



OUR LOVE WAS...

# Undeniable

jenna hartley

Also by Jenna Hartley

**Love in LA Series**

Inevitable

Unexpected

Irresistible

Undeniable

Unpredictable

Irreplaceable

**Alondra Valley Series**

Feels Like Love

Love Like No Other

A Love Like That

**Standalones**

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SCAN ME



# Undeniable

j e n n a   h a r t l e y

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*For Ellen.*

*You're a dear friend, and I so appreciate all your encouragement and support. You came into my life at a time that I'd lost some of my positivity and spark, and you helped me find it again. Thank you for, well, for everything.*

# Content Warnings

This story contains explicit sexual content, profanity, and topics that may be sensitive to some readers.

For more detailed information, visit the QR code below.



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## CHAPTER ONE

# Olivia

“So, Olivia, tell me about yourself,” my date said. At least, that’s what I thought he’d said. The restaurant was so loud and so visually stimulating, it was difficult to concentrate on any one thing.

Aerialists soared overhead. Music thumped through the speakers. And the space felt more like the set of *The Voice*—at least, if it were filmed inside a spaceship.

Actually, it was more like some of the scenes in *Sing 2*. If *Sing 2* were crossed with burlesque. No Rosita, but there *was* a waitress in a sequined, feathered dress shimmying down the main aisle.

“Liv?” Tad asked, placing his hand over mine.

*Oh, right.*

One of my work friends had been trying to set me up with Tad for ages. They thought we’d really hit it off based on our shared desire to travel. He worked in tech, and he’d suggested we meet at a trendy new restaurant that had just popped up on the LA scene.

*But seriously? Liv?*

I barely knew the guy. Even my friends didn’t call me Liv. And only my dad shortened my name to Livie. Still, I had to give Tad credit for trying, and he was good-looking. Even if I was currently questioning his taste in eating establishments.

Hell, maybe the food was going to be fantastic. As a marketing assistant at a publishing company and a self-

proclaimed foodie, I certainly knew you couldn't judge a book by its cover.

"What do you want to know?" I asked, crossing my legs and taking a sip of my wine. *Not bad. Not worth twenty dollars a glass either.*

"Whatever you want to tell me." He leaned forward, resting his forearms on the glossy table.

"Do you like to read?" I asked as the waiter delivered our food. Baked branzino for me, and the bone-in tomahawk steak with black truffle oil for Tad. The most expensive item on the menu.

When he'd ordered, I'd decided he was either trying to show off or overcompensating. Neither was flattering.

Tad scrunched up his face as he sliced into his steak. "Not really. I'm more of a man of action. Rock-climbing. Boxing. That kind of thing."

"Maybe you just haven't discovered the right book," I said, trying not to let this be a deal-breaker.

I loved reading. Was passionate about books. I couldn't imagine my life without stories. And I couldn't imagine falling in love with someone who didn't at least *like* reading.

"Nah. Too boring."

*Too...* My fork screeched on the plate, but it was so loud in here you couldn't even hear it. Even so, I wanted to gasp, my heart seizing in my chest. *Boring?*

"What about you?" he asked, taking a huge bite of steak and then moaning indecently.

*Bleh.* If that was any indication of his skills in the bedroom, I was definitely not interested. Not that I'd been planning to have sex anyway—this was a first date. I needed more of a connection with someone before I'd even consider sleeping with them.

"Do you enjoy rock-climbing?" he asked. "Or boxing?"

I wanted to laugh. Did I look like the kind of girl who did rock-climbing or boxing? My curves were generous. Ample.

Instead, I shook my head and said, “Not really.”

“Play any sports?” he asked.

“Nope.”

“Wow. Really?” He sank back in his chair. “I just figured...”

*Oh boy. Here it comes.*

I let out a sigh. *Might as well get this over with.*

“You figured what?” I asked. “That since my dad is a legendary athlete, I must enjoy playing sports too?”

“Well...yeah. Your dad is Harrison Hayes. He won six championships. He’s the GOAT.”

I scoffed. *Typical.*

My dad was a retired NFL player turned color commentator. He’d played for the Hollywood Heatwaves for nearly ten years, and he was lauded as one of the greatest players of all time.

To me, he’d always just been Dad. A man with seemingly infinite patience and open arms. He’d attended every spelling bee, every baking competition I’d entered, always there, never judging.

“Guess the athletic gene skipped a generation,” I said with a bite to my tone.

I’d tried a few sports, but it had never been my thing. Funnily enough, my dad had never pushed me to play, but my mom had. She’d suggested that it would help me make friends. That athletics would be good for my figure.

“Guess so,” he said. “But wow. I can’t imagine having Harrison Hayes as your dad. I mean...” He shook his head, his expression one of awe.

I loved my dad, and I was proud of him. But I worried I’d never meet someone who was interested in me for me. And

even if I did, would I ever find someone I could introduce to my dad without my date fawning over him?

The branzino turned to sawdust in my mouth. Tad wasn't the first guy to have this reaction, and he wouldn't be the last. I only hoped he wouldn't wax poetic about my dad and his career highlights like other guys I'd gone on dates with.

Fortunately, the music got even louder, and a flamethrower came on stage, along with several other performers. I was quiet the rest of the meal, almost grateful for the distraction since it didn't require much talking. And while the branzino was expertly prepared, I'd lost my appetite.

When it came time to pay the bill, Tad looked to me expectantly.

"You want to split it?" I asked, knowing that I was going to get the short end of the deal. His meal cost nearly three times as much as mine, and that wasn't including the drinks.

"I'll pick up the check next time."

*Next time?* I wanted to laugh. There wouldn't be a next time.

Whatever expression I'd made must have clued him in that something was wrong. But then he said, "What? It's not like you're not loaded." And I realized just how clueless he was.

*Wow.*

*My parents* were loaded, not *me*. My mom was famous and wealthy in her own right—an actress known predominantly for her work on the stage. Both my parents were celebrities.

My shoulders tightened at the mention of my parents and their wealth. In my experience, money had been the source of more harm than good. And no amount of money could buy happiness or guarantee love.

I didn't want to cause a scene, and I just wanted to get the hell out of there. So I paid the tab and stood. He placed his hand on my lower back, ushering me to the exit. I'd already ordered a ride, and I was grateful it was waiting out front for me.

“This is me,” I said, opening the door.

“Oh, uh—” He furrowed his brow as I started to climb in the back seat. “Wait.” He opened his wallet, and for a minute, I thought he was going to offer to pay for his dinner, my ride home, something. But then he pulled out a trading card with my dad’s picture on it and said, “Do you think you could—”

I slammed the door closed, cutting off the rest of his words.



ALYSSA LEANED HER HIP AGAINST THE WALL OF MY CUBICLE.  
“So...how was your date with *Tad*?”

Someone had jammed the copier again, and I could hear them cursing as telephones rang out around the office. I busied myself with booting up my computer and entering the password. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“That bad, huh?” She crossed her arms over her chest.

“Worse.” I opened a document on my computer.

“You ready for your pitch today?” she asked, mercifully changing the subject.

“Hopefully,” I said.

“You are,” she said with more confidence than I felt. “You’re persuasive when you’re passionate about something. Hell, remember when you convinced me to skydive for your twenty-fifth birthday?”

I laughed despite myself, remembering that day all too well. “How could I ever forget? It was terrifying and exhilarating.” To date, it remained one of the most reckless things I’d ever done. Sometimes, I still couldn’t believe I’d followed through with it.

“And I swore that I’d never willingly jump out of a plane,” she continued. “That anyone who would was crazy.”

“Yeah, but you’re my best friend. And you love me.” I batted my eyes at her.

“That’s not why you were able to sway me.” She planted her hands on her hips and narrowed her eyes at me. “Besides, you pitch marketing ideas all the time.”

“Yeah, but this is different.” *More personal.*

Not to mention a larger undertaking than my usual marketing projects. Spines for Soldiers wouldn’t just be an elevator cling or organizing a panel for an industry event. I hoped it would actually make a difference—and not just to the bottom line.

“Come on, then.” She nudged me. “Let’s hear it.”

“Hear what?” I asked, trying to review all the highlights of my speech to make sure I wasn’t forgetting anything.

“Your pitch for the sexy soldier program.”

I rolled my eyes. “Would you please stop referring to it as the ‘sexy soldier’ program?” Because that definitely wasn’t going to help sell my proposal to my boss.

“Why? I mean, it’s geared toward current and former military personnel, right? And most of those guys are—” She fanned herself. “Oh my.”

“It’s geared toward serving the men *and* women who sacrifice so much for our country.”

Individuals like my grandfather, who had served in the air force, only to return a different person. It didn’t matter where or when or even how long you served, the effect was profound and impacted families, communities. I wanted to help with that.

It might sound idealistic, but I knew how powerful stories could be. And I wanted to use them to help these brave men and women overcome the horrors of war. I wanted to remind them about love and the beauty of the human spirit.

“You’ve seen those videos of guys online doing pull-ups in their fatigues, right?” She flashed me a devious grin and started to enter the code to unlock her phone.

I shook my head, knowing Alyssa was teasing me. Trying to help me loosen up. “Put that away.” I shoved her phone away from me, ignoring the flash of a bare, muscular chest on the screen. “That’s not the point of the program.”

Though, a woman like Alyssa had no problems attracting the notice of a sexy soldier or any man. She was gorgeous, and she had the kind of confidence people took notice of. While I...I’d never been the popular girl. Guys had never been very interested in dating me, unless it was to get closer to my dad. And even now, nothing had really changed. My shoulders slumped as I remembered my date with Tad.

“What’s that look for?” she asked.

I gnashed my teeth. “Tad.”

“Ugh. What kind of name is that anyway?”

I laughed. “The kind that belongs to a douche who expected me to pay for an overpriced dinner, and then had the gall to ask me to get my dad’s autograph for him.”

She let out a low whistle. “Damn. That’s...that’s bad. Even for you.”

“Right?” I threw my hands in the air. “Men.”

“Maybe you should try online dating,” she offered.

I scrunched up my face. “I don’t know.”

“Just think about it. You could have the chance to get to know someone without the whole, ‘Your dad is Harrison Hayes’ thing.”

“True,” I said. “But then what happens when we meet and they realize who I am? I’ll be that much more invested. And even more crushed by the inevitable outcome.”

“Maybe.” She shrugged. “Maybe not.”

I could see she wasn’t going to budge, so I said, “I’ll think about it.”

“You know...” She leaned in, whispering conspiratorially. “I heard Adrina’s leaving. Spines for Soldiers could be your chance to show Seth that you’re up for the job.”

“Jeez,” I huffed. “Are you trying to make me even more nervous?” I was teasing. Sort of.

We both knew how badly I wanted that promotion. It came with a bigger marketing budget. More autonomy. And—best of all—my own office.

*Goodbye, dinky cubicle.*

I glanced at the clock on my computer, my knee bouncing beneath my desk. “Almost time.” I stood, smoothing my palms down my thighs.

“You’ve got this.” She tossed her red hair over her shoulder.

She was gorgeous, like a fiery pixie with her petite size. I towered over her by nearly a foot. We couldn’t be more different in both looks and temperament, but we were the best of friends, bonding over our mutual love of books and good food.

I grabbed my printouts, and we headed down the hall toward the conference room. As we entered, Alyssa leaned in and said, “If you can not only jump out of a plane, but convince me to do it, you can do this,” then gave my arm a squeeze before heading to her seat.

In many ways, jumping out of a plane seemed so much easier. All you had to do was fall, fly. But putting my ideas, myself, out there felt like an even bigger risk. Especially when it was something I’d worked so hard on. Invested so much of my time—and myself—in.

I took a seat at the table next to Nicole and tried to take a few calming breaths. Seth ran through some administrative details, and I skimmed my presentation one more time.

“Olivia,” he finally called, and I stood.

I was jittery with nerves, but then I remembered why I was doing it. I remembered my grandfather and all the men and

women who served our country. If they could put their lives on the line day in and day out, I could muster the courage to pitch an idea that might somehow benefit soldiers like them. If they could fight for my freedom, I could stand up for myself and my ideas.

## CHAPTER TWO

# Connor

I pulled out my phone, blood covering my hand. The phone rang once, and then Clay picked up. “We have a situation.”

“What kind of situation?” Clay asked. “Is the principal down?”

I shook my head, my thoughts hazy from blood loss. “Need a med team. The ambassador’s son shot me.”

“What?” he roared.

“Disco is in pursuit,” I said through gritted teeth. *Fuck, that hurt.*

“I’ll send backup, and I’ll be there soon. Where’s the ambassador and the rest of his family?”

“Asleep upstairs.” Though, I wasn’t sure for how long, considering the commotion we were making.

“Good.” He disconnected the call.

Disco returned with a sullen-looking George, who had bruises developing on his face. I gave him an update.

“ETA?” Disco asked.

I checked my phone, continuing to keep pressure on my wound. “Nine minutes.”

“Good,” Disco said through clenched teeth. He was pissed. And maybe in pain. His wrist looked odd, but maybe my own wound was making me delirious.

George tried to escape Disco's hold, but Disco held tight with his good hand.

"You'll pay for this," George seethed at me.

I glared back at him.

There was a knock at the side door, and Clay entered along with a team once it was clear that the situation was no longer active. Clay ran the New York office of Hudson Security, an exclusive executive protection agency. He was a formidable man and a well-respected one—a fellow retired Navy SEAL. I liked him, was proud to work with him.

"He attacked me!" George blurted, pointing at me. *The fucker.*

All eyes swung to me. "Is that true?" Clay asked, while a medic checked out my knee.

I tried not to wince as the medic peeled away the makeshift bandage. My knee fucking hurt, but I wouldn't let them see my pain. Pain was weakness.

Wyatt—Clay's second-in-command—entered the room. Where Clay had blond hair and a surfer vibe, always the life of the party, Wyatt was more serious, taller too. "We'll need a statement from each of you," he said then turned his attention to George. "I'll start with you."

George stood and left for another room, Wyatt and a few others from Hudson trailing behind. Leaving Disco and me alone with Clay and the medic.

"You're likely going to need surgery," the medic said to me, peering up at me from his crouched position on the floor.

