark eyes quickly assessing both of us even before we sat down.

"Thanks," I said dryly as I took the seat across from him. "You try gettin' up at the ass crack of dawn, flying for a few hours, then getting home to find your place trashed and vandalized. See how good you look then."

"I heard about that." Maury's expression grew serious. "No one was hurt, right?"

"Not physically, at least," Nyx said. "Scared the Huxleys pretty good, though."

"I heard that too," Maury said. "They're good people."

"I hope that means you're going to help us find the bastards who did it." After a moment, I added the part I hadn't told Maury yet. "And help us prove

why they did it.”

“*Why* they vandalized and trashed the ranch? I figured it was the usual racist shit.” Maury leaned forward. “What aren’t you telling me, Bradyn?”

I looked at Nyx, and she nodded. It was time to bring someone else into the know. It was a risk, especially for Nyx, since she had to rely mostly on my judgment, but a line had been crossed. I didn’t know if whoever had trashed our cabins would have hurt anyone if someone had been there, but it wasn’t something I was willing to risk if they tried again.

Starting with my part of things seemed the easiest. “I’ve been working on a documentary about some of Savannah’s most prominent families but focusing on the truth of their pasts.”

“Yours?”

“That’s one of them, yes.”

Maury let out a low whistle. “You’ve got some serious balls on you.” As soon as he said it, he glanced at Nyx and blushed. “Sorry, miss.”

“Don’t worry about it.” She made a dismissive gesture. “And it’s Nyx. Not *miss*.”

“Sorry, mi-Nyx.” He turned back to me. “You don’t think your parents had the place trashed as a warning about the film.”

Another reason I liked and respected Maury was that he was smart. He could’ve been a detective or start working his way up the other ranks, but he’d only ever wanted to be a training officer. I was glad to know that someone like him was influencing future police officers.

“It’s not just the film,” I said. “You saw Nyx’s PI license, right?”

“From New York. I remember.”

Not a surprise. He didn’t miss much. “There’s some confidentiality about her case,” I continued. “But what you need to know is that she found out my ancestors did some seriously shady shit. Even more than owning slaves, I mean.”

“You think your parents would go to all that trouble just so you won’t badmouth people who lived a couple hundred years ago.”

“More like they’re worried that we can prove they not only know what their ancestors did but that they’re still covering it up, which means they could lose a lot of money,” Nyx said. “Pride is a nice motive by itself, but if you add in money...pretty bad combination if you ask me.”

“It is,” Maury agreed. “I’m guessin’ that means you’re sure it’s your parents behind what happened at the ranch.”

“I’d be surprised if it wasn’t.” I sighed. “But you know as well as I do that it’ll be almost impossible to get enough evidence to arrest them, let alone convict them.”

“And you think I can help you.”

“We want to confront my father, and we need you to help us figure out a way we can do it and use whatever we get in court.”

Maury let out a low whistle. “You’re going to help send your dad to prison?”

“If I have to,” I said. “I’m hopin’ that we can get somethin’ bad enough that he won’t be able to just talk his way out of it. He’ll have to bargain at the very least.”

While Maury thought, I turned my attention to the food on my plate.

I hated that it’d come to this. I’d never thought of my parents as being ‘good people.’ Yeah, they donated to a few worthy causes, like St. Jude’s and the American Red Cross, but they also gave money to the Daughters of the Confederacy, though that was one they tended to keep under the radar.

They gave money to politicians who said all the right things and smiled in all the right places, but who had some of the darkest shit to hide. So, *decent* had probably been the best I could’ve given either of them. Even after I was disinherited, it hadn’t made me think they were bad.

But I’d never thought they’d cross the line into flat-out actively illegal shit. Covering stuff up was illegal, but it wasn’t violent. Didn’t make it right, but actually sending people out to vandalize and harass innocents? If it’d just

been me, I wouldn't have been as pissed, but Shadae and Brew? Nyx?

Hell no.

It didn't matter if my parents weren't actually getting their hands dirty. I was done just digging and sharing. Reaction was done. I was going on the offensive. I'd use my family name as a platform for change.

Starting with making my father accountable for everything he'd done, but it wouldn't end there. It was time to be proactive.

Thirty-One

Nyx

It'd taken me until after midnight to get the cabin cleaned up since I hadn't done any of it before Bradyn and I had gone to meet with his cop buddy. At least I knew now that Maury was a good guy. Bradyn wouldn't have gotten Maury involved in this mess otherwise.

I couldn't lie. Part of the reason I'd put off cleaning until after we'd gotten back to the ranch was because I'd wanted an excuse to not sleep with Bradyn. He wouldn't have taken it badly if I'd turned him down, but I was pretty sure I wasn't strong enough to say no. I didn't think there was a strong enough word to explain how much I wanted to be with him.

Which meant I needed to take a step back and remind myself that I was a whole person, even without him. I could never let myself become like my mom, needing a man so bad that she'd ignore anything that threatened it.

It had nothing to do with being nervous at what Bradyn and I were trying to do. Nothing at all. It wasn't as if the last time I'd confronted someone with the shit they'd done, I hadn't been believed. Nope. Not that at all.

"You don't have to come with me," Bradyn said as we got into his truck. "I can do this myself."

"Not a chance." I reached over and squeezed his hand. "My case is a big part of why this happened, and I'm not going to let anyone scare me away."

"I hate that my family's so deep into this." He started down the driveway. "Not just the vandalism or even the hiding stuff. It all comes down to that whole 'the South will rise again' shit. Did you know there are a lot of schools down here that teach the Civil War had nothing to do with slaves? That all the poor plantation owners wanted was states' rights?" He shook his head. "Like it doesn't matter that those 'rights' they're talking about violated basic human rights."

"You sound like you've had this argument before," I said.

I wasn't sure it was a good idea for us to be talking about his fucked-up family when we were on our way to meet the fucked-up head of the fucked-up family, but hey, this was harder for Bradyn than it was for me, so I'd talk about almost anything he wanted.

"I've had that argument a million times, for all the good it did." He sighed. "I just get so tired of it, you know? We're in the twenty-first century. You'd think people were more...I don't know...enlightened or something."

"*Enlightened*. There's a ten-dollar word," I teased.

He smiled but didn't laugh. That, as much as the little lines at the corner of his mouth told me he wouldn't be finding much funny until all this was done. Or maybe nothing about his family would ever be funny.

Shit.

"Do you...do you want *me* to do this alone?" I rubbed the palms of my hands on my shorts, trying not to think about all the ways my offer was making my stomach churn.

He shot me a quick glance. "Hell no! I'd never leave you alone with my dad."

One look at his face told me he wasn't worried about a repeat of what'd happened with Antoinette and his father. He was worried his dad would hurt me somehow. He was protecting me, but he also needed me. It was a strange combination, but one I actually understood. It was that sort of line that every good Dominant walked. I was just used to being on the giving side of it rather than the receiving.

Maybe he and I sharing dominance could actually work after all.

If we hadn't been dealing with all this extra shit, I would've had him pull over someplace a little more private and ridden him right there in the driver's seat.

"I'll follow your lead," I said. "If you need me to say or do anything, just let me know."

"Thanks."

It got quiet again and stayed that way until we reached the Traylor home. A massive, sprawling home that was bigger than some apartment buildings in New York. And if all of the information we'd collected was right – and I had little doubt that it was – it'd been stolen. Sure, it hadn't been this big when the Clancy's had taken it, but seeing it now, knowing where it'd come from...no nerves were going to stop me from doing what was right.

As Bradyn parked the truck, a thought popped into my head.

“If your dad's governor of Georgia, why'd we come here instead of going to his office? It's Tuesday.”

“His office is actually in Atlanta,” Bradyn said. “We just happened to get lucky that he had a photo op in Savannah this morning and decided not to commute today.”

I frowned. “Isn't Atlanta a couple hours from here?”

“Not by plane.” His hands tightened on the wheel. “I'm sure it won't come as a surprise that the Traylor family has a private plane at its beck and call. Dad has an apartment in Atlanta too, so he usually staggers his commuting every couple days or so.”

I whistled a long note. “Must be nice.”

“It was.” Bradyn got out but paused before closing the door. “But it wasn't worth my integrity.”

I took his hand when we met at the front of his truck, and the two of us walked up to the door side-by-side. The person who answered Bradyn's knock wasn't someone I'd seen before, but since Bradyn and he knew each other by sight, I assumed it was an employee of some kind.

“Your father is in his study.”

“Thanks.” Bradyn led me around the massive staircase and down a hallway lined with pictures.