*Well, fuck.*

"What the hell happened?" Clay asked. When I didn't answer, he turned to Disco. "Disco?"

Disco cradled his wrist to his chest. "I'm not sure. When I came in, Connor was standing over George."

At least he'd left out the part where I'd been beating George to a pulp. He was loyal, a quality I admired now more

than ever.

“Why?” Clay asked.

“You’d have to ask him.”

“Connor,” Clay seethed.

I dragged my hand over my head. “I couldn’t take it anymore. I couldn’t stand by and do nothing.”

“Nothing about...” When I hesitated, Clay turned to Disco, who merely shrugged.

“George’s wife and daughter,” I said. “I had to protect them. He’s emotionally abusive, and I’m pretty sure he’s hitting them too.”

“Pretty sure?” Clay asked. “*Pretty sure?* And you’re willing to gamble your career, and Hudson’s reputation, on what? A hunch? I mean, fuck, Cujo.” He dragged a hand through his hair.

My call sign was Cujo. It was a sort of play on my first and last name—Connor James—as well as a nod to the Stephen King novel of the same name. The guys liked to joke that I was relentless—with studying, with missions, anything. It wasn’t terrible as far as call signs went, at least if you didn’t mind being compared to a rabid Saint Bernard. I’d certainly heard worse.

Poop Deck, Pigeon, Crash. I shook my head. No fucking way.

Wyatt eventually rejoined us. “Did you talk to his wife? The daughter?” I asked.

Wyatt hung his head, disappointment radiating off him. “They said nothing. And I could see no visible signs of abuse.”

I clenched my fist—both to fight the pain in my knee and the rage coursing through me. “Of course they wouldn’t. They’re terrified.”

“And you know this how?” Wyatt asked.

“I know the signs. And I’ve spent enough time with this family to understand what’s going on, even if everyone else is

content to just ignore it.”

“We were hired to protect their family.” Wyatt let out a deep sigh as if the answer were obvious.

“I *was* protecting the family.”

“From outside threats,” Clay said.

“Oh.” I leaned back in my chair. In their eyes, I’d done the wrong thing, even if I’d done it for the right reasons. “So when you say ‘their family,’ you really mean their reputation.”

“Cujo, you were out of line. Reckless. And if you’d had concerns, you should’ve come to us. Not taken matters into your own hands. That’s not how we work. That’s not what Hudson stands for.”

I was well aware. The core values of discretion, professionalism, and dedication had been drilled into me. Into all of us. Our clients paid good money, and we put our lives on the line to protect them. And there were standards. Expectations.

Even though we were executive protection agents, most people referred to us as “bodyguards.” The “principal” was the client, whomever we were protecting. Our job required muscle and intimidation, sure. But executive protection was so much more than that. Advance planning, interpersonal and conflict-resolution skills. Something that I was sorely lacking at the moment.

“You assaulted the principal’s son. An *ambassador’s* son. His only child,” Clay said.

I clenched my fists, my blood boiling with anger. “I don’t care who his father is.” I couldn’t even say his name. I seethed at the mere mention of him. “That piece of—”

“Enough,” Clay roared, holding up his hand as if to silence me. “You violated SOP. You put this company and other people’s *lives* at stake. Disco fucked up his hand. Hell, you got injured yourself, and you’re damn lucky it wasn’t worse.”

“What was I supposed to do?” I threw my arms up, feeling as if it was a no-win situation. “Just stand by and watch?”

It sucked that Zeke had gotten hurt, but it was a job hazard. We all knew what we were getting into with executive protection. And Zeke had a better understanding than many others, thanks to his experience as a bouncer.

I'd definitely lived up to my fucking call sign—acting like a feral Saint Bernard as I pummeled the bastard.

Wyatt's expression softened ever so slightly, and I assumed he was playing the good cop to Clay's bad. "You can't let douchebags like that fuck with your head or you'll never make it in this business."

He was right about that, but I wasn't going to admit it. Executive protection, especially at the elite level, required cooperation from the principal. And things generally went more smoothly if the principal liked you. Or, at a minimum, didn't dislike you. But the situation had hit a little too close to home.

"And if we didn't know your reputation and realize that this was out of character, you'd be fired," Wyatt said.

I wasn't sure whether to take that as a compliment or not.

"Which is why—" Clay took a deep breath "—you're suspended with pay pending an investigation."

"But—"

Clay shook his head, and I knew there was no use arguing. Clay's word was law—at least in the New York office of Hudson Security. And deep down, I knew he was right. I'd fucked up. Besides, I was no use to anyone in the field—not at the moment.

"For how long?" I clenched my teeth, knowing this was a test. He was reading me, just as I was reading him.

"Six weeks." When I opened my mouth to protest, he added, "At a minimum."

*Well, shit.*

"Get your knee fixed, and then use the time to heal and sort your shit out. We'll see you in the office in three weeks to reassess."



“SHUT THE DOOR,” CLAY SAID, TAKING A SEAT AT HIS DESK. Wyatt was already seated, the Manhattan skyline glittering behind them.

I glared at my reflection in the large window. Glared at my cane. At my knee. At the fucking situation.

It had been three weeks since the incident with George. I wasn't sure I was any closer to sorting my shit out as Clay had commanded, but I was sick of being stuck at home.

It had given me too much time to think. Too much time to worry about George's wife and daughter, and what he'd done to them since my attack. I felt...restless. Useless.

“How's the knee?” Clay asked when I eased into the empty chair, and I wondered if I hadn't been able to mask my pain as well as I'd hoped.

“Fine.”

“How's physical therapy going?”

“Fine.” I had no problem doing the physical work. It was painful, but I could see the progress I'd made, even if it wasn't as fast as I'd hoped.

“Our team has completed their internal investigation, and we've come to a decision.”

*Oh shit. Was he firing me?*

“You're still suspended, but we'll reevaluate after your doctor clears you for more activity. And once some of the heat dies down from the ambassador.”

I released the breath I hadn't realized I was holding. I wasn't in the clear, far from it. My follow-up appointment was still weeks away, and I wondered how hard the ambassador

had pushed. What he'd threatened. He was a powerful man with lots of connections.

I also saw Clay's statement for what it was—a subtle warning. Stay in line, or you're gone.

“In the meantime,” Clay continued. “You're to continue with physical therapy. And you'll meet with the company therapist, Tatum, twice a week.”

“Twice a week?” I gaped at him.

“Nonnegotiable,” Wyatt said, arms crossed over his chest.

I was still absorbing that information when Clay said, “We'd also like you to participate in a new initiative—Spines for Soldiers.”

*Spines for Soldiers?* Was this some sort of back injury program? If so, why was he telling me about it? I'd injured my knee, not my spine.

“Igloo Books has a new goal to bring quality reading material to the men and women who serve our country.” It sounded like he was reading from a script, and I couldn't help but laugh for the first time in weeks. It was *so* not Clay.

“You okay there, Pigeon? You sound very...robotic.”

“You won't be laughing in a minute,” Wyatt said. “Violet nominated you.”

*Violet?* As in Violet Hudson, wife of Maverick Hudson, the founder and head of Hudson Security?

I glanced between them, wondering if they were shitting me. But Clay continued talking. “Here's a quick overview of the program.” He handed me a printout. “You'll receive more information by email.”

I scanned the page. Current and former military were paired with civilian reading buddies to compare notes via email. The first book had been chosen for us, but after that, we could select which books we'd like to read from the Igloo catalog. I'd have minimal details about my reading partner and was expected to communicate only through the designated email I'd been assigned.

There was more—details about reading ten books to complete the program. but I wasn't interested. I set the paper back on his desk.

“Thanks, but no thanks. I'm not interested in some pen pal, buddy reading program.”

It was bad enough that I was going to have to dissect my feelings with a therapist. But I figured I could show up, do the bare minimum, and leave.

Clay leaned back in his chair, crossing his ankle over his knee. “It wasn't a request. That should've been clear from the fact that it's a direct order from the top.”

*What a fucking joke.*

I stood, grimacing when my knee protested the sudden movement. “I'm fine,” I ground out, grabbing my cane. Clay gave my bum knee a pointed glance. “I will be. As soon as this heals.”

“You want back in the field? Attend therapy and complete this program. In the meantime, think of this as mental training. A chance to read on company time. But make no mistake about it—this is mandatory.”

I blew out a breath but held my tongue. *This* was fucking bullshit.

“Do you understand?” he asked.

I wasn't going to win any awards by arguing with my boss. These guys didn't mess around when it came to mental health.

“Yes, sir.”

“Here's the first book.” He slid a paperback across the desk.

“Great,” I deadpanned, not even looking at the cover.

“You'll receive an email with the program guidelines as well as tips to maximize your experience.”

I nearly barked out a laugh. Ha! Like I was going to enjoy this “experience” or my mandatory therapy.

Clay returned his attention to his computer, ignoring me when I readjusted my cane. Wyatt crossed his arms over his chest, a stern expression on his face. Apparently, the conversation was over, and there was no use protesting. I huffed and swiped the book from the desk, tucking it beneath my arm.

If I wasn't careful, I'd be sitting on the sidelines, reading books indefinitely.

Once I was out in the hall, I leaned against the wall, grateful for the pretext to stop and rest. I glanced both ways, making sure no one was around before wiping my forehead with the hem of my shirt. The pain was making me sweat, and I didn't want to let on how bad it was.

I scanned the dust jacket of the book—something about Alaska and love and loss. I frowned down at it. The only things I'd read in the past decade were tech manuals or ops specs, not...whatever the hell this was.

How was *this* supposed to help with my mental state? So far, it had only made me more agitated. I was tempted to toss the book in the trash on my way out but thought better of it. I wouldn't be doing myself any favors by dissing this program. I might see it as a waste of time. But for whatever reason, it was important to Violet, which meant it was important to my career.

If I could learn to hold my breath for two minutes and forty-nine seconds, to effectively drown-proof myself, I could sure as hell do this—asinine as the request was. Besides, I didn't actually have to read the book, did I? I could just log on, chat with some book nerd, and then log off. I straightened, feeling better already.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, Lucy's name flashing on the screen. I ignored it, vowing to call her back later. I was in no mood to talk, and my bad attitude would only invite questions I didn't want to answer.

I was headed for the exit, albeit slowly, when the door to one of the conference rooms opened, conversation spilling out

into the hall. I gnashed my teeth. I should've been in there, preparing for my next assignment.

“Hey, Connor.” Katie smiled at me. “It’s been a while. How are you?”

I lifted a shoulder. “Been better.”

She leaned in, lowering her voice. “Leg still bothering you?”

I didn’t respond other than to grunt.

“I could help.” Her voice was sultry. “Come over tonight, and I’ll make you feel better.”

The offer was tempting, but I’d been less and less interested lately. The idea of maneuvering around my knee for sex sounded like a pain in the ass. And it only made me feel even more powerless. More broken.

“Maybe another time,” I said.

I didn’t want to hurt Katie’s feelings, but she knew where we stood. I’d always been completely honest—this was sex, nothing more. I wasn’t interested in a relationship, but lately, I got the feeling she was.

“Sure.” She grinned, her expression hopeful. “Text me if you change your mind.”

When I returned home, I listened to Lucy’s voice mail and downed a couple pain pills, ready for the burn to subside. I skimmed my emails, noticing a new one from an email address at Igloo Books and frowned. The subject was: Greetings, reading buddy! And my scowl deepened.

Fuck water; I was going to need something stronger. I poured myself a whiskey, despite knowing it was a bad idea to mix alcohol with the pain pills. I downed the first, then another before opening the email with a deep sigh.

*This should be good.*

Dear Connor,

I hope it's okay that I addressed you by your first name. My name is Olivia, and I'm thrilled to be paired as your reading buddy. First of all, I'd like to thank you for your service and sacrifice.

Here are a few fun facts about me.

I am a voracious reader. I consume about four to five books a week.

My favorite movie is *Booksmart*.

I have a large gray cat named Luna.

I love baking, and my friends rave about my chocolate crack cookies.

Since you mentioned enjoying adventure stories in your profile, I hope you'll enjoy *Alone in Alaska* as much as I did. I can't wait to discuss it with you, specifically the themes of isolation and living in the wilderness. I'm sure you can relate to that to some extent, given your training.

Talk to you soon,

Olivia, she/her

I ROLLED MY EYES. I MEAN, WHO EVEN TALKED LIKE THAT? Themes of isolation? A bullet-point list of facts about herself? I'd never even heard of her favorite movie.

I looked it up out of curiosity—released in 2019. *Huh*. Maybe she wasn't as old as I'd first expected, given her voracious reading habits.

Even so, this girl—this *Olivia*—was wound so tight it wasn't even funny. She probably didn't even know the meaning of the word fun.

I polished off the rest of my whiskey. My body hummed from the pain pills and alcohol coursing through my system. And I decided to have a little fun myself.

## CHAPTER THREE

# Olivia

I mmersed in my latest read, I ignored the hum of conversation in the café as I waited for Alyssa to arrive. It wasn't the trendiest café in LA, but that was part of its charm. That and the amazing food and proximity to my office.

Work had been so hectic this morning, I hadn't had time to check my Spines for Soldiers email. As I scrolled through and spotted a new one, a thrill of excitement raced through me when I saw who it was from—Connor. I knew nothing about my new reading partner other than his first name and the fact that he was a former Navy SEAL, but I was excited, nevertheless.

I'd always wanted a pen pal. The idea that we could connect over a book from across the country or even the world made me giddy. I opened his message, but the longer I read, the more my smile fell until I was staring at the screen with my jaw hanging open. *Are you kidding me?*

"Who?" Alyssa asked, making me realize I'd said it aloud. I'd been so absorbed in the email, I hadn't even seen her approach.

"Connor." I continued to stare at my screen, aghast.

"Who's Connor?" she asked, nudging me toward the line.

"The SEAL I was paired with for Spines for Soldiers. Former Navy SEAL," I corrected.

"Mm. Sexy name."

“For an asshole,” I sneered, my mind still on what he’d said. He was probably just a grumpy little old man who had nothing better to do with his time than tear other people down.

“Ooh. Tell me more.”