Not like family photos, but painted ones of people from a hundred years ago or more. My history class hadn't covered clothing through the years, but I would've had to be pretty stupid not to know those styles of big dresses and

weird pants were from a long time ago. All the frames had little metal things at the bottom that I figured probably had people's names on them, but we were walking too fast for me to read them. We weren't running, but we were definitely not dawdling either.

We stopped at a closed door about halfway down the hall, and Bradyn knocked.

"Come in."

The first thing I noticed when we walked in was that Clancy didn't look surprised to see us. The second was that more paintings hung in here, but they were all of men, and I could see a little of Clancy, and even a little of Bradyn, in them. I wondered how many of the names I had on my Calvert / Traylor family tree were being displayed here.

As Bradyn moved ahead of me, I reached into my pocket and started recording. I just hoped Clancy thought Bradyn and I were the sort of people who might cause some problems but wouldn't think to actually do something to get evidence. If we couldn't get him to confess anything or if he figured out that I was recording him, we'd lose the element of surprise, and that just might cost us everything.

"Is somethin' wrong there, son?" Clancy wasn't wearing a smirk, but I could hear it in his voice. He knew exactly why we were here, and he was pleased about it.

"Let's not do this," Bradyn said.

"This?" Clancy raised an eyebrow.

"This little dance you like to do. Both of us circlin' around until someone finally gives and speaks first." Bradyn's voice was even. "You know damn well why Nyx and I are here."

"Tsk, tsk." Clancy shook his head. "Language. We raised you better than that."

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him *exactly* the sort of example they'd set for their children, but that wasn't why we were here. Priorities.

“You’ve done some shitty stuff to me, but this? You’ve gone too far.”

I wondered if Bradyn was intentionally cursing now just to aggravate his father, and I found that funnier than I probably should have. I managed to keep from laughing, but only because I knew it’d bother Bradyn.

“I guess it really shouldn’t surprise me, but I never thought you’d go after the people you’re supposed to be protecting.” He took another step toward his father’s desk. “You’re the governor of the entire state, and that’s supposed to mean something. Or does it just apply to those of us with less melanin?”

Clancy’s eyes narrowed. “That’s a nasty accusation to make, son, especially against your father.”

“Yeah, well, maybe if you’d been a different sort of father, I wouldn’t have to make any accusations.” Bradyn hooked his thumbs in his belt loops. “Who’d you hire to trash the ranch?”

“I have no idea what you’re talkin’ about.” Clancy smiled again.

“I have no idea how you manage to cover up so much shit if you keep hirin’ people too stupid to properly frame someone else.”

The smile didn’t falter. “Do explain.”

Didn’t anyone just flat-out say what they meant anymore?

“If they’d been smarter, they would have stuck with either robbery or racially-motivated vandalism,” Bradyn explained. “The race angle doesn’t explain why only Nyx and my cabins were trashed since we’re, you know...*white*. But if they’d only been tryin’ to steal stuff, writin’ racial slurs on the house without breakin’ in was stupid. I would’ve thought you were smarter than that.”

Color crept up Clancy’s neck and into his cheeks. “Watch yourself.”

“I don’t think so.” Bradyn shook his head. “I think I’m done watchin’ myself around you. In fact, I think I’m done listenin’ to you at all. I’m goin’ to do what I want, and you’re goin’ to let me.”

Clancy laughed, but it was a sound as ugly as the expression on his face. “I think you’re forgettin’ who I am.”

“No, I know exactly who you are.”

I didn't know if Clancy saw the flash of sadness that crossed Bradyn's face, or if he would even care if he did, but I saw it, and it pissed me off that it'd been Bradyn's father who'd put it there.

“I think I know better now than I ever have who you are. What our family is.” He inhaled deeply before continuing. “I know what the Calverts did to the Adams' family, and that you know too. I know you – and probably Mom and Ashley – have been covering it up.”

“You've been busy,” Clancy said. “But you're just a disinherited son, out to spread rumors about your poor family. No one's gonna believe you.”

“They will if I have proof.” The words were soft, but the impact on Clancy was visible.

“You don't.”

“I do,” Bradyn countered. “Like I said, you should have picked better goons. They may've shredded a lot of stuff, but they never bothered to pay attention to whether or not they had the originals. And contrary to what you may think, I'm not stupid. I made more than one copy.” He glanced at me.

I didn't hesitate. “Ditto.”

Clancy looked startled, as if he'd forgotten I was there. From what I knew about him, I suspected that was exactly what'd happened.

“I made copies too,” I said. “In case you didn't understand what *ditto* meant.”

“Your taste in women has...declined.” He made a face like he'd just eaten something nasty.

“I'm sure you meant that as an insult,” I said, “but since I know what a lying, cheating bastard you are, I'll accept it as a compliment.”

“You know, in my day, girls knew their place.” Clancy glared at me.

“Well, nowadays, women like to make their own place.” I gave him my best snarky smile. “I'm sure you boys understand.”

If looks could kill, I would've been six feet under.

But we still wouldn't have shit to use against him. We needed him to start talking.

"I'm still waitin' to hear what I'm supposed to've done that's so bad I would've done somethin' as heinous as vandalizin' one of my people's property to hide it."

What was it I'd said about coincidence and fate?

"You've been hidin' what our ancestors did after the Revolutionary War," Bradyn said. "You know what Matthew Calvert did."

Clancy slammed his palm onto his desk. "Matthew Calvert was a patriot."

"He was," Bradyn agreed. "But that didn't make him any less a criminal."

"What, exactly, was his crime?" Clancy asked, his bright blue eyes sparking. "He fought for a new country and then claimed a piece of it for himself."

"He stole it," I said, hoping me talking would provoke him again. Keep him off-balance. "Stole it from hard-working people who just wanted to make good lives for themselves."

Clancy made a sound that made me want to punch him. Well, more than I already wanted to hit him. "Stole it? Matthew merely took spoils of war. It was the way of the world back then, and it's still the way of the world for the most part."

"Zachariah and Ester Adams were every bit as American after the war as Calvert," I pointed out. "Wouldn't that land have been as much a spoil of war for them as for him?"

"Every bit as American? Come now, girl. Not even a Yankee like you could be that naïve."

"Why wouldn't they have been? I mean, wasn't that the whole point of the war? Freedom from the whole kings and nobility shit? Equality?" How was he not seeing that I was baiting him?

He shook his head. "Of course, my family has always believed in equality for all, but back then, before the War Between the States, there was only so much God-fearing white folk could do."

“But there were free people of color, even back then,” I pointed out. “And the Adamases were free. They owned that land, and your people took it from them.”

Clancy gave me one of those small, condescending smiles that always made me want to hurt someone. “Don’t you know that history is more about who does the tellin’ than the facts?”

“Except we have proof of the facts,” Bradyn said.

“What do you have?” Clancy narrowed his eyes at his son. “Some old papers with writin’ that’s barely readable? Letters?”

Bradyn’s expression didn’t change, and I hoped mine didn’t either. We hadn’t mentioned what our evidence was. It wasn’t a full confession, but it was something.

“Now, why don’t the two of you stop worryin’ about things that happened in the past and worry about your futures. Ya’ll need to stop diggin’ in stuff that don’t concern you.”

I wasn’t a cop or a psychologist, but his accent getting thicker by the second made me think he was a lot more emotional than he was letting on.

“Why don’t you let Nyx and I decide what’s worth lookin’ into.”

“Ya’ll both listen to me now, even if you never did before.” Clancy’s face hardened. “It’d be best for you to go back home, missy. Stickin’ your nose in our business, likely it’ll get bit off. And you, boy, it ain’t gonna matter that we’re blood.”

Bradyn stared at his father, and I knew he’d just lost the last little bit of hope he’d had of his father’s innocence. Instead of making him say the last thing we’d agreed to tell Clancy before we left, I stepped up to do it myself.

“Look, I don’t give a shit who you are, but I do give a shit about your son and your grandkids. Do the right thing and come forward with all of this. We’re giving you forty-eight hours to get with your lawyers and figure out how you want to make things right.”

Clancy glared at me. “I don’t have to put up with this shit from you. Get the hell outta my house.”

“We’re going.” Bradyn’s voice was tight but controlled. He took my hand, and we headed for the door.

Before I stepped out of the study, I turned around to offer one last comment. “By the way, I’m not a religious person, but I think God might have a thing or two to say about you using His name the way you do.”

I had a moment’s pleasure at seeing Clancy’s jaw drop, and then Bradyn and I were hurrying down the hall toward the front door. I really hoped Clancy did the right thing because, if he didn’t, this was going to get even uglier, and that wasn’t something I wanted to see.

Thirty-Two

Bradyn

Nyx followed me into my cabin without either of us talking about it. The entire ride back to the ranch had been silent, and I didn't know if it was because Nyx was trying to give me space or because she needed to think. Either way, I was grateful for her being there. I wasn't ready to be alone yet.

Everything had gone the way I'd thought it would, but that didn't make it any easier to accept. Even him disinherit me hadn't hurt as much as this. Maybe it was because I'd always been used to him trying to control me with money. Maybe it was because I hadn't believed he'd do something that could've easily turned violent. Or maybe it was just that he'd made other people a part of it.

"Come with me," Nyx said suddenly.

She took my hand and led me to the couch. As I sat, she bent down and took off my shoes and socks, setting them aside. My eyes followed her as she stood and walked across the room. She disappeared into the bedroom for a minute and then came back out with the only tie I owned.

"You need to get out of your head." She moved around to the back of the couch. "No thinking. Just feeling."

I closed my eyes as she tied the make-shift blindfold, acknowledging that she was in charge. Being dominated wasn't what made my stomach flip. It was the realization that she wasn't taking the Dominant role because she felt the need to be in control right now. She was doing it because she wanted to take care of me. I suspected it was probably the first time she'd taken on the Dominant role for that reason, and the importance of this moment wasn't lost on me.

I just hoped I deserved it.

Her fingers moved down the front of my shirt, and the cotton moved against my skin. I realized she was taking off my shirt a couple seconds before she

pushed it off my arms.

“Tell me what you want.” Her voice was as soft as her touch. “Tell me what you need.”

“Are you topping from the bottom now?” I quipped.

Her finger touched my lips, then traced the bottom one. “Tell. Me. What. You. Want.”

I flicked my tongue out, and the tip touched against the pad of her finger. “Touch me. Taste me.”

She moved back, but I could still feel her eyes on me. I’d never been blindfolded during sex before, so I didn’t know if my awareness of her was simply due to the lack of one of my senses, but I didn’t think that was it. There was just something about her that drew me like a magnet. Like I could find her anywhere.

The moment her hands met my chest, a shiver ran through me. Her legs nudged my knees, and I parted them. She shifted, and I registered a change of position. She was kneeling now, I thought. Her hands went to my knees, then slid up my thighs.

Hot air ghosted across my belly. “Is this what you want, Bradyn?” Soft lips pressed against my skin, and I broke out in goosebumps. Then her tongue traced a circle around my belly button, and I gasped. “Is this the touching and the tasting you want?”

“Yes.” The word was shaky, but I was too focused on sensation to care what I sounded like. “More. Please.”

Her hands ran up my sides, fingers leisurely exploring every muscle, running along my ribs. Kisses went from my belly button up to my pecs. Silky hair slid over my skin, the light touch making me squirm. Then her teeth fastened onto my nipple, and I yelped in surprise. She chuckled just before her tongue soothed the sting.

“Do you want my teeth on you?” she asked. “Do you want me to mark you?”

“Fuck, yes.”

She answered with a bite to the muscle next to my nipple. I started to reach for her, but she grabbed my wrists and pushed them back down.

“Speak, don’t touch.”

I growled and got another bite for my troubles. One of her hands moved to my crotch, cupping me through my pants, and I moaned. Her mouth moved over my chest, licking and biting as her hand squeezed and massaged my thickening cock.

“Firebird,” I groaned. I made my hands into fists to keep from grabbing her.

“Tell me what you need.”

“More. I need more.”

Her lips pressed against mine. “More what? Tell me.”

“Just *more*,” I demanded.

She laughed, her mouth moving to my ear. “My mouth? Is that what you want? All that wet heat around you, sucking your cock, taking it as deep as I can. Licking you like you’re a damn popsicle.”

“Fuck, Nyx.” My heart felt like it was going to pound through my chest.

“Or is it my pussy you want?” She nipped at my earlobe. “You feel so fucking good inside me. Stretching me, filling me.” She shuddered. “I can almost come just from remembering what it’s like to fuck you.”

She let go of my cock, and my hips rocked up instinctively.

“Do you want me to unzip you? Lower myself onto that huge dick of yours and ride you until we both can’t see straight. Is that what you want?”

“Fuck, yes,” I groaned.

“Then *tell* me.” She bit my jaw.

“Ride me.” I finally managed to get the words out.

“Condom?”

Condom? Why the hell would I care? Right...protection.

“Bedside table.”

I was tempted to take the blindfold off when she left, but I behaved myself, mostly because I loved that she wanted to take care of me. I’d analyze exactly what that meant at a later point. Right now, I just wanted to be buried as deep as possible inside my firebird.

“I’m surprised you don’t have your cock out already.”

I laughed. “I would’ve if I wasn’t worried about hurting myself. Unzipping when you’re hard is difficult enough. Adding blind into the mix just makes it dangerous.”

“I’ll take care of that then.”

Her hands moved over me, and in a quick minute, she had me unzipped, out, and was rolling on the condom. The couch dipped on either side of my hips, and I could feel the heat from her body. Then she was sinking down onto me, and nothing else mattered.

Her hands settled on my shoulders, and she gave a little sigh as she settled on my lap, like that was the only place she wanted to be. I knew it was the only place I wanted to be.

“Can I touch you now?” I asked.

She kissed the corner of my mouth. “*Tell me.*”

“I want to touch you.”

“Do it.”

I put my hands on her knees and then slid them up to her hips. “Fuck me, firebird.”

“It’ll be my pleasure.”

Her voice was like liquid sex, all thick and sweet. And then she started to move, and *everything* was sex and sweet. I wanted to see her, lose myself in her eyes while we danced. Maybe I sounded like some sort of sap, but I wasn’t really in control of my brain at the moment.

“I’m getting close.” Nyx’s voice was breathless. “The taste of you, the feel of you in my hand, had me wet before you were even inside me.”

I didn’t think I could get much harder, but she’d just proven me wrong. I felt like I was going to explode.

“Tell me.” Her nails dug into my bare shoulders, signaling her desperation as much as her voice did.

I didn’t need to ask what she meant. “Come for me, little firebird.”

I used my grip on her hips to pull her down, and at the same time, drove up into her, fusing our bodies together as completely as possible. She cried out, a shudder going through her entire body, and she came.

Passionately, completely, almost violently. Her orgasm triggered my own, and I followed her into that burst of pure pleasure so intense that it was partly pain, where no one but the two of us existed.

Thirty-Three

Nyx

I woke up in Bradyn's bed, and it was still dark. A glimmer of moonlight showed my phone on the table by the bed, and I reached for it. We'd fallen into bed after we'd come to our senses on the couch, and I was pretty sure we'd passed out about an hour later. Based on the time showing on my screen, we'd been asleep for only a couple hours.

Bradyn had rolled away from me at some point, which made it easier for me to get out of the bed. I didn't usually wake up in the middle of the night, but once I did, I rarely ever got back to sleep. It was annoying on nights like this when I only woke to go to the bathroom, but I knew how it'd be. Since I wasn't in my own cabin, and I didn't want to go outside at the moment, I took my phone with me.

Maybe I'd been through enough these past few days that I'd actually doze, though I doubted it.

When I went into the living room, I sat on the couch – the opposite end from where Bradyn and I had fucked earlier tonight – and pulled up my email. At least I could get some work done while I waited. What I was waiting for, I didn't know. I could've gone back to my cabin if I really wanted to, no matter what time of night it was. I just still wanted to be here.

As I deleted the last spam email, I got an alert that another email had come in. Hoping for a case but expecting more of the same junk, I opened it.

I made it past the first line before what I was reading actually registered, and then I went completely numb.

Delia,

I heard you changed your name, but after all that's happened between us, I don't deserve to use your new one. I'm writing to tell you how sorry I am. This apology is a long time coming, and I'm ashamed that I didn't believe you. I should have. I'm your sister, and I should have believed you.

So much has happened. I know that you were telling the truth about what Art did to you, what he planned to do to me. It's too long a story for me to tell it all in an email, but I want you to hear it. I want to beg for your forgiveness in person. I'm here in Savannah, and I want to meet with you.

Your sister,

Dara

I found myself reading the email for the third time without even realizing it. It was like my eyes had to keep going back over each word just to prove that it was real.

I hadn't spoken to Dara since that night. Like our mother, she'd called me a liar and insisted that Art had never hurt her and would've never hurt me. She'd blamed me for ruining our lives. I'd held on to hope for years, but by the time I'd left juvie, I'd lost it. Kaimi had become my sister. Not the same as Dara, but in some ways, better, because the sister I'd chosen had also chosen me. Kaimi had believed me from the first time I'd told her my story. She'd accepted it the way I'd wanted Dara to.