“What is it about women and assholes?” I mused aloud. “I mean, do you honestly enjoy being treated like crap?”

She barked out a laugh. “Fuck no. But if a man is dominant, controlling, the sex can be so, so hot.” She fanned herself.

My cheeks flamed with heat. I didn’t have much experience when it came to sex. Or at least, nothing that could be considered hot enough to scorch your panties like the kind Alyssa mentioned. I’d only heard about it secondhand and read about it in the few romance novels Alyssa had convinced me to try. I honestly wondered if it was a myth.

“Plus,” she continued as we inched toward the counter. “The more brooding and alpha they are, the more satisfying it is when they fall.”

“Fall?” I tilted my head to the side.

“In love, silly.” She yanked her purse up on her shoulder.

I covered my face with my hands. “You read way too many romance novels.”

“What can I say?” She shrugged, completely unapologetic. “It’s my job.”

Alyssa worked in the marketing department as well, but in the romance genre. Where I covered several types of fiction, she focused solely on contemporary romance because it was *that* popular.

“Yeah. Yeah. I know.”

“So...” She leaned in, nudging me with her elbow. “What did your sexy SEAL say that’s got you so hot and bothered?”

I hmped. “Sexy? He may have been a SEAL, but he is *not* sexy.”

His attitude was so far from being sexy, it was laughable. He was arrogant and rude and... I blew out a breath.

“Oh honey, all SEALs are sexy. It’s like a job requirement or something. Like being able to hold your breath underwater for three minutes.”

I turned to her. “Is that even a real thing?”

“I don’t know. But I bet anyone who can hold their breath for three minutes is amazing at oral sex.” She waggled her eyebrows. “Imagine the possibilities.”

“I’d rather not.” I crossed my arms over my chest, a prickly feeling spreading over my skin. The few times a guy had gone down on me, it had been...awkward and less than pleasant.

“You’re no fun.” She pouted.

“I am fun!” I protested.

“Okay. So why aren’t you going out with me and the gang tonight?” she asked when we finally made it to the counter.

“Because I don’t feel like it, okay?” I turned to the clerk and smiled. “Hey, Drew!”

His answering grin was huge. “Hiya, Olivia. The usual—hold the aioli and a side salad with no dressing?”

I nodded, pleased he’d remembered my order, even the small details. “You know it.”

“That’s why I like you.” He smiled as he rang me up. “You’re predictable.”

I frowned, just as Alyssa whispered the word “boring” in my ear.

“You know what?” I was still reeling from that jerk’s email and now being called “predictable” by Drew, even if he’d meant it as a compliment. “I’d like to change my order. I’ll have the...the—” I glanced up at the menu above the cash register and settled on the first thing I saw “—the PLT.”

“One PLT coming right up,” Drew said, curiosity lighting his gaze.

“Ooh,” Alyssa teased. “You’re really living on the edge now.”

“That’s right,” I said, signing the tablet and giving my name an angry flourish. “Watch out world, Olivia Hayes is on a roll.”

She bumped my hip with hers. “You know I’m just teasing you.” She turned to Drew with a smile. “I’ll take the Southpaw, thanks.”

“Sure thing,” he said.

We thanked him and accepted the cups for our drinks before heading over to a table.

“He likes you, you know,” Alyssa said.

“Who?” I asked, glancing around.

“Drew.”

I frowned and glanced over at him before returning my attention to Alyssa. “Drew, as in hold-the-aioli Drew?”

“Yes.” She laughed with a roll of her eyes. “God, you are so clueless sometimes.”

“I just don’t see it.”

“Don’t see what? The way he lights up when you walk in? Or how he spends extra time talking to you about books? Or the fact that he has your order memorized?”

“He does that with everyone.” I straightened my fork and knife.

She shook her head. “Not with me.”

“Whatever,” I scoffed. “You’re clearly smoking something if you think he—or any guy for that matter—would pick me over you. I mean, at least until they hear who my dad is,” I said with a self-deprecating laugh.

“Tad was a douche,” she said. “Have you given any more thought to online dating?”

“Yeah. Actually, I think I’m just going to swear off men altogether.”

“Girl, I love my vibrator, but I still want sex. You’re ready to give that up?”

I wasn’t sure there was much to give up. I didn’t have a ton of experience in that department.

“I just—” I sighed. “I want a connection. Something deeper than just physical.”

And definitely more than someone who was only interested in my dad. I was over it.

“Here you are.” Drew smiled at me. “One Southpaw.” He set a plate before Alyssa, and I was grateful for the interruption. “And one PLT.” His eyes lingered on mine as he grabbed our number from the table. “Anything else?”

Alyssa shook her head. “We’re good. Thanks.”

I snapped myself out of it and said, “Thank you.”

“Of course.” He grinned. “Enjoy your meal. And I hope you don’t mind, Olivia, but I added one of our new chocolate cherry chunk cookies to your plate. They’re nut free, and I thought you might enjoy it.”

“Thanks, Drew.” As I smiled up at him, I began to wonder if Alyssa was right and I’d been missing something.

“You look really nice today,” he said, his eyes lingering on my legs.

If there’d been any doubt in my mind, that last comment dispelled it. I dipped my head, grateful to hide behind my curtain of hair. Another customer called out for him, and then he was gone.

“Are you as allergic to compliments as you are to nuts?” Even though Alyssa was teasing, I could hear the disappointment in her tone, and it pained me. Alyssa and I had been best friends since college. She knew me better than anyone.

“No,” I answered a little too quickly. My tone a little too defensive. “I just figure the person giving them usually has an ulterior motive.”

“Like wanting to get in your pants,” she teased, popping a chip into her mouth.

“More like football tickets or an autographed jersey or...”

She placed her hand over mine. “I know you’ve dated some jerks in the past, but not all guys are like that.”

I nodded but continued to avoid her gaze, sliding my hand out from under hers so I could lift the sourdough bread to peek at my sandwich filling. Looked pretty good, even if it wasn’t my usual. I removed the sliced tomato and carefully set it aside, not entirely sure how to respond.

But she wasn’t finished. “I just—” She sighed. “I wish you’d see how incredible you are. You have all this confidence at work, and I just wish...” She shook her head. “I wish you’d let that spill over to the rest of your life.”

It was easy to be confident at work. Books were my life. And I’d never been compared to my parents or asked for favors regarding them. My success at work was because of what I’d done—no one else.

Instead of responding, I took a large bite of my sandwich. The flavors burst on my tongue, toasted sourdough, crispy prosciutto, the crunch of the lettuce, and a zesty freshness from the homemade nut-free pesto. I closed my eyes briefly and relished the combination, wondering why I’d always stuck to the same sandwich. Week after week, I’d ordered the same thing over and over. Because it was easy? Or was it because I was too scared to try something new for fear of being disappointed?

“Thanks to you, soldiers all over the world are feeling a sense of connection with books and people. I mean, my reading partner is a badass, and she’s totally loving the alien romance novels I sent her.”

“That’s great!” I said, but then I faltered at the memory of Connor’s email. “I wish that were the case for everyone.”

“Connor.”

I nodded.

“So, are you going to tell me what his email said?”

I shook my head, mortified by the mere idea of repeating it aloud. Instead, I unlocked my phone and placed it on the small table between us. We both set down our sandwiches and leaned in to read from the small screen.

Dear Miss Goody-Two-Shoes,

I do hope it's okay that I addressed you by that moniker, seeing as it's fitting.

AT THIS POINT, ALYSSA STARTED TO LAUGH, THOUGH SHE quickly covered it by coughing into her hand. I glared at her, but she kept her eyes fixated on the screen. She knew better than to agree with him, even if part of me realized he was spot-on in his assessment. That was probably what irked me so much. That a stranger had pegged me so correctly from one email. I sighed and returned my attention to the screen.

A little bit about me—fun facts, as you'd say.

Reading novels is a waste of time.

Let me guess. *Booksmart* is your favorite movie because you identify so much with the characters.

I'm sure you and your cat are very happy together and will be for many years to come. Happy and alone.

The only thing I like eating more than homemade cookies is pussy.

Sincerely,

Connor, he/him

“OH MY.” SHE SLID THE PHONE BACK TO ME. “KIND OF A jerk, but I bet he's wicked good at dirty talk.”

“Gross. What if he's my dad's age? Or older?” I cringed.

“Pretty sure no man in his late forties or older has ever even heard of *Booksmart*, let alone watched it.”

*Booksmart* had been our favorite movie ever since we’d seen it together in college. And, whether I liked it or not, Alyssa made a good point. The fact that Connor had mocked my favorite movie made me think he was a bit closer to our age.

“But you could find out his age if you really wanted to.” She arched an eyebrow, daring me to log in to the admin side of the program and dig through his private profile.

“No.” I shook my head. “No way.”

I’d suggested the program and helped guide it to fruition, but I hadn’t been responsible for many of the details, such as the reading partner intake form or the actual pairing of reading buddies. And if I had, I certainly wouldn’t have paired myself with this jerk.

“Gah!” I banged my fist on the table, which made the silverware clatter. “Can you believe the things he said to me?” I could feel myself getting hotter the more I thought about it, especially when several people nearby turned to see what the commotion was. “The audacity. What if I were a sweet, little old lady?”

“Again—” She grinned. “You mentioned *Booksmart*. That probably gave him a good guess as to your age bracket.”

“Ugh,” I huffed, hating that she was right.

She leaned back in her chair, crossing her arms over her chest as she watched me with a bemused expression.

“What?” I stopped mid-rant. “What is that look for?”

“It’s just nice to see you so fired up—so *passionate*,” she said in a suggestive tone I didn’t appreciate. “About something.”

“Well, he’s making a mockery of the program I busted my butt on.” My body flushed with heat.

“So, tell him.” She popped a chip into her mouth, and it crunched loudly when she chewed.

I jerked my head back. “What?”

“Yeah.” She leaned in, resting her elbows on the table. “Let him have it.”

“I can’t—I couldn’t...” The idea made my pulse race.

“Why not? It’s not like you have to send it. Just type out what you want to say. What you wish you could really say.”

Her idea did have merit. And I needed a way to let off some steam. So, I wiped my hands on my napkin and picked up my phone.

“Dear Asshole,” I read aloud as I typed, anger infusing every stroke of the keys.

I would apologize for the profanity, but it seems deserved.

A few fun facts.

I pity you. Reading is one of life’s greatest escapes, one of the best ways to gain understanding about other people or places. You’re missing out.

You know nothing about me, and you know what they say about making assumptions...

Can’t say I’ve tried it—pussy. But hey, you are what you eat, right?

Sincerely,

Olivia

Alyssa laughed at my line about the pussy, though my cheeks flamed with heat when I said the word aloud.

I typed out my name and sat back with a satisfied sigh. “There.”

But when I heard a telltale whoosh of an email sending a second later, I bolted upright. “No! No. No. No.” I tapped at the screen frantically, trying to unsend the email, to take back the words I’d said. But it was too late.

The phone fell from my hands, and I hung my head. “This is bad. So, so bad.”

When I peeked up at Alyssa from beneath my chestnut hair, she didn't look nearly as frazzled as I felt. And if I wasn't mistaken, she looked rather amused as she patted me on the shoulder. "It'll be okay."

"No." I navigated to the internet browser, searching for ways to unsend my email, to no avail. I finally gave up and tossed my phone into my purse with a huff.

"It was totally unprofessional. I could get—" I gasped, the realization dawning on me. "I could get fired."

"You're not going to get fired, Olivia. Connor doesn't know you work for Igloo Books. For all he knows, you're just another random volunteer."

"Yeah, but..." I covered my face with my hands and shook my head. "I was so incredibly rude."

"Like he wasn't?"

"And that's supposed to justify my response?" I stood, knowing it was getting late, and we needed to head back to the office. "I never should have listened to you. 'Just type out the email,'" I said in a poor attempt to mimic her sultry voice. "Just imagine what you'd say if you could."

She wrapped up the rest of her sandwich and followed me to the door. "So you showed him you have a backbone, that you're not going to take his shit. Good for you."

"No." I shook my head. "This is so *not* good for me. I'm supposed to be showing how well this program can work, not undermining it by insulting my fellow participants. If anyone were to find out... If Seth..." I felt sick.

*Oh god. Goodbye, promotion.*

She threw her hands in the air, as if I was exasperating, not the other way around. "If you're really that concerned, tell Connor you sent it by mistake. Or—" She held up a finger. "That it was intended for someone else."

I laughed. "Someone else? I think it's pretty obvious he was the intended recipient." I stopped midstride on the

sidewalk. “Maybe my dad knows someone who can take it back. He’s got to have some tech wizard who can erase it.”

“Olivia.” She grasped my shoulders, forcing me to look at her. “Take a deep breath.”

I did as she said, though my heart was still racing. I couldn’t believe I’d typed those words, let alone sent them.

“Your email wasn’t *that* bad in the grand scheme of things.” Her calm tone was at direct odds with the churning of my stomach.

“Not that bad?” My eyes bulged. “I called him an asshole and insinuated that he was a pussy.”

She scrunched up her nose. “Okay, well, it wasn’t great. But it could be worse.”

I shook out of her hold, digging around in my purse for my phone. “If I can’t take it back, I should at least apologize.”

“Nope.” She grabbed it out of my hand. “Nuh-uh. You should never apologize for standing up for yourself.”

I sighed, sensing that I needed to step away from the situation. As much as I hated to admit it, I’d allowed my emotions to get the best of me. And I never let that happen. Not when my parents told me they were getting divorced, not even when rumors circulated in high school that my mom was sleeping with one of the teachers.

Whatever happened, I rarely allowed myself to show any outward emotion. I rarely let anything get to me. But this man—this asshole, Connor—had gotten under my skin.

One email exchange with a man I didn’t know, and I’d completely lost my cool. I didn’t like it. Not one bit.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Connor

“Is something amusing, Cujo?” Tatum asked. It was nearly the end of my second therapy session, and it hadn’t gotten any easier.

I hit the power button on my phone and flipped it facedown on my thigh. “No.”

“Good. Because I’d hate to think that you were laughing when I was asking you an important question about your childhood.” He glared at me as if challenging me to disagree.

I was already on thin ice. I wasn’t doing myself any favors by zoning out during mandatory therapy.

“Of course not.” I kept my chin up and my eyes straight ahead. Show no weakness. It was a lesson that had been ingrained in me long before joining the SEALs.

Though, of course, I had been laughing to myself. Olivia was something else. Her latest email had come as quite a surprise.

It had been a few days since I’d emailed her, and I hadn’t thought to check the account assigned to me for the Spines for Soldiers program. I hadn’t thought about the program at all, nor had I reconsidered my stance on reading the book. It remained on my nightstand, collecting dust.

I wasn’t opposed to reading, despite what I’d written in my initial email to Olivia. In fact, when I was younger, I’d loved reading. My mom had always encouraged it. And we’d spend hours together, huddled up in my bed, immersed in a story. That said, I remained skeptical that this program—that reading

with a stranger and emailing about it—would “heal” me. I was pretty sure nothing could heal the wounds of my past.

Part of me felt bad for being such an asshole to her. I hadn’t been thinking clearly, and it had been a mistake to reply when I’d had a mix of alcohol and pain pills in my system. But Olivia’s latest email... I shook my head. I honestly was stunned she’d had the guts to call me an asshole, let alone the insults that followed. I was too amused to be offended. Too surprised to be upset.

Even from that one interaction, she was...different than I’d expected. She also—despite her nerdy bullet-point lists, self-professed bookish tendencies, and cat-lady ways—had stood up to me. Some of her jabs were a bit juvenile in nature, but she’d made her point. Better yet, she’d made me laugh. You are what you eat... God, I hadn’t expected that from her.

For a brief moment, I wondered if she was even eighteen, but then I realized she’d have to be to sign up for the program. I spent the rest of the morning thinking about her. Where was she from? What did she look like? Did she have a boyfriend? I shook away the thought. I shouldn’t care if she had a boyfriend. I shouldn’t be thinking about her at all, but she was a good distraction.

After my appointment with Tatum, I headed to physical therapy. And unfortunately, even thoughts of Olivia couldn’t distract me then. The exercises were grueling and painful, but I was determined to push myself. To recover—and quickly. To show that I was an asset to the team and the company.

When I finally got home, I struggled my way up to my apartment, ready to ditch this damn cane. I was fucking exhausted both mentally and physically. My roommate’s door was open and the light off, and I knew Decker wouldn’t be home from work for another hour or two.

My knee was aching after a grueling hour of rehab, so I popped a pain pill before grabbing a bag of ice and sitting against my headboard. I was tempted to reach for my phone or laptop, but neither sounded appealing. And when a flash of

teal caught my eye, I glanced over at the book I'd been ignoring—*Alone in Alaska*.

I picked it up from my nightstand and flipped it over to read the back cover. I had to admit, the story did sound interesting. It was about a seventeen-year-old who'd been flying to Alaska with his tutor when their plane crashed. It was touted as an epic tale of survival and love, and I was going to go out of my fucking mind if I had to stare at the four walls of my bedroom any more than I already had the last month.

I'd watched everything on Netflix. I'd organized my computer files, and they'd already been pretty tidy. I'd listened to a bunch of podcasts. And yet I was still bored. Restless.

I couldn't stop thinking about George's family. Were his wife and daughter okay? Had I somehow made things worse for them?

I sighed and glanced at the book again. I needed a distraction. And this was definitely more appealing than any of my other options. So, I opened the cover and started reading.

"Cujo," Decker said, rapping on my open bedroom door.

"What?" I snapped my head up, slamming the book shut.

The kid had *just* turned nineteen, and his former teacher *finally* seemed to be reconsidering her stance on their relationship. He'd been crushing on her for years; she'd been fighting it. But they'd been living in the wilderness for over a year, and they relied on each other. Cared for each other.

"Whoa. Are you reading something other than an ops guide?"

I set the book aside, blinking at the setting sun. When had that happened? I'd been so immersed in the story that I hadn't realized how late it had gotten. I flipped on the bedside lamp, ignoring his question.

"What's up?" I asked, my mind still on the story.

"You're coming out with us tonight, right?"

I'd been avoiding everyone in the office since my suspension. And even if I hadn't been, I didn't feel like going

out, not when I was still limping around. It only drew more attention to me and my injury.

I shook my head. “Nah. I think I’m going to sit this one out.”

“That’s what you said last week. No more excuses.” He turned for the door, but I didn’t move.

He returned with a heavy sigh. “Okay,” he said, pulling out the chair from my desk and taking a seat on it. “What’s going on? Is this about your suspension?”

“Nah.” I crossed my arms over my chest.

I didn’t want to let on how much being suspended fucked with my head. I was so used to being busy, to working nonstop, that I didn’t know who I was without it.

“Come on.” Decker nudged my foot with his. “It sucks, but we all know it’s temporary.”

“Is it?” I asked.

“Yeah. Rehab that knee. Finish Spines for Soldiers, and you’ll be back in the field in no time.”

I hoped he was right. Decker and I had met in BUDs—the three-week orientation every seal attended—and had been part of the same unit ever since. He was like a brother to me. After ten years in the Navy, Decker and I had retired from the SEALs and gone to Hudson at the same time. I couldn’t imagine watching him continue to go into the field without me.

“Is something else going on?” he asked when I didn’t respond. “Is it your dad? Did he try reaching out to you again?”

I shook my head, my shoulders slumping. Decker was one of the few people who knew about my childhood, but that wasn’t it.

When I’d finally talked to Lucy, I’d almost wished I hadn’t. My dad was dying—stage four cancer. And he wanted to see me.

*Fuck that. Fuck him.*

“I’m just tired. Physical therapy was exhausting.” And my session with Tatum was even more so.

“So...there’s nothing else going on?” he asked.

“Nope.” I popped the letter “p.” At least not anything I wanted to discuss.

Hell, I was almost more irritated with Decker for interrupting my reading than anything else. A snowstorm had just descended on Tracey and Ace in Alaska, and I needed to know what was going to happen.

He eyed me for a moment as if he didn’t quite believe me, but I didn’t crack. I didn’t want to talk about my feelings. I didn’t want to talk about my injury. I didn’t want to talk about the fact that Clay was right—everything with the ambassador and his family had fucked with my head.

“Katie will be there.”

“Even more reason not to go,” I muttered, reopening the book to where I’d left off. I knew if I went, we’d both drink too much and end up back in bed again.

He huffed, and I sensed he had more to say. I didn’t know what his deal was, but I was glad when he stood, returning the chair to the desk.

“You’re leading her on.”

“Who?” I frowned. “Olivia?”

He jerked his head back. “Who’s Olivia?”

“My reading buddy.” Decker had been busy with an assignment, and I’d been avoiding him and everyone else at Hudson.

“No. I was referring to Katie.”

I gnashed my teeth. “Not that it’s any of your business, but Katie knows exactly what we are. What we’ve always been. And what we will only ever be.”

“You sure about that?” he challenged.

“Oh, fuck off, Poop Deck,” I said, using his call sign.

His expression was thunderous, but he said nothing more. It was only when he’d reached the door that I wondered if I’d been too harsh. “Look,” I said, dragging a hand over my head. “I wasn’t trying to be a dick. I’ve just got a lot on my plate.”

“Yeah. We all do,” Decker said, giving me a pointed look. “But at some point, everyone is going to get sick of you pushing them away.”

It wasn’t long before I heard the front door slam shut. And then, the apartment was quiet. I sighed, not wanting to think about what Decker had said and whether he was right. Instead, I ordered some takeout and opened my book again.

It was easier than facing reality.

I read while I ate, and I stayed up way too late just to finish the book. When I finally made it to the last page, it felt as if I’d run the emotional gauntlet. I’d never felt so connected to the characters, as if they were my friends. And I *needed* to talk to someone who had read it.

*Huh. Maybe Violet had been onto something when she’d nominated me.* I pushed that thought away. I’d met the woman only a handful of times. She didn’t know me.

I unplugged my phone from the charger and navigated to the internet browser. There was only one person I knew who might understand what I was feeling since she was a self-proclaimed bookworm. And she thought I was an arrogant—strike that, asshole, according to her—SEAL who hated reading.

Olivia’s scorn was deserved, yet I felt the need to defend myself. To prove her wrong, even if only in part. Because she was right—I had been an asshole to her. But in my defense, I hadn’t been myself. I’d had a bad mix of alcohol and pain pills, attempting to push away how upset I was after my conversation with Clay and Wyatt.

Still, I shouldn’t have taken it out on her. She didn’t deserve that kind of treatment. No one did. I wasn’t a bully, and I sure as hell didn’t want to end up like my father.

I scrubbed my hand over my head, the short hairs bristling against my palm. I ran my hand back and forth over my head as I debated what to say to her. How to apologize.

Dear Olivia, I typed. I figured that using her name might be a good place to start.

Thank you for your latest missive. It was... enlightening, to say the least. I owe you an apology. Though it's no excuse for my treatment of you, I'd had a difficult day. A difficult month.

I couldn't believe I was going to confess all of that to her, but I figured I might as well lay it all on the line. I'd enjoyed the book, and I wanted to talk to her. And if it took a little groveling, so be it.

So, if you're amenable, I continued typing. I'd like a do-over.

Sincerely,

Connor

PS: Can you believe Tracey nearly died in that snowstorm? That would've been evil.

I read it again, let out a deep sigh, and hit send. Considering how late it was, I wasn't expecting a response anytime soon, if ever. I'd been a jerk to her, but she'd earned my respect by standing up to me. It was as if I'd been testing her without realizing it, and she'd passed. I only hoped she'd give me another chance. And not just for the sake of completing the program, though that was yet another reason why I needed to fix things with her.

I reclined on the bed, feeling restless. I couldn't go for a run, thanks to my injury. I'd already read the only fiction book I had. And...I didn't quite know what to do with myself.

My phone buzzed with a new email, and I reached out for it. When I saw who it was from, I grinned.

Dear Connor,

I think our emails must have gotten mixed up. Did your evil twin, Coleman, respond the first time? If so, I totally understand. My evil twin, Olga, clearly hijacked my email (and perhaps my brain, too). And for that, I do apologize. Olga can be a real bitch, especially when she's hungry.

Best,

Olivia

PS: OMG. Right? But it was a masterful stroke by the author, one which lent itself perfectly to the scene in the cave that followed.

I LAUGHED ALOUD AS I REREAD HER EMAIL A SECOND TIME. She was funny. But then I remembered that steamy scene in the cave she'd referenced, and I felt myself getting excited for an entirely different reason.

I'd never read a book with sex in it, at least not one like that. I'd never realized how erotic a book could be, and I was surprised by how hard it had made me. I wondered if it had turned her on. If she liked reading those types of scenes.

I hit "Reply," quickly tapping out my response on the keyboard.

Olivia,

Looks like you're a night owl too. Do you have any other books you could recommend? I'm feeling a bit... restless.

Connor

SURE, I WANTED ANOTHER BOOK RECOMMENDATION. Especially if it was anything like *Alone in Alaska*. But more than that, I wanted to keep the conversation going.

I stared at the screen, the light casting a glow about my bedroom as I anxiously awaited her response. And then my phone hummed that satisfying buzz that told me I had a new

email. I hadn't been this excited about anything in a while, definitely not since my suspension.

Connor,

Do I have another book for you? \*Rubs hands together and lets out an evil cackle.\*

You can't handle the number of books I have for you.

What kinds of books are you interested in? More like *Alone in Alaska*, or something else? How adventurous are you when it comes to trying new things?

You mentioned having a bad day, a bad month. What happened? If you aren't permitted to talk about it, I understand.

Olivia

I LET OUT A DEEP SIGH, DEBATING HOW MUCH TO TELL HER. I sure as shit wasn't going to mention the drama with my father. And as much as I liked that she didn't know about my injury, I hadn't really opened up to anyone about it. I was so focused on trying to maintain this front that I was strong—mentally and physically. That I was more than fit to return to work, but even I'd begun to have my doubts.

It wasn't just Clay's comments or the fact that everyone at Hudson Security was up my ass about the last assignment. It wasn't even the ache in my knee, which my doctor was confident would continue to recede with time. It was the weariness in my soul.

I'd been so focused on getting back into the field, but what if I wasn't up to it?

I'd let my personal issues cloud my judgment. I'd *never* allowed that to happen before. And yet, I'd crossed so many lines, I was lucky I hadn't been fired.

I'd been convinced that George was abusing his wife and daughter. I still was, even if no one else believed me. I knew what I'd seen. The way they curled in on themselves as if to

protect themselves. Their skittish movements and the terror in their eyes.

And yet, none of us were any better off, thanks to me. Hudson had lost a client. As far as I knew, George's wife and daughter were still trapped. And I'd been suspended.

What if I wasn't so fortunate the next time? What if I lost control and fucked up again, and something even worse than a sprained wrist happened to one of my teammates because of it?

Olivia,

It's a long story, but basically, I was injured while on assignment.

I TYPED IT OUT THEN DELETED IT. TYPED IT OUT AGAIN, THEN deleted it again. Did she really want to know, or was she just asking to be polite? Considering her earlier candor, I assumed she genuinely cared. She wouldn't have joined this program if she didn't, right?

Unless her boss was forcing her to participate like mine. I sighed, slumping against the headboard. The reasons didn't really matter, and I figured I owed her some sort of explanation.

I busted my knee, and the whole situation is fucking with my head.

How do you have so much time to read? Are you a librarian? A retired nurse?

I am very adventurous when it comes to trying new things. I'll let you infer from that what you will.

Connor

WAS I...FLIRTING? AND WHY WAS I FLIRTING? I'D NEVER MET Olivia. Someone who could've been an octogenarian for all I

knew, though I had a feeling she was closer to my age. I'd hoped my comment about the retired nurse would garner a response, but I had no idea what to expect. No idea who this mysterious Olivia really was.

Despite all the resources at my fingertips at Hudson Security, I had almost nothing to go on. And sure, I could've had one of my buddies in the tech department trace her IP and dig up some info, but that felt wrong. Like a violation of her trust.