But something had changed.

With Ambrose involved with my case, it made sense that Dara could've tracked me down, but it didn't explain the why. And with this many years having passed, I needed to know the why. If there was any hope of us moving past what'd torn us apart, I needed to know what had finally convinced Dara of the truth.

I sent a short reply.

I'll meet you at the Cotton Exchange tomorrow, Wednesday.

I couldn't bring myself to say anything more. I'd already risked my heart by opening up to Bradyn. I was going to be a lot more cautious when it came to my sister. I'd wait until I spoke to her before making any decisions about whether or not I wanted her in my life. At the very least, I could get the closure with her I'd never gotten with our mother.

Thirty-Four

Bradyn

I knew something was off the moment I woke up, but it took me a minute longer to figure out what it was.

I was alone in my bed.

Granted, that wasn't an entirely uncommon occurrence, but Nyx had been here when I'd fallen asleep. Or, more accurately, passed out.

Great sex was weird in that, sometimes, it made you feel energized, and sometimes, you completely lost consciousness. Last night, it had been the latter. We'd tumbled into bed, had sex again, and then it was lights out.

Judging by how much I needed to pee, I hadn't gotten up at all, and my stiff muscles said I'd barely even moved. If I'd been alone last night, I doubted I would've gotten any sleep at all. Honestly, I doubted if any other woman would've been able to make me forget as completely as Nyx did.

After the incident with Antoinette and my father, I'd become...cautious. Not exactly jaded, but I definitely didn't trust as quickly as I once had. This thing with Nyx, though, it'd taken me by surprise. Being with her felt natural in a way nothing else ever had. Not easy, exactly, because relationships were work. The ones worth having anyway. But it didn't feel forced with her.

The closest comparison I could think of was how some people talked about their talents or careers. Like the first time a true musician picked up the instrument they were meant to play. Or how an athlete might feel when they picked up a ball or racket or club.

I loved making films, and I considered it an important field. I didn't really want to do anything else. But it still hadn't been that sort of click where everything suddenly made sense.

Being with Nyx had.

I couldn't think of any other way to describe it. And even if I wasn't ready to actually call it love, I knew that was the direction we were going. If nothing else got in our way, we'd be there sooner rather than later, and the thought didn't scare me at all.

When I came out of the bathroom, I was surprised to find the kitchen empty too. I'd assumed that she'd woken up and decided to make breakfast, even if it was just for herself. It was the middle of the week, and we both had work to do. My first lesson wasn't until one o'clock, though, so I had a little time to kill.

My stomach growled, reminding me that I hadn't eaten dinner yesterday. Add in the stress I'd been under, and how many calories I'd burned with Nyx last night, it was no wonder I felt like making a huge ham and cheese omelet.

Once I finished that, I'd head to the house and see if my dad had made any decisions. It wasn't even yet twenty-four hours since we'd given him the ultimatum, but a stop by could make him realize that Nyx and I weren't going to just back away.

My plan for the morning set, I headed to the fridge to get what I needed for breakfast. There, on the door, was a note. I hadn't really expected Nyx to leave one, but I was glad she had. It meant she'd been thinking of me, and I was just insecure enough to need that reassurance. I had all the confidence in the world when it came to the physical stuff, but the emotional...I wasn't so sure.

The note was brief, but the fact that it was there was what mattered.

Bradyn, I feel like a bit of an ass for leaving while you're still sleeping, but I have something to take care of, and it's on a bit of a timetable. I'll see you later. - N

I was curious about whether or not the errand had to do with Nyx's case, but it was a mild curiosity. Her case and my film shared a lot, but that didn't mean they shared everything. There would be things she needed to find that had nothing to do with me or my family, and I wouldn't ask her to share them just because we'd collaborated in other areas.

It was strange how quiet it was. Nyx wasn't exactly talkative, but there was something to be said for the simple presence of another person. I'd never noticed it before, but I had a feeling that no matter how things went with Nyx, I'd never look at being alone the same way again.

I shook my head and settled in to eat my eggs. No more deep thoughts over breakfast. Stick with the plan. Eat. Go see my father. Hope I felt less like punching him than I had when I'd left yesterday.

That was doubtful, but I was trying to be optimistic.

When I stepped outside, I hoped the weather was a good omen. The end of October usually meant low to mid-seventies and today was a perfect example, a balmy seventy-three and sunny. After being in New York, I was definitely appreciative of the ability to walk around without freezing my ass off. Of course, according to Nyx, it had barely been chilly in the Big Apple. I didn't even want to think about what it would be like in December or January.

Except, I might need to think of it, because I doubted Nyx would want to stay in Savannah.

Thinking that far ahead probably wasn't something I should be doing, but I couldn't help it. When I thought about making plans for the future, I wanted her to be in them.

As I pulled up to the house, my thoughts of Nyx moved to the background, and I began to think about what I would say to my dad. By the time I got to the door, I had something perfect in mind.

"If you're here to see your father, he's not at home." The same new housekeeper I'd met earlier this month sounded bored.

"Do you know where he is?"

She folded her arms, and I realized that 'bored' wasn't actually the right description. She looked...annoyed. As if she had far better things to be doing with her time than answering doors.

"Look, I can call him and tell him that I'm here with you and give him some long-winded explanation about how it's your fault I'm interrupting whatever

he's doing." I took my phone out of my pocket. "Or you can tell me where he is, and I promise he won't know that it came from you."

She glared at me for a few seconds more and then sighed. "Someone called from Check & Sons, said they had important information for him. He left about an hour ago."

"Thanks." I smiled, but she didn't return it. "I didn't hear it from you."

She closed the door without another word, and I turned back to my car. Apparently, I had a new destination.

I hoped that Dad going into the firm meant that he'd spent yesterday talking to his lawyers, and they'd called him in to discuss more in person. If that was the case, I'd be polite about my inquiry and then be on my way. If he was trying to figure out a way to get out of what I wanted him to do, I'd have to figure out a new approach.

Since it was almost noon, maybe I'd take him out to lunch, and we could discuss his options.

Then again, my appetite was never the best around him.

I managed to snag a parking space in the back and then walked around to the front. I was coming up the sidewalk when a familiar figure walked out the front door of the firm.

Dark red hair pulled up and back from her face. Fair skin. Curves I knew intimately. She wore a dark green t-shirt and a pair of jeans so new they looked like she'd walked them out of a store.

Apparently, I'd discovered what her errand was. Now, I was even more curious because I didn't know if she'd come here because of her history with the Check family, or if she'd been the reason my father had been called here. If it was the second one, it probably meant I didn't need to have lunch with Dad. Except I didn't know why she wouldn't have had me go with her if she was meeting my father.

"Nyx!"

She didn't miss a step. I called her name again, but still nothing. She must've been lost in thought because there wasn't much in the way of noise at the moment. I'd have to ask her later what she was thinking about so hard. Since I didn't know if she'd talked to my father or why she would've talked to him without me, going inside continued to make sense, so that's what I did.

The receptionist smiled at me as I walked into the building, and I smiled in return, but I didn't stop at her desk. She must've known what family I belonged to because she didn't tell me to come back or call for security. She'd probably seen my father come in and now assumed that I was here for whatever meeting he'd been called to. I wasn't about to tell her differently. The last thing I needed was for her to call someone and find out I wasn't supposed to be here at all.

The short corridor took me to the T where a turn to a right would've taken me to the offices, and the left took me to the conference rooms. The first one was empty, and I could hear voices coming from the second one. I couldn't make out the words, but someone was yelling. Even if that was where my father was, I didn't think it'd be a good idea to interrupt whatever was going on in there. My questions could wait if that was the case.

I went for the last room to see if Dad was there. If he wasn't, I'd check the offices. I didn't hear anything, but the door was only partway open, so I couldn't see the entire room. I gave the door a push and was already starting to turn away when something at the corner of my eye caught my attention.

Someone was lying on the floor.

No, not someone. My father.

“Dad?”

I took a step and was inside the room. That's when I saw the blood.

Thirty-Five

Nyx

I'd been here for forty-five minutes, and my sister still hadn't shown up. It had been thirteen years since I'd last seen her, and she was almost an hour late. Part of me hoped nothing had happened to her, but part of me actually hoped something had gone wrong. If that wasn't the case, it meant she didn't even care enough to try to get here on time.

As much as I hated it, it didn't actually surprise me that she didn't care. After all, she'd walked away from me before. I only had an email to tell me that anything was different. And no reason why.