Besides, I was quickly coming to find that the mystery was part of the allure. Not that I was looking for a relationship. I had enough crap to deal with at the moment.

Olivia's response came so fast, it was almost as if we were instant messaging. It was fun. Easy. I didn't have to worry about what Olivia would think of me. I didn't care what she thought of me. She was just as anonymous to me as I was to her. And, best of all, there was no pressure. No expectations beyond reading and talking.

I kicked myself for being so resistant to the pen pal program I'd mocked. Because now that we'd started talking, I craved more.

Connor,

I'm sorry about your knee. Injuries are no fun, and the mental aspects of recovery can be challenging. I hope it gets better soon!

I work in the publishing industry.

What should we read next? More adventure fiction? A thriller? Romantic suspense? Science fiction?

Olivia

HMM. SHE WORKED FOR A PUBLISHING COMPANY—IT MADE sense, considering her love of reading and books. As did her offense to my initial email insulting reading.

I stared at the screen, trying to read between the lines. Her responses only left me with more questions than answers. Was she purposely evading my questions? I'd hoped that my subtle way of asking would also give me insight into her. Most women loved talking about themselves, but Olivia seemed to be the exception. Which only made me even more determined to get to know her.

I fired off my response and tucked my arm beneath my head, waiting for her email until I couldn't keep my eyes open any longer. It was the first time in weeks I'd fallen asleep thinking about something other than my knee or the fucked-up assignment.

## CHAPTER FIVE

# Olivia

I yawned and turned over, blinking at my phone. There was a new email. *Several* new emails. I smiled at the sight of Connor's email address and burrowed farther beneath the covers. In the span of a week, we'd gone from being strangers to talking every day.

We talked about anything and everything. Every time my phone buzzed with a new email, I was giddy. And the more I got to know him, the more I liked him. Felt like I knew him.

He was an only child like me. Had traveled to over sixty countries, visiting desert and urban areas, jungles and mountains, mostly during his time with the SEALs. Though, he still traveled in his current job—working in executive protection for Hudson Security. I felt so...unadventurous in comparison. As much as I'd always wanted to see the world, I typically opted for fictional adventures, while he was out traveling the world and saving lives.

Our differences didn't stop there. He'd never had a pet—his lifestyle wouldn't allow for it. Even so, he'd always wanted one. Whereas I couldn't imagine my life without Luna. He hated olives, and I loved them.

I was greedy for information about Connor. And I was happy that he seemed so willing to share it with me. Happy and yet surprised.

This was so much more than I'd expected from the program. When I'd pitched *Spines for Soldiers* to my boss, I'd hoped that people would connect. Form friendships and bond

over books. But even in the short time I'd known Connor, our relationship already felt so much deeper than mere pen pals.

I told myself to get up. Get ready. I was supposed to have brunch with my mom since she was in town for the first time in a while. But instead, I rolled over and hugged a pillow to my chest, rereading Connor's emails again to myself.

Olivia,

Oh wow. I was not prepared for the level of drama in this book.

Connor

I laughed aloud and scrolled to the next. The time stamp was even later, and I was beginning to wonder if he'd stayed up all night reading. It was a pretty far cry from his initial resistance, and I wondered if it was the books that had changed his mind or something else.

Olivia,

Please tell me you're just as tortured as I am by these characters and their decisions. I keep telling myself to go to sleep, but I can't. I just keep turning to the next page and saying "one more chapter." God, I'm turning into such a cliché.

Connor

THIS TIME, I LAUGHED SO HARD, I STARTLED LUNA FROM THE bed. Oh boy. Connor was in trouble now. I was almost as interested in the way these emails would unfold as the actual story.

Olivia,

I am ruined.

You ruined me.

And I'm going to sleep now.

Connor

I SMIRKED, GLOATING TO MYSELF. I HAD A GOOD ENOUGH FEEL for people and books that I'd suspected Connor would like that series, and I'd been right. I typed out a response, figuring he was probably still sleeping, even though it was later on the East Coast.

Connor,

I'm glad you enjoyed the story. Thank you for not sending any spoilers. I'm hoping to finish it today, but I have plans, so it'll have to wait for now.

I have to admit, I'm a bit scared of the idea of continuing to read it based on your emails. Though we both know you have a flair for the dramatic.

I suppose if you get tired of working for Hudson, you might have a career in drama or storytelling. I hope you have a good weekend.

Olivia

I'D JUST FINISHED GETTING READY, WHEN MY PHONE CHIMED with a new email. I greedily peered at the screen, almost dropping my phone in my haste to read Connor's latest message.

Olivia,

Enjoyed? *Enjoyed?*

No.

That story fucking destroyed me.

And I loved every minute of it.

Connor

PS: What kinds of plans? Anything exciting? Hot date?

HIS MESSAGE MADE ME LAUGH, BUT WHEN I GOT TO THE postscript, I paused. *Hot date?* Ha! I hadn't gone on another date since Tad. And even though Alyssa kept encouraging me to try again—to try online dating—I just couldn't. Didn't want to.

Maybe I was destined to be a cat lady for life. And maybe that was okay.

Yet Connor *had* asked.

Why had he asked? Was he just making polite conversation or... My alarm chimed, and a glance at the time told me I was going to be late. Even so, I took a minute to type out a response. My mother would never be on time; she always *had* to make an entrance.

Connor,

Just wait until you read the next one on our list.  
Muahaha.

I'm glad you loved "every fucking minute." Such a far cry from the man who said, and I quote, "Reading novels is a waste of time." What was that about anyway?

Exciting? Ha! Haven't you realized by now that I'm very much the book nerd cat lady you accused me of being?

If you must know, I'm having brunch with my mother since she's in town.

Olivia

PS: What are you up to this weekend? And why are you awake after staying up all night?

I DASHED OUT THE DOOR AND SPED ACROSS TOWN. I SPENT THE entire drive thinking about Connor. Tempted to check my phone. What was he doing right now? Had he responded?

The valet took my keys, and then the hostess escorted me to a table. Even though I was ten minutes late, Mom was still nowhere in sight. For once, I was happy she was late. And I smiled to myself and checked my email.

Olivia,

Oh boy. I'm scared now.

I'd like to remind you that you're attributing that quote to the wrong person. If you remember correctly, it was Coleman who said reading was a waste of time, and I (Connor) wholeheartedly disagree.

If you want to know the truth, I think I forgot how much I loved reading. My mom and I always loved reading together. She would've loved you, by the way.

Book nerd cat lady, you? No way. I certainly wouldn't see that as a bad thing. Again, you're confusing me with another man. I'm sure that happens to you a lot. What with all the men who are probably lining up to date you.

I don't get the feeling you're particularly looking forward to brunch. Why's that?

Connor

PS: Plans? What plans? I'm trying to recover from this epic book hangover. Thanks a lot.

And I'm used to little sleep.

I FROWNED AT THE PART ABOUT HIS MOM, SADNESS FILLING ME as I reread his words. He spoke of her in the past tense, leading me to believe that she'd died. I was sad for Connor. And sad that my relationship with my own mother was as strained as it was.

So instead, I focused on the rest of Connor's email. "All the men lining up to date me?" What a joke.

Connor's postscript did, in fact, make me laugh. I was so absorbed by his email that I startled when the waiter appeared with a glass of water. I thanked him then returned my attention to my phone.

C,

You should be scared.

I WAS TOO LAZY TO TYPE OUT HIS FULL NAME. EVEN SO, I hesitated with my fingers over the keys, debating what to say about his mother. Or if I even should. But I never held back with Connor, and I wasn't going to start now.

Somehow it was easier to be honest with him, vulnerable. I didn't know if it was because of the way our relationship started. Or the fact that it felt somewhat anonymous, despite how much we now knew about each other. Or just who he was. But I liked it. I liked who I was with him.

EVEN SO, I STRUGGLED WITH HOW TO RESPOND. I FINALLY settled on something serious, followed by something lighter.

I'd love to hear more about your mom—but only if you want to talk about her.

Also, I apologize for confusing you with Coleman.  
Won't happen again.

WHEN MY STOMACH GROWLED, I GLANCED AT THE TIME. MY mom was now almost twenty minutes late, and I was starving. I sighed and returned my attention to the screen. Some things never changed.

I'm at the restaurant, and if my mother doesn't get here soon, Olga might make an appearance.

CONNOR KNEW HOW MUCH I LOVED FOOD. APART FROM talking about books, it was one of our favorite subjects to discuss. Best desserts. Favorite food memories. And so much more.

My mom...

I TYPED IT, ERASED IT. TYPED IT AGAIN AND ERASED IT. I HAD to tell him something. If I didn't, I knew he'd only keep pushing until I did. So, I typed out a quick paragraph. It was almost a stream of consciousness confession about my mom and our relationship. It was messy and honest. And incredibly freeing.

Connor didn't know who my mom was. He had no idea that I was Camille Howard's daughter, assuming he even knew who Camille Howard was. I could say whatever I wanted.

My mom is so concerned with appearances. Like this restaurant—it's so...ugh. It's so pretentious, and the food isn't even that good.

I was getting off topic, but I could get really fired up when it came to food.

My mom can be narcissistic and critical, especially of me. I know she loves me, and she means well. But her comments are often misguided and sometimes hurtful.

*THERE. DONE. WOW. THAT HAD FELT SURPRISINGLY GOOD.*

Though seeing those words in black and white, staring me in the face, wasn't easy.

I SIGNED MY NAME AND SENT IT, SURPRISED WHEN MY PHONE dinged almost a minute later.

O,

Fuck that. I hope Olga comes out to play today. Your mom sounds like a piece of work.

C

PS: Now I'm getting hungry. Send me a picture of your meal. I just love pretentious, overpriced food, don't you? 😊

I LAUGHED. BEFORE I COULD EVEN CONSIDER HIS REQUEST FOR a picture of my meal, another email came through.

O,

Sorry if I overstepped. I know I've never met your mom (and if you're pissed at me for what I said, I get it. And I'm totally blaming it on Coleman), but I don't like the idea of anyone hurting you.

C

THE BRIDGE OF MY NOSE STUNG, AND I BLINKED BACK TEARS at his words. At his kindness. Connor had never met me, and yet he cared about me. Wanted to protect me.

And I cared about him. We'd only known each other through email for a short time, but I was coming to realize that neither the time nor distance mattered when it came to him.

"Darling," Mom said, startling me.

When I glanced up at her, she was smiling, but something seemed different. *I* felt different. And that was because of Connor.

“Well, don’t just sit there.” She flashed a tight smile, glancing around as if aware that many eyes were on us. “Aren’t you going to give me a hug?”

“Right. Of course.” I stood, smoothing my hands down my thighs. “Hi, Mom.”

She embraced me lightly then stepped back as if to assess me. “You have to try my friend’s new cosmetics line.”

“Oh yeah?” I asked, trying to be polite, while also wary of a trap.

*She’s only in town for a short time,* I reminded myself as I sank down across the table from her .

“Yes. The color of the foundation would be perfect for you. A much better fit than your current one.”

“Mm.” I perused the menu, half paying attention to her. Only a few minutes in, and I was already regretting my decision to meet. I decided to change the subject. “How’s New York?”

“Oh, it’s wonderful. I wish you’d come visit.”

I knew what would happen if I did. I’d spend my visit being criticized or alone. My mom was always so busy—too busy for me. Despite that, the idea was tempting, if only so I could meet Connor.

*Meet Connor?* Had I lost my mind?

He could have a wife. Kids.

I’d barely known him a week, and yet I already felt as if he knew me better than anyone else. Maybe because we talked nonstop. Because he was kind and honest. He was protective...of me. I still couldn’t get over that. Over what he’d said.

*I don’t like the idea of anyone hurting you.*

Why? Did he view me like a little sister? Like someone who needed protecting? Or...

“I could fly you out,” I heard Mom say as if from a distance. “Get you tickets to my latest show. We could go

shopping. Get a haircut.”

Another dig. I didn’t think she’d said it to be hurtful. At least, I hoped not. I’d always told myself her comments were well-intended if mean. And that she was truly oblivious to the damage she caused.

But Connor’s words made me brave. Not to mention, Olga was starting to get hangry. And that was how I found myself asking, “Do you think I need a makeover?”

“Oh, darling—” She leaned forward, smiling. “I’m so glad you finally asked. Yes, I’d love to give you a makeover.”

I shook my head as she launched into all the plans she had. Personal trainer. New wardrobe. Cosmetic procedures. She broke down my appearance, enumerating each and every one of my flaws.

The longer I sat there, the smaller I felt. Until I was nothing more than a speck of lint on the white tablecloth.

“So, what do you think?” she asked.

“I, um—” I glanced around, feeling the curious stares of nearby diners. “I—” I didn’t even know what to say. Why didn’t she realize that her words were hurtful? Why couldn’t she accept me as I was? And why did I still care so much?

I couldn’t continue like this. It was toxic. And it hurt.

I’d had the guts to stand up to Connor in the beginning, even if my email had been sent by accident. And ever since, I hadn’t hesitated to speak my mind with him. So why couldn’t I tell my mom to back off?

All the sounds came rushing back to me in that moment, clarity ringing through me like a bell. I held up a hand. “I don’t want a makeover. I don’t want to try your friend’s new makeup line or get a haircut. I like the way I look. You’re the one who has a problem with my appearance.”

“But you asked me,” she said, furrowing her brow.

“Only because you’re always suggesting that I change something—usually several things—about how I look.”

Her shoulders slumped. “I only say these things because I love you, and I want the best for you. I’m trying to be helpful, but if you can’t see that...” She sank back in her chair and shook her head, swiping away a tear. For a minute, I felt bad, but then she asked, “Where is this coming from? Did your father put you up to this?”

“No, Mom.” I pinched my lips, tired of her always putting me in the middle. “Dad had nothing to do with this. I just...” I toyed with my napkin.

“Oh my gosh,” a woman said, interrupting the fragile moment that stretched between my mom and me. “You’re Camille Howard, aren’t you? I’m such a fan.”

My mother instantly turned to her with a megawatt smile, and as always, I faded to the background. She loved the spotlight, craved it. Where I would rather run and hide than be the focus of everyone’s attention. Probably because I was afraid of what would happen when someone shone a light on me. What they would find to critique.