That was the real reason I was here. Sure, I had a tiny bit of hope that Dara had actually meant what she'd said in that email, and she wanted to apologize for everything that'd happened, but I wasn't stupid. I hadn't been trying to think about what her other possible motivations could be, but I figured they existed. No, the main reason I'd come was to figure out *why* she'd reached out to me.

But it didn't look like I'd get any answers. Not now and probably not ever.

At least I'd had a good lunch, and now I thought I'd treat myself to dessert. I might as well get some sugar in my system. Once I finished, I'd head back to the ranch and see if Bradyn had heard from his father.

It wasn't until I motioned for the waitress to come over that I realized people were looking at me...with weird expressions on their faces. And looking at their phones, then at me again.

I frowned as the look registered.

Fear.

They were scared of something.

Of me?

What. The. Hell.

“Delia Check.”

I froze, half-turned in my seat, and watched three police officers walk toward me. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell them that wasn't my name anymore, but I couldn't speak.

“Delia Check, also known as Delia Phoenix, you're under arrest for the murder of Clancy Traylor.”

My jaw dropped.

Fuck me.

End of Darker 2, The Inquirer.

***Continue the story in the final book, Darker 3: The Fugitive, coming
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One

It happened during my last session with my court-appointed therapist. She'd given me two pieces of advice that I decided to follow. The first was to not let anyone define who I was, to be an individual who was comfortable in her own skin. The second was to have a healthy sex life. I remember thinking that was kind of strange, considering I was only eighteen at the time.

Somehow, I doubted this was what she pictured when she'd imparted those words of wisdom.

The man beneath me moaned as I rode him. The muscles in my thighs were starting to burn with each rise and fall, but I didn't slow. I kept my eyes open, my head down, but I barely registered the pretty-boy features of the young man I'd picked up just an hour ago. My hands splayed on his muscular chest, helping me balance.

“Fuck, babe, you're so tight.”

Okay, so I hadn't picked the guy for his eloquence, but he had a nice thick cock and no issues with me calling the shots. That's what mattered.

I flexed my muscles the way I'd been taught, and he swore again. “I work out,” I said and flexed again.

I leaned forward, and he pushed himself up on his elbows, his mouth latching on to a pale pink nipple. My eyelids fluttered as he sucked on it, his tongue and teeth teasing, but I didn't close my eyes. I always fucked with my eyes open... always. Lights on. No exceptions.

“Harder,” I said and ground down, the angle allowing just the right amount of friction on my clit. I was close. The pressure inside me was at the point where I had to come or explode. “Come on... baby.” I almost tripped over not knowing his name, but I caught myself. “Suck harder. Make me come.”

Technically, I was doing most of the work, but he deserved a little credit for his nice cock and the wonderful things his mouth was doing to my breast,

especially when he followed my directions. Never underestimate the importance of a man who does what he's told.

“Ah,” I moaned as the suction increased, sending jolts of intense pleasure from my breasts straight to my throbbing pussy. I moved one of my hands to the place where my body joined with his and my fingers found my clit. I rubbed it with quick, rapid circles, the combined friction and pressure making it hurt beautifully. I always needed that edge.

“Fuck, I'm gonna...” The guy's words turned into a loud grunt as his hips jerked up against me, his final thrusts hard and fast.

The hand not between my legs moved to my breast. Even as I felt my partner's cock begin to pulse inside the condom, it was my turn. A light pinch and twist to my nipple, and I was there. My muscles tensed and my pussy contracted around the thick shaft inside. The nameless young man swore again, his face a mask of pain-pleasure. As I descended from my high, I rolled off him, and his now-sensitive cock slipped out. I lay on my side, breathing heavily and enjoying the little bursts of electricity racing along my nerves, the aftershocks of a pretty good orgasm. Eight on a scale of ten.

He moved closer and I immediately stiffened, adrenaline flooding my system. I jerked upright, pushing myself back until I was well out of arm's reach.

“Easy, babe.” He gave me a smile, showing a set of deep dimples that went perfectly with his baby blues. He leaned on his elbow. “That was amazing.”

I nodded in agreement and climbed off the narrow dorm bed. College boys were easy, but their beds were generally shit. I picked up my underwear and bra.

“Leaving already?”

I glanced at him as I dressed. He hadn't moved, even to cover himself.

“Come back,” he continued. “Give me ten minutes and an energy drink from the mini-fridge, I'll be good to go again.”

It wasn't even remotely tempting since that would mean at least ten minutes of small talk, but I didn't want to hurt his feelings. I wasn't a bitch, no matter how often I'd been called one. “Thanks, but no. I have to go to work.”

He glanced at the clock, a puzzled expression settling on his handsome face. "It's three in the afternoon."

I smiled and shrugged as I adjusted my tank top. His eyes locked onto the bit of cleavage the tight black top exposed. I didn't say anything. He'd seen them bare. As long as he kept his hands to himself now, he could look all he wanted.

"Will I see you around?" He sat up, but didn't reach for me.

"Probably not for a while," I answered truthfully. While I liked coming to campus, I generally tried not to frequent the same places when I had an itch to scratch. No matter how good the sex, I rarely repeated. I knew society liked to pretend it was the women who got clingy, but I'd met plenty of men who thought a couple roles in the hay meant we were a regular thing.

I smoothed down my miniskirt and pulled on my nearly knee-high boots. I had two pairs, but these were my favorites. The four-inch heels raised me close to five-eight and I preferred being tall. Plus, if I ran into any trouble, they packed a hell of a kick.

"Where do you work?"

I gave him a small smile, but didn't answer. I scanned the carpet. One of my earrings had fallen out. I still had the other three in my right earlobe, but the hoop from the cartilage at the top was missing.

"Let me guess."

I rolled my eyes, knowing he couldn't see my face. I knew what was coming. I knew how people saw me. I'd dyed my hair several times over the years, but for the past six months, I had rocked a bright blue. It was cropped short, angled at my chin in a way that kept my heart-shaped face from looking too delicate. My eyes were a pale gray that most people thought were contacts though they were one hundred percent natural. Aside from the multiple piercings in my ears, I also had an eyebrow ring and one in my bellybutton. That, plus my numerous tattoos and the way I dressed, meant people generally made the wrong assumptions regarding my occupation.

"Dancer at The Blue Moon?"

At least he'd picked one of the classier strip clubs in the area. I had a feeling more than one of my conquests over the past three and a half years had gone trolling clubs looking for me. The thought was amusing. What did it say about the state of feminism in society when a woman couldn't express herself through her appearance without people assuming she was a stripper?

I finally spotted the small silver hoop and slid it back into place with practiced ease. "It was fun," I said as I headed out the door.

By the time I reached the dorm lobby, I was already running through my schedule for the day, my encounter all but forgotten. I only had two jobs today, but the second had a long list of things I needed to do, most of which had to wait until everyone at the company had gone home. Those were my second favorite kind of jobs, because it meant I rarely had anyone staring at me or trying to talk to me while I worked. The best work was, of course, the kind I could do from home. I liked crowds at clubs and concerts, the anonymity that came with being part of the masses, but I wasn't a social person. There was only so much personal interaction I could handle at a time. I'd heard half a dozen psychological diagnosis as well as a multitude of reasons behind them. I had a simpler explanation that I preferred.

I didn't play well with others.

* * *

The brisk wind that greeted me as I stepped outside was much chillier than it had been less than an hour ago. Autumn really had come to Colorado. I shivered and pulled my long-sleeved shirt more tightly around me. I'd been debating about stopping home before hitting my first appointment—the weather just cinched it. Coming home late tonight without a jacket would suck.

I headed toward the apartments that sat on the edge of the Colorado State University campus. They were a nice mix of graduate students, married students and recent graduates in the transition stage between college and real

life. Age-wise, I fit in with them, even though I'd graduated three years ago. I didn't really hang out with any of them though. I preferred my own company. I could trust myself.

I didn't even give the 'out of order' sign by the elevator a second glance; it had only worked the first year I'd lived here. I didn't mind the walk up three flights of stairs most of the time. Less time I had to spend on the treadmill at the gym. It was a real bitch when I had to carry stuff though.

The apartment was small, but I didn't need a big place. When you grow up with hardly any room to move, a one-bedroom with a kitchen, bathroom and living room all to myself was a luxury. The place was neat and simple, the furniture a mismatch of clunky college thrift store finds and the nicer pieces I'd been slowly buying. A bedroom suite had been my first purchase, a celebration of my first self-employment check. I didn't go in the bedroom though. I didn't need to. Still, I paused at its doorway and looked at my place, allowing myself to feel the satisfaction of knowing I'd accomplished all this on my own.