I waited a minute, but Mom didn’t seem eager to end her conversation anytime soon. It was nothing new. But I was done. I didn’t even bother to say goodbye, opting to slip out while she was busy with her fan.

I should’ve just canceled. And while I didn’t regret speaking my mind, I didn’t necessarily feel like it had made any difference.

I sighed, stopping at one of my favorite food trucks on the way home. On weekends, it often had a line twenty people deep. Luckily, that wasn’t the case today, but the meal was always worth the wait.

I found a bench and took a seat, the waves crashing in the background. I emailed Connor a picture of my breakfast bowl with the ocean behind it. I could barely wait to dive into the dragon fruit and acai concoction.

His response was almost immediate.

Wow. That view is gorgeous. I'm surprised your mom went for something so casual based on what you told me about her.

C

PS: Where's the bacon? That looks more like a snack than breakfast.

PPS: We could do this so much faster if we could text.

I LAUGHED TO MYSELF. OF COURSE, HE'D SAY THAT ABOUT THE bacon. But then I paused. Was he asking me to exchange phone numbers? Was I ready for that?

Was it even safe? I mean, if he had my number, he'd be able to track me down.

Oh, who was I even kidding. The man worked for an elite executive security company. He probably had all kinds of resources at his disposal. If he'd really wanted to track me down, he already could've done it.

That said, I trusted Connor. Even if he hadn't been a former Navy SEAL and vetted by the Spines for Soldiers program, I knew he would never harm me. I knew he was my friend. It didn't matter that we'd only connected recently, it felt as if I'd known him forever.

But...exchanging personal information was a violation of the program rules. We were only supposed to communicate through the designated emails. I was a rule-follower through and through. But I was tempted to break the rules for Connor. And that idea both scared and excited me.

*What would Amy and Molly from Booksmart do?*

Before I could overthink it even more, I typed out my number and hit send. As my phone made that telltale whooshing sound, my heart started beating faster. And when my phone buzzed in my hand a few seconds later, I let out a little shriek, garnering curious glances from nearby onlookers.

Unknown Number: Hey, Olivia. It's me, Connor.



## CHAPTER SIX

Connor

I stared down at my phone, willing Olivia to respond. I'd agonized over my text message for far too long, finally settling on something simple.

Hey, Olivia. It's me, Connor. 😊

I started gathering the supplies to make my protein shake. I'd just returned from the gym, and I could already tell I was going to be sore. Finally, my phone buzzed, and a sense of relief and excitement coursed through me.

Olivia: Hey!

So what happened at brunch?

Olivia: She just kept pushing and pushing, so I told her how I felt. ☹️

Way to go! I'm proud of you. ☺️☺️☺️

How'd she take it?

Olivia: She started to get upset. Defensive. She tried to blame my dad for putting me up to it. ☹️

I ARCHED MY BROW, NOT LIKING THE SOUND OF THAT. Tempted as I was to lambaste her mom, that wasn't what

Olivia needed.

I take it they don't get along?

DESPITE EVERYTHING WE'D SHARED, WE TYPICALLY DIDN'T talk about family. I sure as hell wasn't going to bring up the topic. And I got the feeling Olivia wasn't particularly inclined to discuss her family either. Or at least, she hadn't been before now.

Olivia: Ha! No. Well, my dad tries. He never says anything bad about her, though he'd have every right to.

Meaning...

Olivia: Meaning she cheated on him years ago, and they've been divorced for nearly a decade.

I'm sorry. That must have been difficult—for all of you.

I WONDERED HOW OLD OLIVIA WOULD'VE BEEN WHEN THEY'D divorced. If she'd had to move between their houses, like I'd had to leave home after my mom's death. Though I'd been fortunate to have Lucy. My dad's sister had taken me in and raised me like her own.

Olivia: Thanks. To be fair, they were both very career-minded and goal-oriented. I'm not saying that excuses what she did, but now that I'm older, I can see how it would be difficult for a relationship to survive long-distance over the long term.

I RUBBED MY HAND OVER MY HEAD, CONTEMPLATING HER words. She was forgiving—perhaps too much so. I wondered what she'd think about my complicated relationship with my dad. I wondered if she'd tell me I should visit him while I still had the chance. If she'd find a way to forgive someone who had done something so...despicable and inexcusable.

I could feel my blood pressure rising, so I focused on Olivia instead. I didn't want to think about my piece-of-shit father. I didn't want to care that he was dying or that he claimed to have changed.

Are you speaking from experience? Have you ever had a long-distance relationship?

Olivia: God, no. Why would I want to start something that's doomed to fail?

I STILLED, MY HEARTBEAT SLOWING AT HER WORDS. HER admission.

What about your dad?

THREE DOTS DANCED ON THE SCREEN. DISAPPEARED. Reappeared again before a new message finally came through.

Olivia: What about him?

Do you guys have a good relationship?

Olivia: He's the best. We've always been very close. I chose to live with him after the divorce.

THAT DIDN'T SURPRISE ME BASED ON WHAT SHE'D TOLD ME about her mom. And I was glad that she had a strong relationship with her dad, even if it was a foreign concept to me.

So you're a daddy's girl.

Olivia: Definitely.

What does your dad say about how your mom treats you? Does he ever step in?

Olivia: We're never really all together. My mom lives across the country and rarely visits.

Doesn't necessarily sound like a bad thing.

Olivia: Does it make me a terrible daughter if I admit that it's not?

No.

A NEW MESSAGE CAME THROUGH AS MINE SENT.

Olivia: Anyway, enough about me and my drama. What are you up to today?

I WANTED TO PUSH HER, BUT I COULD TELL THAT SHE NEEDED to change the subject. So I let her, instead typing out a response to her question.

About to log on and do some training. But I just got home from the gym.

Olivia: Is that allowed...with your knee?

I WANTED TO LAUGH, BUT I WAS TOUCHED THAT SHE EVEN cared. Not that I should've been surprised. Every interaction showed me what a big heart she had.

Yes. I did arms and core.

I SENT HER A PICTURE OF MY BICEP AS I FLEXED IT.

Olivia: Did you just grab that image off the internet?

I LAUGHED ALOUD TO MYSELF AND HEADED FOR MY BEDROOM, shutting the door behind me.

No, sweetheart. That's all me.

Olivia: I guess you must really like to work out. You and my dad would get along well.

Oh yeah?

Olivia: Yeah.

WHEN MY PHONE WAS QUIET FOR A FEW MOMENTS, I DECIDED to text her again. Technically, she had texted last, so the ball was in my court.

*God, I'm pathetic.*

What about you? Do you like to work out?

Olivia: Do long walks through the bookstore count? 😊

☐ ☐ ☐

No

Olivia: Then no.

I LEANED BACK IN MY CHAIR, DEBATING HOW TO ASK HER WHAT I really wanted to know. I had so many questions, but I didn't want to make her feel uncomfortable. I was never this shy when it came to women, but Olivia was different.

She was my friend. I'd come to rely on her, trust her. I told her more than anyone else, even Tatum and my friends. And I didn't want to fuck up what we had.

Can I ask you something?

Olivia: I don't know. Can you? 😊

MY FINGERS HOVERED OVER THE KEYBOARD, AND BEFORE I could talk myself out of it, I typed my question.

How old are you?

THREE DOTS DANCED ON THE SCREEN THEN DISAPPEARED. Danced then disappeared before a new message came through.

I held my breath, wondering if I really wanted to know the answer. What if she was fifty? Eighty? What would I do then? I felt this connection with her that I couldn't explain. I was attracted to her, even though I'd never seen her. And something just kept tugging me toward her.

Olivia: How old are you?

I LAUGHED. OF COURSE. ANSWER A QUESTION WITH A question. Clever. And infuriating.

If I answer, will you?

Olivia: Yes

Be honest.

Olivia: You're the one person I'm completely honest with.

I SMILED TO MYSELF, KNOWING EXACTLY HOW SHE FELT. Decker was right; I'd been pushing everyone away. Everyone except Olivia.

I feel the same.

And I'm thirty-one.

HER RESPONSE WAS ALMOST IMMEDIATE.

Olivia: I'll be twenty-six this summer.

I LEANED BACK IN MY CHAIR, PUMPING MY FIST IN THE AIR.  
“Fuck yeah. I knew it.”

“What are you so happy about?” Katie asked, standing in my doorway, hip cocked to the side.

I’d been so absorbed with Olivia that I hadn’t heard anyone come in. And I nearly fell off the chair and onto the floor. “What?”

“I asked what you were so happy about?”

Katie stood before me, but my mind was still on Olivia. Even from across the country, she occupied my thoughts more often than not. And while I thought I’d been honest about my intentions with Katie, her unexpected visit made me question if I’d been clear enough.

“Oh, um, just being right about something. Hey.” I stood, wiping my hands on my pants.

“Hey.” She gave me a coy grin, closing the door behind her before sauntering over to me. “I’ve missed you.”

When she reached up to wrap her arms around my neck, I grabbed her wrists, holding them gently to stop her. Her face fell. “What’s wrong?”

“We need to talk.”

She winced then quickly covered it with a smile. But she couldn’t fool me—the smile didn’t quite reach her eyes.

*Shit. How had we gotten to this point? Why had I ever allowed it to get this far?*

“I thought that was the whole point of this,” she teased in a seductive tone, stepping closer. “Not talking?”

“It was,” I said, and she couldn’t hide the pain that flashed in her eyes this time.

“Was?” She took a step back. “Are you brea—” She gasped, her eyes wide. “Are you really going to end this?”

I tried to gauge her emotions. It had been weeks since she’d flirted with me in the hallway at Hudson, and I hadn’t initiated anything since. Not that I’d seen her much. I spent

most of my days at the gym, at therapy, reading, or attending training online so I could show how valuable I could be to Hudson.

I hadn't called or texted Katie, and neither had she...until now. That wasn't out of the norm, but this time was different—at least, it was for me. Ever since I'd started talking with Olivia, something had shifted. And these days, there was no room in my brain for anyone but her.

"I've tried to be patient with your injury," Katie said. "I gave you space because that's what I thought you needed. What we all thought you needed."

*Shit. Was everyone talking about me?*

"I appreciate that," I said, ignoring that concern for the moment. "But I can't do this anymore."

"Why can't we keep doing what we were doing?" she pleaded. "We're good together."

This had been a long time coming, and I should've done it sooner. But I didn't say that. I valued my balls too much. Besides, I'd still have to see Katie at work, and I didn't want things to be awkward.

Instead, I shook my head, resolute. I didn't want to hurt her, but I didn't want to lead her on either.

She wiped away a tear with the back of her sleeve. "I just don't understand. Unless—" She glanced up at me, suspicion in her gaze. "You've met someone."

When I hesitated, she asked, "Who is she?" Her eyes flashed with jealousy. "Does she work at Hudson?"

I shook my head, taking her hands in mine. "Katie, you're a wonderful person. And you deserve more."

She sniffled, and my gut churned with unease. Maybe I'd just been too keen to ignore the signs that Katie had wanted more all along. Decker had been right, the bastard.

I wrapped my arm around her, giving her a hug as I ushered her toward the door. "I should've listened to my

friends,” she muttered. “They all warned me about you. They told me you’d never want more than sex.”

I frowned. I distinctly recalled telling her this could never be anything more than sex. And I remembered her agreeing. But I should’ve known better. “Do you want me to get you a ride home?”

She shook her head, wiping her tears as we neared the door. “I’ll be fine.”

I shut the door behind her and leaned against it with a heavy sigh.

“Told you,” Decker called from his bedroom. The door to his room opened, and he stalked out.

*Fucker.* “Were you eavesdropping?”

“Kind of hard not to. Just like it was impossible not to hear you two fucking in the next room.”

“Whoa.” I held up my hands, surprised by the strength of his anger. “What crawled up your ass?”

I didn’t want to fight with one of my best friends, my brothers, but I wasn’t going to take shit from him or anyone.

“You.” He was panting. “You are my problem, Connor. It’s always about what *you* want. About what *you* think is best.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“You knew Katie wanted more, and you led her on anyway. You lost your shit, and Disco got hurt.”

I wasn’t sure what I was most upset about—the fact that he felt like I’d intentionally misled Katie. Or the idea that he thought my actions were driven by selfish desires.

“That’s not...” I didn’t even know what to say.

I clenched my fists, fuming at his accusations. Mostly because I hated how accurate they were. I *had* used Katie—even if she’d been a willing participant, at least in the beginning. And I had lost my shit. And Disco had been injured as a result. But I got the feeling there was something more going on.

“Why are you always so worried about Katie? So protective? She’s an adult. She can make her own decisions.”

His eyes narrowed to slits. “You’re an asshole, Cujo.” He spun and marched toward his room, slamming the door behind him.

*Fuck.* What had I missed?

I went to my room and fell back on the bed. I wasn’t sure where the day had gone so wrong, but it had. And while I was tempted to call Olivia, I didn’t want to dump my problems on her. So, I opened my e-reader and downloaded the latest book she’d sent me instead.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Olivia

“Somebody’s in a good mood today,” Alyssa said as we packed up our stuff after yet another Monday morning meeting.

God, sometimes it felt like all we did was have meetings. And half of the issues we discussed could’ve easily been handled with a simple email.

That said, when Seth had asked for an update on the Spines for Soldiers program, I hadn’t hesitated to brag about it. I’d even recruited a few more sign-ups from my coworkers. The program had only been live a short time, but everyone seemed to be enjoying it.

I headed down the hall toward my cubicle. “No more than usual.”

I could feel her eyes on me, watching me as I set down my things. “Nope. You’re definitely in a good mood. And you rocked the hell out of that update.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“But I don’t get the feeling it’s that.” She tapped her lips, taking a seat in my cubicle. “Did you go on a date while I was gone?”

I shook my head.

“I take it you figured out some way to magically unsend your email to your sexy SEAL?”

I couldn’t believe how much had happened in such a short amount of time. While Alyssa had spent the past two weeks

traveling for book signings abroad, Connor and I had continued emailing—and not just about the books.

I couldn't hold back my smile at the mention of him. "Nope."

She narrowed her eyes at me from where she sat. "Okay." She dragged out the word. "What gives?"

"He's not *my* sexy SEAL." I rolled my eyes, though the image of his bicep had me clenching my thighs, assuming it was, in fact, his. I didn't even know what he looked like, but I got excited every time my phone buzzed with a new email or text. "But things are going better with Connor."

"I'll say." She grinned. "The fact that you're no longer referring to him as 'the asshole' is a pretty good indication. So..." She crossed her legs as if settling in for a long story. "What happened?"

"Well..." I took a deep breath, still trying to make sense of it all. Still trying to reconcile how we'd gone from name-calling to...whatever this was. It felt like more than friendship. "He apologized, and so did I. And then we've sent so many emails and texts back and forth, I've lost count."

"Texts?" She arched one eyebrow. "You took your relationship to the next level, huh? Nice."

"Yeah. It is really nice." I tucked my hair behind my ear. "*He's* really nice. Despite that first email, he's been nothing but friendly since."

"Mm-hmm." She crossed her arms over her chest. I knew that look—it meant she was scheming.

This was part of the reason I hadn't rushed to tell Alyssa. That, and she'd been out of town for book signings in Rome, London, then Edinburgh. Her Instagram feed was filled with pictures of her and some of our authors, attending parties, drinking. It made me even more thankful I worked in fiction, not romance. I was *so* not that social.

"What?" I asked when she continued to study me.

"He's totally into you. And you're totally into him."

I thought back on our emails, and now our texts. “Nah. We’re just having fun. Getting to know each other.”

She held out her hand expectantly. “Give me your phone.”

“What?” I jerked my head back. “Why?”

“Because I would bet good money that he’s flirting with you.”

“No way.” I shook my head, doubting it. “We’re just friends.”

Connor wasn’t flirting with me, was he? And was it wrong that I secretly wished that were the case?

Was it possible to be attracted to someone without ever meeting them? Because I was attracted to Connor.

He was well-spoken, smart, and funny. He made me laugh. He helped me let down my guard.

And despite his initial resistance to the program, he’d devoured every book I’d sent him. Since he consumed the books faster than I could mail them, we’d decided to switch to e-books. We’d had a lively debate about the characters and their motivations, the authors, and more. I’d never had such deep conversations with a man, especially not with one I’d never met.

Alyssa grabbed my phone while I wasn’t paying attention. And the longer she stared at the screen, the wider her smile stretched. Until finally, she squealed. “Oh my god. He’s totally flirting with you.”

She kept reading then said, “And you flirted back. Way to go!” She nudged me. “I love how bold you are with him. I was right about online dating for you.”

“We’re not...” I ducked my head, lowering my voice. We shouldn’t even be talking about this at work. “...dating.”

“You’re *something*, though. No man texts this often and would read all these books, unless he was interested.”

“You really think so?” I asked, desperate for confirmation.

She leveled me with a gaze. “I know so. He’s hinted at your love life several times. He sent you a picture of his bicep—which was super hot. He totally wants you.”

“Jeez. Did you read our entire text thread?”

“Skimmed. And yes.”

I scoffed. “Invasion of privacy much?”

“Meh.” She lifted a shoulder. “Consider it one of the privileges of being besties.”

I really did laugh then.

“*And* he wants to read a romance novel? Dude,” she said, stretching out the word. “That’s so hot.”

“What?” I yanked the phone from her hand, my eyes quickly scanning the screen.

He wanted to read a romance novel and discuss it? Over the phone? I gulped. While the novels we’d read had certainly contained sensual, even steamy, scenes, none were strictly romance novels. They were more action and adventure with a side of romance.

“Do it. Do it. Do it!” Alyssa said, her fist pounding my desk. “He has the hots for you.”

I often got the feeling Connor was interested in me, and the idea that Alyssa thought so too made me giddy. But...it was completely pointless. I had a crush on him, so what if it was actually reciprocated? He lived on the opposite side of the country, and I’d likely never meet him.

Even if we did meet and somehow hit it off, I wasn’t interested in long-distance. I’d watched my parents’ marriage crumble because of competing goals and schedules. I’d seen them torn apart because of loneliness, infidelity, and distance. If there was a surefire way to make a relationship fail, it was trying to carry it out from across the country.

“Why are you hesitating?” she asked. “He’s single, right?”

I gnawed on my lip. “I think so.” At least, I hoped so, though we’d never discussed it directly.

“He has to be,” she said, clearly wanting it to be the case. “And,” she said, holding up a finger, “since I’m a romance novel expert, I have the perfect book for you.”

“You do?” My mind was elsewhere—trying to think of reasons why this was a bad idea. But all that came to mind was what Connor might look like, *sound* like, especially as he read a steamy scene in a romance novel.

“Of course,” she scoffed, snapping me out of my daydream. “You have to have him read *Insatiable* by Meghan Hart.”

“Yeah?” I answered absent-mindedly.

She nodded. “Trust me. Her books are sexy but tasteful. She’s an indie author from my hometown. There’s a whole day dedicated to celebrating her writing.”

Why did that not surprise me? Probably because it was the Alondra Valley.

I loved it there. It was so cute and charming. And they had an amazing indie bookstore—Bibliophile.

“So...are you going to do it?” Alyssa asked.

“I don’t know,” I hedged. “I mean, do you really think this is a good idea?” I certainly had my reservations, though a part of me was curious too. Curious and...

“I think it’s a great idea. And I can’t wait to hear what he thinks of it. I also—” she leaned forward “—think you should take him up on his proposal to talk on the phone.”

“What?” I shrieked, but then I clapped my hands over my mouth as if that could take it back. “I mean, are you crazy?”

I could think of a million reasons why talking on the phone with Connor was a terrible idea. For one, I felt comfortable with him; I liked him. And I didn’t want to ruin that. Also...I could revise my emails and texts, not so much with a conversation over the phone where I’d be on the spot to be witty and sexy and whatever else.

“Aren’t you curious?” she asked, and I shook my head. “Not at all?”

“No.” *Liar.*

“Come on. Live a little.” She grinned.

“I don’t know,” I hedged, despite the fact that it was tempting. I was undeniably curious about Connor. I couldn’t get that image of his bicep out of my head—again, assuming it was actually his. “That’s not exactly within the parameters of the program.”

“So? It’s a pilot program anyway. And you’re the one spearheading it. Besides, you guys are already texting. What’s the difference?”

It was bad enough that I’d given him my number; it would look even worse if someone found out that I was breaking my own rules. But Alyssa made a good point.

“What would Molly and Amy do?” she asked referring to the main characters in *Booksmart*.

I knew the answer to that.

“What if it’s awkward?” I whispered, a tendril of excitement curling itself around my heart and taking hold.

She rolled her eyes. “Are your email or text exchanges awkward?”

“No, but—”

She cut me off before I could finish and said, “Just trust me, Olivia,” with an exasperated sigh.

“Fine.” I spun so I was facing my computer once more. “I’ll send him the book, but I’m not agreeing to a phone call.” *You know you want to*, a little voice whispered in the back of my head, but I told it to shush.

“I knew you’d never do it. Even if we both know you want to.” And I knew she was goading me, but it wasn’t going to work. Not this time anyway.

“Nice try.” I smirked, typing out my reply to Connor’s latest email.

We mostly texted now, but we emailed about books through our Spines for Soldiers accounts so he could still get

credit for participating in the program. I was about to hit “Send” when Seth peeked his head inside the opening to my cubicle. Alyssa leaped out of her chair as if her ass were on fire. “See you later, Olivia. Thanks for looking over that packet for me.”

He took a seat in the chair Alyssa had just vacated. “I stopped by to discuss a special project I need your help with.”

“Great.” I perked up, excited by the prospect. This had to be a good sign about the promotion, right? Adrina had left, and her spot was officially available. Everyone knew it was between Nicole and me. “What is it?”

“We’re looking to expand our biography offerings, trying to capture a new market.”

“Okay,” I said, not entirely sure what this had to do with me. Marketing was my domain, but I’d always focused solely on fiction.

“I wondered if you’d, uh—” He tugged at his collar, his eyes darting around my cubicle. “Speak to your father to see if he’d be interested in writing a memoir.”

*My father?*

Of course. I sighed but tried not to let my disappointment show. I should’ve expected this. In all honesty, I was surprised I’d made it this far into my career without being tapped for a favor regarding one or both of my parents.

When people discovered that my father was Harrison Hayes, they usually forgot everything else. It was as if I ceased to exist as an individual and they saw me only for what I could do for them.

I didn’t realize Seth was still talking until he asked, “So, what do you think?”

I nodded, selecting my words carefully. I didn’t want to piss off my boss, but there was no way I was asking my dad. I refused to use his celebrity status—or my mother’s—to get ahead.

So, I resorted to my standard response in such cases, though I was a bit more generous, considering Seth was my boss. “I’m sure he’d be happy to consider it. Though, his agent, Talia Winters, usually handles these types of inquiries. I can get you her contact information.”

Seth leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “I know, but we, um, we thought the idea might be better received if it came from you.”

I tried to maintain a calm façade even as I seethed inside. This man—the audacity of his... It was unbelievable. And coming on the heels of freaking Tad, I’d had enough.

I was tempted to outright deny Seth’s “request.” I tilted my head back, wondering if my refusal would cost me my job. But as angry as I was, when I opened my mouth to do just that, I started sweating.

*What is wrong with me?*

I couldn’t shut him down, and I didn’t want to outright lie, but I had no intention of asking my dad to write a memoir.

“You know—” He lowered his voice. “One of the senior marketing positions just became available. If you play your cards right, the job could be yours.”

I forced a smile, though it probably looked more like a grimace. One of my deepest fears had just come true. I was being considered for promotion—possibly being given an edge—because of my connections. “Thank you, Seth. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Please do.” He held my gaze a moment then stood. “You’d be competing against Nicole, of course. And while she’s had some great ideas in the past, securing a biography of...” He paused as if debating his words, then settled on, “A notable person would certainly go a long way in showing commitment to Igloo and the type of go-getter attitude we look for.”

*You’ve got to be kidding me.*

I clenched my hands beneath my desk but merely nodded. Everything about it made me cringe. My job was marketing

fiction, not biographies, and certainly not acquisitions.

“Great.” He clapped his hands together and stood. “Thank you, Olivia.”

As soon as he was gone, I folded my arms on my desk and rested my head on them with a heavy sigh. My entire life, people had formed opinions about me based on who my parents were. I’d thought I was immune to that at work. For once, I’d thought that I was appreciated for who I was and what I had to offer. And I’d been so wrong.

I wondered if Alyssa—like the rest of my coworkers—had overheard most of my conversation with Seth. Which only made it that much worse. *So much for doing things on my own merits.*

So much for playing by the rules. For bottling everything up, letting everyone walk all over me. Seth, my mom... Enough.

Emboldened and enraged, I deleted my earlier response to Connor and typed out a new one. I was done playing it safe. And at the moment, I was so pissed, I didn’t care if agreeing to a phone call with Connor got me fired. Hell, it might even be worth it.

I forwarded a copy of *Insatiable* to his e-reader and then returned to the email. My response was simple and to the point: Let’s do it.

The rest of the afternoon dragged. I felt completely uninspired and demoralized after my chat with Seth, and I didn’t know what to do. I also didn’t know when or if I’d hear from Connor. I half expected him to wait to call until after he’d read the book.

I returned home and made sure Luna had fresh food and water before pulling some leftovers from the fridge. As I heated them up, I opened my copy of *Insatiable* and started reading. I was hooked from the first page, and I admired how brazen and bold the main character was. She was the type of woman I wanted to be—unabashed about what she wanted both in and out of the bedroom.

I typically didn't read many romance novels, but this book was making me rethink that. And I understood why Alyssa had recommended the book. Not only was the writing superb, but the characters were so...inspiring. Empowering.

I got up to refill my glass of wine and rinse my plate, eager to return to the story and maybe take a bubble bath. That sounded pretty perfect after the day I'd had.

My phone buzzed on the counter, and I answered without looking, figuring it was my dad calling to say hi as he often did.

"Hey." I cradled the phone between my shoulder and my ear as I carried my wine and Kindle over to the couch.

"Hello?" There was a deep voice on the other end, one I didn't recognize, though it vibrated through me like a tuning rod. "Olivia?"

I stilled. *So* not my dad. "Yes?"

"Hey." I could hear the smile in his voice. "This is Connor. Connor James."

My eyes went wide. *Oh my god.*

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Connor

“Connor?” Olivia’s voice was sweet, cute even, and she sounded young. Younger than twenty-six.

I could hear the surprise in her voice. Hell, I was surprised I’d pushed to take this leap myself. But I couldn’t stop thinking about her. Clearly, I’d been longing for some connection. And I’d found something fun and genuine with Olivia.

Not with Tatum. Not with the guys at work. But with a stranger I’d met online.

“Yeah.” I cleared my throat, trying to shake away the nerves that plagued me. “You know, from the Spines for Soldiers program.”

How many guys did she know named Connor? I shook my head. I didn’t want to think about it. Didn’t want to think about there being any other men in her life.

*Whoa. Hold up there.*

I’d barely known this girl a month, and I was already getting possessive? That wasn’t like me.

I didn’t do relationships. The SEALs—and now my job at Hudson—made them impractical, if not impossible. But even if it hadn’t, I wasn’t interested in commitment. Emotional entanglements, liabilities. Or at least, I hadn’t been in the past.

And yet, I’d never felt more like myself than when I was talking with Olivia. And letting myself be vulnerable with her

—and allowing her to be vulnerable with me—didn't feel like a liability. It felt good.

“Hey. I, um,” she faltered, and I wondered if this was a mistake. I was feeling too much. Too fast. “I wasn't expecting to hear from you so soon. Did you already finish the book?”

I chuckled. “No. I'm a fast reader, but I'm not that fast. Besides, I spent most of the day at therapy or watching training videos.”

“How was it?” she asked, and I was surprised by how comfortable I already felt talking to her, though I didn't know why. Everything with Olivia always felt so organic. The switch from emails to texting had been seamless. And talking on the phone felt that way too.

“Which one?” I asked.