I swapped my outer shirt for my favorite leather jacket and headed back out. Nothing like a good fuck and then a little affirmation of how far I'd brought myself. I wasn't a shrink, but I thought I was pretty well-adjusted. Considering other people who'd gone through the same things I had were either dead, drug addicts or prostitutes, I felt a pat on the back was well-deserved.

I was still in a good mood when I strolled in to Khan and Associates, and the secretary glaring at me only brightened my day. She was a new addition since the last time I'd been here, which meant I was going to enjoy this.

“May I help you?”

If she'd had glasses, she would've glared at me over their rims. I plunked my backpack down on her desk just to see her eye twitch.

“I'm here to see Ms. Khan.” I kept my tone polite and professional. “She's expecting me.”

“Take a seat.” The secretary gave me one of those condescending looks that women like her seemed to reserve for people like me. “I'll get to you when I

get to you.”

I laughed and the scowl deepened, creating an array of tiny wrinkles on her forehead. If she kept that up, she'd make herself look years older than she was. “Check your appointment book. Lang Tech Consulting.”

She didn't even pretend to look at her computer or the calendar on the desk. Instead, she pointed toward the chairs and looked at me like I was something to scrape off the bottom of her shoe. My mild annoyance started to turn into actual anger. I didn't show it though. Even as good as I was at my job, if I got too mouthy, people wouldn't overlook my appearance to hire me.

“Ma'am,” I spoke through gritted teeth. “I'm going to say this one more time and then I'm going to make a call that you really don't want me to make. Let Ms. Khan know I'm here.”

“Excuse me?” She stood up, leaning toward me with her hands on the desk.

I was sure the look she was giving me had quelled plenty of people who seemed tougher than me. Unfortunately for her, my past was full of people a hell of a lot scarier than a middle-aged secretary with a superiority complex.

I sighed and straightened. “Don't say I didn't warn you.” I pulled my phone from my bag and scrolled through my business contacts. I tapped on the right name and waited.

“Yes?”

“Ms. Khan, this is Jenna Lang.”

“You're late, Ms. Lang.” My client's voice was sharp.

“Yes,” I agreed. “I've run into a bit of a snag and it doesn't look like I'll make it in.”

“Ms. Lang,” Ms. Khan interrupted. “Is there a point to this? You're far too professional to sound so flippant about canceling at the last minute.”

“Indeed,” I said. “Your secretary seems to be under the impression that my presence here is unwelcome.”

Ms. Khan muttered something under her breath that could have been a series of swear words. "I'll be right there."

I ended the call, put my phone back in my bag and then gave the secretary a sugar-sweet smile. "It'll be just a minute."

"Young lady," she said, far from threatened. "And I use that term very loosely, if you don't turn around and start walking toward that door, I will call security and watch them haul your slutty little ass right out of here."

A door at the end of the hall opened, then closed, and I took a step back from the desk. A flash of triumph crossed the secretary's face and I knew she thought she'd won.

"Sandra!"

I couldn't stop the smirk when I saw the secretary's face go pale. I didn't want her to get fired, but I'd have been lying if I said I wasn't looking forward to witnessing her bubble get popped.

"Ms. Khan."

"Didn't Ms. Lang tell you that she had an appointment with me?"

The secretary glared at me, crossed her arms and turned back to her boss. "No, ma'am, she just marched right in here and demanded to see you."

My smile disappeared. She was seriously going to stand there and lie? I glanced at Ms. Khan. The woman was impeccably dressed, as always, the picture perfect business woman. She didn't look at me, but I could tell her face was blank.

"Your job, Sandra, is to make inquiries in situations such as this, not prevent work from getting done. Something to keep in mind for the future." Ms. Khan turned back the way she'd come, making an impatient gesture over her shoulder. "Come on, Ms. Lang. I'm not letting you bill me for the time you've wasted."

I pressed my lips into a flat line and followed. I'd done four jobs for Khan and Associates and had always thought she'd been at least indifferent about me. Apparently, I'd been giving her too much credit. As we walked down the

hallway to her office, I realized she was just a good actress. She'd been tolerating me because I was good at what I did and still new enough to charge a lower rate than my competitors. I didn't feel any anger though, just resignation. It wasn't the first time and it wouldn't be the last.

Fuck them all.

I didn't care. I was who I was. No one would ever change that.

Two

I finished up at Khan and Associates in good time, my annoyance at what had happened driving me to get done and get out as soon as possible. Fortunately, Ms. Khan left me alone to do my work, so I didn't have her condescending presence to deal with. Still, I was glad to leave. I wouldn't end my contract with the company over this, but I wasn't about to spend any more time than necessary hanging around.

The sun was going down as I stepped into the brisk wind. I headed for the bus stop, thankful it was only a couple yards away. I'd probably end up taking a cab home tonight. It was getting to be the time of year when I couldn't walk to all my jobs, which meant splitting my travel between cabs and buses. I wasn't fond of either, but didn't have enough money to buy a car yet, no matter how well I'd been doing financially. Still too much debt to pay off.

The driver gave me a once over and rolled her eyes as I climbed on board. I took the first empty seat and stared out the window as the bus made its way through Fort Collins. The software company I was going to was on the other side of the city, so I had at least thirty minutes, forty if traffic was bad. I ran through the checklist of everything I had to do. The repetition and familiarity of work kept me from thinking about anything else, and if there was one thing I avoided at all costs, it was thinking too much.

Archer Enterprises was in a fairly unassuming building considering it was one of the largest software companies in the country. I hadn't been here before, but I'd done my research when I'd gotten the call for the job. The place didn't look like much on the outside, but I knew the tech inside would be better than anything I'd ever seen before. Hell, their state-of-art badassness was the main reason I'd wanted the job.

I walked to the glass doors and glanced around as the doors opened. Immediately inside the lobby were two security guards who looked like they'd once either been Special Forces or linebackers. Maybe both.

“Jenna Lang,” I introduced myself. “Lang Tech Consulting.”

The younger of the two guards gave me a doubtful look and I wondered if I was going to have another issue.

“Have you been here before?” the other guard asked. His dark eyes were warm, but his expression professional.

I raised an eyebrow. “Does it matter?”

“Actually, Miss, it does,” he said. His tone was neutral, neither kind nor unkind. “Mr. Archer doesn't allow us to let people up unless they've been here before.”

One corner of my mouth twitched up in a partial smirk. “Then how are they ever supposed to get in?”

The younger one smiled. “What Monty here is trying to say is that Mr. Archer insists on being contacted personally to come down for anyone who hasn't been here before.”

Okay, that was surprising. What CEO came down to see every visitor? I mean, I knew a lot of those types had a lot of time on their hands, but I assumed the majority preferred to spend that time clubbing or fucking or spending obscene amounts of money, sometimes all at once.

“Wait here,” the older guard instructed. He reached over and picked up a phone. He pushed a button, waited a moment, and then spoke again. “Mr. Archer, there's a Ms. Lang here for you.” Another minute passed. “Yes, Sir. Thank you.” He hung up the phone and turned back to me. “He'll be down in a moment.”

I nodded and the older guard took a couple steps back. The younger one, however, stayed where he was. I didn't think he was concerned about me doing something crazy or anything like that. Based on the way he eyed me up and down, I was pretty sure he was deciding if he just wanted to ogle me or ask me out. He was kind of cute, but I wasn't interested in another fuck anytime soon. And I didn't do dates.

I looked around. The lobby was small, but that didn't surprise me. Archer Enterprises was large in terms of production, so their factories were massive, but one of the things that made Archer different from similar companies was that the CEO hand-picked only the best and the brightest, believing in quality

over quantity, and he was willing to pay what they were worth. Which made sense since he'd been the best and the brightest his whole life.

Rylan Archer. Twenty-eight and a self-made billionaire who'd started his software company while a freshman at Colorado State University. By the time he was a senior, he'd had enough money that he could've dropped out, but he finished his degree in computer science and then hired the number two in his field, a guy named Curt Stockard who'd end up being the public face of Archer Enterprises until eighteen months ago when a car accident put him in a coma for three weeks. When he woke, he cashed in his shares of the company and had taken off to the Bahamas with his wife. Since then, Rylan had been forced into the spotlight and, from what I could tell, he didn't like it. I'd barely been able to find any interviews with him.

I looked over when I heard the elevators ding and Archer stepped out. My eyes widened a bit. I had to admit the pictures I'd found didn't do the CEO any justice. Dark brown hair that was just a bit too long for the average businessman, stunning blue-violet eyes that, even from a distance, I could tell were intelligent. He was tall, easily six-two, six-three, with broad shoulders and a suit that showed off his muscular torso. Strong jawline, high cheekbones. Damn. He was hot.

But this was business. And I never mixed business with pleasure.

“Mr. Archer.” I stretched out my hand.

“Ms. Lang.”

Rylan's grip was firm, but not too much. He didn't try to do what most men did and make it caress, but he also didn't take the opportunity to prove his superiority by trying to crush my hand either. The men who attempted to do that generally ended up with an unpleasant lesson in the pressure points in the hand.

“If you'll follow me.”

He turned and started to walk without even looking behind him to see if I was coming. I wondered how much of that was the confidence that came from being the boss or if it was arrogance. I supposed I'd figure it out soon enough.

“I've done my research on you, Ms. Lang,” he said as he pressed the elevator button.

I was a bit surprised. I'd thought someone who insisted on personally meeting every new arrival would want to talk to me one-on-one since we hadn't really had an interview. As we hadn't gone to his private elevator, I assumed he was putting me right to work.

“And I've done mine on you, Mr. Archer,” I replied.

I caught a hint of a smile, but he didn't look at me.

“I insist that all of my employees call me Rylan.”

Ah, one of those kinds of rich guys. I'd met them before. They wanted their employees to think of them as buddies. Thought it gave them some kind of equality, made them more like the “common man”.

“Am I an employee then?” I asked as I followed him onto the elevator.

“For the moment,” he answered and pushed the button for the top floor.

I frowned. Most central computer systems were kept on ground floors, sometimes higher up if a company didn't have the whole building. I'd never heard of a computer room on the top floor.

“You'll be accessing the server from my office,” Rylan said. “I don't allow anyone but myself in the main server room.”

“No private elevator?” The question popped out and I mentally scolded myself. That wasn't any of my business.

Rylan ignored my question and went back to his previous train of thought. “You have quite an impressive history.” He glanced at me. “Would you prefer I call you Ms. Lang, or is Jenna okay?”

I knew how it worked. If I said Ms. Lang, I was being stand-offish. If I said Jenna, he might take it as license to get too personal. In previous situations, I'd found the best way to handle it was to not make the decision. “However you address the rest of your employees would be appropriate.”

Again, a twitch of lips that said my answer somehow amused him. “All right, Jenna. As I was saying, when looking for a tech company, I was very thorough. I have to say, I was surprised when I reached you.”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. Of course he was surprised. Everyone was surprised to find out I ran a legitimate business and had the degrees to back it up. Not that I could blame them. I looked more like the freak the suits kept in the basement and never let out.

“You're young to have a masters in computer science,” he said.

Not the first thing I'd expected. I figured he was either building up to comment on my appearance or would let it go completely.

“Then again, you graduated at sixteen, went straight into summer classes and didn't take any time off. Considering all that, getting a masters along with a minor in business by twenty isn't really odd.” Rylan's voice was even, matter-of-fact.

I wasn't sure if I should be impressed or freaked out that he knew so much about me. Most employers dug, but not that deeply. The elevator dinged and the doors opened. Rylan motioned for me to step out first and then followed. We were on the top floor, which wasn't surprising, but what surprised the hell out of me was that there wasn't a hallway. It opened straight into his office. At least I assumed it was his office since that's where he'd said we were going.

It didn't look like any CEO's office I'd ever seen before. For one thing, it was one giant open space with three glass walls. Behind us, where the room would've gone out over the lobby, was a solid wall with a door on either side of the elevator door. One, I assumed, would lead to a private bathroom. The other, I wasn't sure, but wasn't too curious about. Not my business. What would be my business was the set up three fourths of the way into the room.

When we first walked in, there were two long conference tables on either side of the elevator door. All of the chairs faced an elaborate extension of about three or four desks had been placed together to create a long island that could hold the half a dozen computers currently set up. I already knew the kind of computer I'd be working on based on the software Archer Enterprises put out, and I wasn't disappointed. He had a tower and the newest, top of the line

desktops as well as laptops and massive monitors. I had no doubt that his systems would be up to date as well. He didn't hire me for bugs or software upgrades.

“What I found most interesting was that you were able to get an investor for Lang Tech Consulting at such a young age. Banks have gotten wary about loaning money for computer ventures over the past couple years.” Rylan barely glanced at the skyline view as he walked toward his desk.

“I didn't get a loan,” I said, unable to stop myself from explaining. “One of my professors saw how good I was and convinced the college to hire me for a couple jobs. Helped me get my foot in the door.”

It was a test. The look in Rylan's eyes as he glanced at me said he already knew that, but had wanted to know if I'd be honest about how I'd gotten started. From what I could tell, it looked like I'd given the right answer.

As I followed Rylan around the desk to the front of the monitors, one of the non-elevator doors opened and a man entered. He was tall and lean, but not a cut and defined kind of lean. Rather, he had the build of someone fortunate enough to have a good metabolism, but didn't spend much time exercising. His jet black hair was slicked back in a style that was older than the early thirties his features seemed to fit. His eyes were the color of dark chocolate, but they weren't exactly warm. His gaze slid over me and I had to suppress the urge to glare at him. There were some guys I could just tell were undressing me with their eyes. Admiration was one thing; leering was something else.

“Jenna, meet Christophe Constantine, my assistant.” Rylan tapped on one of the keyboards and the screens all came to life. “Would you like tea or coffee? We also have water and fruit juice available.”

“Coffee, please,” I said. “Black. And decaf if you have it.”

I was close enough to see Rylan's eyes shine with humor.

“I thought caffeine was all computer programmers and techs drank.”

Despite myself, I smiled.

“Rylan,” Christophe spoke. His voice was much lower than I would've thought, almost gravelly. “Emmaline Kent wants to speak to you about some glitches in the program she's working on.”

“I'm booked until tomorrow,” Rylan said. I watched him scan a mental calendar, his eyes narrowing as he appeared to find an empty slot. “Schedule her an appointment for one o'clock and tell her to be ready to present a series of possible solutions for the issues she's having.”

“Will do,” Christophe said. “Did you want anything to drink?”

“My usual,” Rylan answered even as he pulled out two chairs. “And make sure the pots are full before you leave for the day.”

“Got it.” Christophe turned and walked out.

“Now, Jenna, what do you say we get down to business?” Rylan sat down in one of the chairs and I took the other. “Once you get started on the preliminaries, I'll have Christophe order us some dinner.”

“Excuse me?” I pushed my chair away from him as I turned.

“I assumed since we'd be staying late, you'd get hungry. I usually order in when I'm working late, so I figured I'd get enough for two.” Rylan didn't seem put off by the edge in my voice.

“You're staying too?” I tried not to scowl. One of the things I liked about security system work was that I usually had to do it after the offices were empty, which meant I only had the occasional security guard checking in on me.

Rylan gave me a small smile. “I know there are a lot of companies that give free reign, but no one gets on my computers or my server for the first time without me there. Sorry, Jenna. You're stuck with me for the duration of this assignment.”

Three

I wasn't happy that Rylan was staying while I worked, and even less so when I realized he fully intended to be right there the entire time. He wasn't hovering, but it was close. It wasn't that I couldn't work with someone watching me. It was more that I didn't like to, especially when that someone was a man I didn't know. But, I was a professional and I'd do what needed to be done. Besides, he hadn't given me a reason not to trust him.

“You said you had a security issue.” I pushed my chair to the edge of where I needed to be and hoped I didn't offend him. “But you didn't mention specifics.”

Rylan nodded and leaned closer to pull up a program on the center monitor. I managed not to flinch or pull away, then mentally scolded myself for being so jumpy. It wasn't like I hadn't worked with men before or even good-looking men. And while he was definitely hot, that wasn't the reason I felt more nervous than usual. Not that I knew what the real reason was.

“I didn't mention specifics,” Rylan said. “Because it's a security issue with a prototype of brand new software I'm beta testing on our servers.”

Oh. That made sense. No one in their right mind would tell someone like me that their servers weren't secure. Even a company with a long-established reputation shouldn't be trusted with information like that. With a company like this, stolen information could be sold to the highest bidder for millions. Now I really understood why Rylan didn't plan to leave me here alone. This was practically the most vulnerable position a business like this could be in. In fact, that was usually why jobs like this were done from the inside.

“Why me?” I asked. “Why doesn't your security tech handle this himself? Or herself?”

A flash of anger went across Rylan's face. “He's no longer employed here.” The tone of his voice told me the matter wasn't going to be discussed any further. “So, what can you do to fix this?” He gestured toward the screen.

There was no attitude in his question, so I didn't snap off some smart-ass reply. Instead, I focused on the screen and let myself fall into the safety of ones and zeros, the cyber-world where I was in control and a single keystroke could change everything. That was one of the reasons I'd gone into a technological field. As an expert, I had power in a place where things were straightforward, even if I was using a backdoor. There were other reasons I'd chosen computers, but this wasn't the time or place to rehash any of them.

The program Rylan had opened was an impressive one. It was a multi-level operating system designed to exponentially increase speed and efficiency while offering a new, attractive appearance. Once all of the beta tests were done and this hit the market, it'd be huge.

If I could fix one, teeny-tiny, glaring error.

As I continued to read the code, I began to frown. Something wasn't right here.

“What is it?” Rylan asked. “You see something.”

I nodded. “I do.” I didn't expound, but kept reading instead. I half-expected him to interrupt and insist that I share, but he didn't. Instead, he let me keep going until I'd finished. Only then did I look away from the monitor and face Rylan.

“What did you see?” Rylan asked, almost holding his breath. This is the first time I saw a crack in his professional surface.

His face was carefully masked and I knew he was testing me.

“The security breach in the software was intentional.” I paused, and then made an intuitive guess. “Which is why your security tech got fired.” I glanced at the monitor nearest me again. “Do you know who he sold the information to?”

“No one,” Rylan admitted.

I was surprised. I hadn't expected him to admit the breach. I thought he'd just brush aside the question and move on.

“The day we installed the software to start beta testing, one of my other security personnel found an incriminating note that made me check the program. My former employee didn't have any time to let his contact know he'd opened a window for them. We had him arrested and a friend at the police station promised to keep him away from a phone for twenty-four hours.”

“Which is why you needed me to come in right away,” I connected the dots. “You need me to fix the problem before this guy calls his contact and lets them know it's open season on Archer Enterprises.”

Rylan nodded. “Exactly.”

“Question. Why don't you just uninstall the software?”

He grimaced. “It's not that easy. It'd take a complete system wipe and reboot. And while the old software was re-installing...”

“You'd be vulnerable,” I finished. A question popped into my head, but I wasn't sure if it was a good idea for me to ask it.

“Whatever you're wondering, just ask.”

I blinked. I'd never had someone call me out like that before. I hoped it wasn't because I was getting easier to read. I didn't address that, however, but asked my question. “Why'd you install software without checking it first?”

He leaned back in his chair. “You mean why did someone who's supposed to be smart not notice there was something seriously wrong with the software before I installed it?” Rylan asked wryly.

I shrugged. “You said it, not me.”

“I trust my employees,” Rylan said. “They check their own work, ask for help when they need it.”

“And how's that working for you?” I closed my eyes as soon as the question came out. Shit. “I'm sorry. That was completely unprofessional.” I opened my eyes, guessing I'd be getting fired if he wasn't on a timetable.

“No need to apologize.” Rylan held up a hand. He crossed one long leg over the other and I couldn't help but admire how well tailored his pants were. “It's

worked fine for years, but I suppose it had to catch up with me sooner or later.”

I managed to keep my opinion to myself on that one. Rylan was far too trusting, especially for a CEO. His eyes met mine and I wondered if he knew what I was thinking, if he could read the code that turned into thoughts inside my mind. I tried not to squirm. There wasn't anything inappropriate in his gaze, but it felt like he was seeing deep inside me. I didn't like it.

“Are you able to fix the problem?” Rylan asked, finally breaking the silence. He turned toward the monitor, the personal conversation clearly over.

Grateful for the shift, I nodded. “I'm basically going to have to re-write the code that your tech put in here. He didn't just leave it out. He actually wrote an open door in its place. I'll want to go through the rest of the code too, just to make sure he didn't put in a back door or mess with anything else.” I didn't look at Rylan as I added, “If you have a non-disclosure agreement for me to sign, I can do that now.”

He slid a piece of paper across the desk and I read through it quickly. I'd learned how to skim these things to make sure I didn't get caught off guard without taking forever to do it. I signed my copy and the company's copy and then Rylan initialed both. With that taken care of, I turned my attention to the task at hand.

I let myself fall into the rhythm of work, tuning out everything around me. I was vaguely aware that Rylan was watching me, but pushed it to the back of my mind. I was good at compartmentalizing when I needed to. I didn't realize that Christophe had brought in coffee until I automatically reached over and a mug was there. It was perfect, strong and black. I sighed. Decaf too. That was good. I'd had enough caffeine today. Anymore would leave me on the wrong side of total control.

I didn't know how much time passed, only that I was half-way through my system check when I became aware that Rylan had moved closer and was now looking over my shoulder. I inhaled sharply, catching a whiff of something masculine and spicy. My stomach clenched in a good way. I didn't know what kind of soap or aftershave that was, but I liked it.

“You're doing great work.” His voice was low and near enough that I tensed. He reached over my shoulder and pointed at a line of code. “That backdoor was virtually undetectable and you closed it while allowing for a passcode to grant access if necessary. Always important in case I get shut out of my system.”

I pushed back from the desk, moving away from him. My eyes narrowed. “How'd you know that was there?”

“I am a software designer,” he said mildly.

I looked around, the passage of time now registering. The sky was dark, the light coming in through the window now artificial. We'd been alone in Rylan's office since the beginning, but now I knew we were alone in the building. Maybe there was a security guard somewhere, but I doubted he came up to the top floor when the boss was here. Especially if the boss was up here with a woman.

“Why didn't you fix this yourself?” I stood as my heart started to race. “Why did you hire me to do something you could do yourself?”

I could feel my palms begin to sweat. I told myself that there had to be a reasonable explanation. Logically, I knew that had to be the case. Smoking hot CEO's of billion-dollar software companies didn't randomly hire tattooed and pierced computer techs just to get them alone. The panic that threatened to choke me told a different story.

The panic reminded me that Rylan had admitted to researching me, finding out about my past. He couldn't know too much, of that I was certain. I'd made sure Jenna Lang was impossible to trace to who I once was. But still, he'd looked me up. My mind raced. Was it possible he'd chosen me because I was alone? Did he think no one would believe me if I tried to claim he'd done something to me? Did he think he could get away with... what?

My breath was coming in rapid, short bursts of air now. I needed to calm down. Breathe. My imagination had taken on a life of its own and was running away, taking my brain hostage. If I didn't get control of it, I would hyperventilate. It didn't happen often, but I could feel a panic attack on the brink. It had been a while since I'd had one. I was due.

“Jenna, are you okay?” Rylan looked concerned as he stood.

He reached out, his hand brushing against my arm. Electricity shot through me, followed by a surge of adrenaline so strong I nearly roared. I could do nothing but act on instinct, my brain barely processing my actions.

My hand curled into a fist and my arm drew back. I turned my body like I'd been taught, putting everything into the punch. Pain flared through my knuckles and up my hand as I connected with the side of his face.

Then I did the only thing I could do. I bolted. I heard him call my name as I hit the elevator button and prayed it would close before he got too close. I didn't know if he wasn't chasing or if I was quick enough, but either way, I made it to the lobby without being caught, and then headed for the front door. It wasn't until I was halfway down the side that I finally slowed. Thank God, a bus. I picked up my pace and jumped on. I dug four quarters out of my pocket, tossed them in the collector and collapsed on a seat. I didn't realize I'd forgotten my backpack until I was at my apartment and had to use my spare key.

Fuck.

I would have to go back to Archer Enterprises and get it.

Double fuck.

End of Preview. Continue reading in the complete series: [The Pleasure Series](#)

The Club Prive Series

Thank you for reading a book in the Club Prive series. Each collection can be read stand-alone, but if you'd like to read the entire series, I suggest reading them in the following order:

- [1. Club Prive \(Carrie's Story\)](#)
- [2. Chasing Perfection \(Krissy's Story\)](#)
- [3. Unlawful Attraction \(Dena's Story\)](#)
- [4. A Legal Affair \(Leslie's Story\)](#)
- [5. Collide \(Bryne's Story\)](#)
- [6. The Hunter Brothers Complete](#)
- 7. The Darker Trilogy.

Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank all of my readers. Without you, my books would not exist. I truly appreciate each and every one of you.

A big THANK YOU goes out to all the Facebook fans, street team, beta readers, and advanced reviewers. You are a HUGE part of the success of all my series.

Also thank you to my editor Lynette. You make my ideas and writing look so good.

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When M. S. isn't writing, she can usually be found reading— oops, scratch that! She is always writing.

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