“Both. Either.” She laughed but it sounded nervous, and it only endeared her to me.

“Training was fine, though I'd rather be in the field.”

“What was your training about today?” she asked.

She was always curious about my job. And any time we read a book that covered something I might be knowledgeable about, she'd ask insightful questions. Test how accurate the story was based on my experience.

“Stage work.”

“You're going onstage?” she teased. “Let me guess. It's a Magic Mike-type show.”

I laughed. “No, and hell no. I'm only going onstage if I need to in order to protect the principal. The client,” I clarified. “But hopefully we eliminate any threats before they get that far.”

“Have you ever done stage work before?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“Guess you're not going to tell me who you were protecting, huh?” she asked.

“I can’t. It’s—”

“Confidential.” She finished for me. She knew I’d always tell her what I could, but there were certain aspects of my job that I could never share.

“You ever been to a Magic Mike show?” I asked, still stuck on that comment. It was the first time outside of a scene in a book that she’d mentioned anything sexual. And it had my mind spinning.

She giggled, the sound breathless and nervous. It went straight to my cock. “No.”

“You sure about that?” I teased, trying to understand her reaction.

“Alyssa went to one for a work event, but that’s not really my thing.”

“What? Hot guys?” I asked.

“I mean, the eye candy does look appealing. But I’d rather read a book and imagine a scene in my head than attend a Magic Mike show.”

*Hmm. Interesting.* I wondered just how hot the things she imagined were. Wondered if she ever imagined me. Fantasized about me.

“Wait.” I paused. “Don’t you two work together?” Were those the types of events Olivia was attending?

“She’s in marketing for romance. I’m general fiction.”

“Right,” I said, though my blood pressure was definitely still elevated. I didn’t like the idea of Olivia watching a bunch of attractive, muscular guys dance onstage. Get undressed onstage.

“And how was therapy?” she asked.

“Therapy—” I scrubbed a hand over my face. How much was I willing to share with her? I could’ve continued to let her believe I’d been referring to physical therapy, and I found myself settling on a version of the truth. “Therapy was hard.” Fucking brutal was more like it.

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Sincerity rang throughout her tone, and I felt myself relax.

“Thanks. I just—I don’t want to be stuck doing a desk job. I’d much rather be in the field. Though it is nice to have a break from principals. They can be a pain in the ass.” My last one certainly had been. I was still dealing with the fallout from my assignment with the ambassador, and I had a feeling I would be for a while yet.

She laughed. “I’ll bet. Well, hopefully you’ll be able to get back out there before too long.” Her voice conveyed a sense of optimism I didn’t feel.

This was about more than my injury. This was about trust, respect. Those were the foundation of our work at Hudson Security. If my team couldn’t trust me, if I couldn’t trust myself, I was useless.

“I hope so.” I blew out a breath. “My injury is...has made things uncertain.” Though, really, it was the circumstances surrounding it. My “reckless” behavior, as Clay had called it.

The ambassador had fired us and refused to pay the outstanding money he owed Hudson—a rather significant amount. Supposedly, he’d threatened legal action, but so far, it seemed like all talk and no action. I hadn’t heard any updates on George’s wife and daughter, but that was to be expected. I seemed to be the only one who was concerned by the situation, and I hoped they were okay.

“It can be difficult to give up something you’re passionate about,” Olivia said. “But it can also create new opportunities that you never expected. It might not seem like it now, but your injury could be a positive thing.”

If someone like Clay or Decker or even Tatum had said something like that to me, I would’ve blown them off. I might’ve even gotten angry. But for some reason, it felt like Olivia truly understood.

“Are you speaking from experience?” I asked, desperate to know more about her.

“Um...” She hedged. “Sort of.”

I frowned. What the hell did that mean? Was she referring to a boyfriend? Husband? She'd always evaded my questions about dates in the past. And even now, I wanted to ask but was afraid to hear the answer. I almost preferred to live in the dark, to be able to pretend she was single.

I sat back against my headboard, elevating my knee like my physical therapist had instructed. "You know you can tell me anything, right?"

She was quiet a moment, then said, "I know. It's just... sometimes it's nice to ignore certain aspects of my life."

*Like a husband?*

Her admission stung more than it should've. And it was a reminder of just how much I didn't know about her. But surely she would've said something if she was married, right?

I decided to ask about something more general. Safer. "You said you market general fiction. Tell me more about that."

"Are you interrogating me, Connor James?" she asked, and despite her playful tone, I sensed her unease.

"No. And if I wanted to interrogate you, it would be much more effective in person."

"So you could see my expression?" she asked.

"Something like that," I mused as my imagination ran wild. I could imagine laying her on a bed and using my lips, my dick, my tongue, to coax information from her like I'd extract orgasms from her willing body.

"Did you ever interrogate people as part of the SEALs?"

"No." It wasn't the first time I'd been asked that question, but it was one of the only times I wasn't annoyed by it. "But everyone is trained to resist interrogation."

"I can't..." She sucked in a shaky breath. "I can't even imagine the courage it takes to be a SEAL or to work in executive protection."

I appreciated the fact that she'd used the proper term instead of "bodyguard." Because we were so much more than just close protection. Not that there was anything wrong with CP. But we were more of a full-service operation—we covered everything from residential and movement teams to special events and stalkers.

If a client wanted their property patrolled and protected, we'd send a residential team. If they were looking for security during a business trip or vacation, we'd assign a movement team. Sometimes clients—like the ambassador—required a mix of the two.

I lifted a shoulder. "Just doing my job."

Though I'd been doing a shit job of it lately. Would Olivia admire me if she knew the truth? If she knew I'd been suspended for attacking a client?

"You still there?" I finally asked, realizing how long I'd let the silence stretch on.

"I almost quit my job today," she said in a quiet voice.

"What?" I asked, sitting up straighter. "Why?"

She sighed. "My boss asked me to..."

I waited a moment, as long as I could hold out until my anxiety got the best of me, then said, "Your boss asked you to what, Olivia?"

All sorts of scenarios raced through my mind. None of which I liked. I clenched my fists.

"He asked me to do something that I don't want to do."

"Something unethical?"

"No," she sighed. "I mean, not in the sense that it's breaking any laws. It just...ugh. It's not something I would personally ever consider doing."

"Did he ask you to sleep with him?" I seethed, anger rolling off my every word.

"Ugh. Gross." Her tone was filled with disgust and outrage. "No. I would definitely report him for that."

Good. That was good. “You don’t have to tell me what he did. But if you want to...” I exhaled slowly, trying to be patient. “You can.”

“Thanks” she said. “Maybe another time.”

I nodded, trying to respect her wishes, difficult as that was. “How long have you worked there?” I didn’t even know the name of the company she worked for.

“Since graduating college.”

I stared at the ceiling, wondering if she was being purposely evasive. If I didn’t know better, I’d think she was the one with SERE—survival, evasion, resistance, and escape—training.

“Where’d you go to college?”

“Stanford.”

*Damn.* I already knew Olivia was smart, but the fact that she’d graduated Stanford confirmed it. She must have had a scholarship or be loaded to afford an expensive school like that. It was a big reason I’d joined the Navy—to pay for my education.

“If you didn’t work in publishing, what would you want to do?” I asked.

“Hmm.” Even though I had no idea what she looked like, I could imagine her tapping a finger to her lips.

What color were they? How plump were they? What would they look like wrapped around my cock? I cleared my throat, shifting on the bed as the image of that threatened to distract me.

“Honestly...I’m not sure. Maybe marketing for a nonprofit.”

“That’s admirable.” I liked that she was focused on service, on giving back to the community. We had that in common. “What kind of nonprofit?”

“One that focuses on early childhood literacy or at-risk youth. In the past, I’ve helped my dad with some charity work,

and I always enjoyed the ones that focused on kids.”

“Because you want to have kids of your own?” I cringed as soon as the words left my mouth, wishing I could take them back. For all I knew, she already had kids. Though I didn’t think that was the case.

“No.” She barked out a laugh, surprising me. “I mean, I’d like to have kids someday. But that’s not why. It’s because I was fortunate enough—despite my parents’ divorce—to have a good childhood. And I know not everyone is as lucky.”

“True,” I muttered, thinking how accurate that was for myself.

She was quiet for a moment, and I was afraid she’d push for more. But instead, she asked, “What about you?”

“What about me?” I asked, tucking my arm behind my head.

“Do you want kids? Already have some?”

“Don’t have any. Don’t want any,” I answered immediately.

My own childhood had been fucked up. I didn’t want to risk doing that to someone else. Let alone the things I’d experienced in the SEALs and with Hudson. The world was a dangerous place.

“If you hadn’t become a SEAL, what would you have done?” she asked, clearly sensing not to pry.

I closed my eyes briefly, trying to imagine a plausible answer. “Honestly, I don’t know. I never really thought about it. Being a SEAL was more than a career—it was my life, my family. Now, the same is true at Hudson.”

Which was a big reason why being suspended had been such a blow. My work was my identity. My life. Without it... well, I didn’t know who I was.

“I get that,” she said. “My best friend is more like a sister. And we haven’t shared bonding experiences like the intense ones I imagine you have at Hudson. At least based on what you’ve told me and what I’ve read online.”

I chuckled. “Someone’s been doing their homework. Have you always been this interested in executive protection?” I teased.

“I, uh...I kind of had to research Hudson and other companies that employ lots of veterans if—” First, she hesitated. Then she stopped short, and I wondered why.

“If what?”

“If I was going to pitch a program like Spines for Soldiers to my boss.”

My eyes went wide, a pit forming in my stomach. *Oh shit.*

“This program was your idea?” I asked, feeling even more awful for dissing it.

“Yes.” Her voice was quiet.

“God, I’m an ass.”

“You mean Coleman was an ass,” she teased, referring to my imaginary evil twin. She was too nice. Letting me off too easy.

“Yeah. Right. Coleman was an ass,” I said, feeling marginally better about the fact that she was joking about it. My tone was more solemn when I spoke again. “I’m so sorry, Olivia. I’m sure you put a lot of thought and consideration into the program. I never should have attacked it.”

“It’s... Yeah, your initial response was disappointing, but I understand why now. And besides, this program was intended to help soldiers, not frustrate them. So, if you have any thoughts on how to improve it, I’d love to hear them.”

Wow. Seriously? Could she be more gracious?

I’d attacked her program, insulted her, and while she’d stood up to me, she’d done it with her head held high. And now, she was asking for my opinion. I admired the hell out of her—for seeking constructive criticism, for striving for improvement.

“You are a good person, Olivia...” I trailed off, realizing I didn’t know her last name. “What’s your last name?” I

whispered.

She laughed. “You aren’t going to use this information to stalk me online, are you?”

“Sweetheart, you forget who you’re talking to. If I wanted to stalk you, I already have more than enough information to go on.” I shook my head. “Wow, that sounded creepy. And I promise not to stalk you online or otherwise.”

I respected her too much to invade her privacy like that. Besides, I was more interested in hearing about this woman from her own lips.

“Ditto,” she said. “And my last name is Hayes.”

“Olivia Hayes,” I said, smiling. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“It’s nice to meet you too, Connor James.” The way she said my name had my cock jerking to attention. He wanted to meet her too.

*Fuck.* I dragged a hand over my scalp. *I am so screwed.*

We were silent for a moment, but it wasn’t for lack of conversation. And it wasn’t awkward like I’d feared either. In fact, I was happy to stay on the phone, just knowing she was there.

“So...” I finally said. “Tell me about yourself.”

She snorted. “I’m sorry.” She laughed.

“Yeah. That was pretty bad.”

“Just a tad—” She really started laughing then. “*Tad.*”

I couldn’t help smiling, though.

“I’m sorry.” She took a breath. “Okay.” She seemed to calm down. “What do you want to know?”

*Everything.*

“Ever done anything...crazy?” I asked, though I was more interested in her bedroom adventures than the ones outside it.

What was it about this woman? How could I be so attracted to someone I’d never met, never even seen? It was absurd.

“Well...I did start talking to this guy on the phone I met over the internet.” I could hear the smile in her voice, and I fought back my own.

“How’s that going for you?” I tried to strike a relaxed tone despite being eager to hear her response.

“Pretty good, so far.”

“Yeah?” I laughed, enjoying the sound of her voice in my ear. If I closed my eyes, I could imagine she was in the room with me instead of...wherever she was. At home? “Where are you now?”

“California,” she deadpanned.

“Smartass.” I chuckled. “Do you like it there?”

“It’s home. Though, I’m not your typical California girl.”

I furrowed my brow. “What does that mean?”

She let out a deep sigh. “Just...forget I said anything.”

“No. Wait.” I sat up, the duvet cover rustling beneath me. “Explain. Please,” I added.

“I’m not—” she huffed. “I’m not thin or blond. I don’t have hair that hangs down my back in beachy waves.”

For someone who seemed to have so much confidence, she’d faltered when it came to her appearance. Did she not think she was pretty?

“You’ve told me a lot of things you aren’t, but you haven’t told me what you are,” I said. “And even without seeing you, I know that you’re beautiful.”

“Connor...”

“What? I mean it. From what I can tell, you’re always thinking of other people. Whether it’s Spines for Soldiers or your charity work, you care. Hell, I wish there were more people like you in the world.”

“You’re one to talk,” she teased. “Mr. Hero.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m not a hero.”

If anything, I was a coward. I'd failed to protect my mom. And I'd failed to protect countless others when it mattered. My most recent failure came to mind, making me feel even worse.

"You are. At least, you are in my eyes. Not many people would put their lives on the line to help someone else. That takes courage. And courage is sexy."

"Mm." I smirked to myself, enjoying the turn of the conversation. I wanted to focus on this woman instead of my shortcomings. "So, you think I'm sexy?"

"I-I," she stammered, and I could just imagine her blushing, "I didn't say that."

"But you were thinking it."

What was wrong with me? I shouldn't be flirting with Olivia. She was...well, she lived on the other side of the country. And she deserved more than emails and phone calls from a broken man. Yet I couldn't seem to stop myself.

"So...what'd you think of *Insatiable* so far?" I asked, clearly a glutton for punishment.

"I just started it when I got home from work. But so far, I love it." I heard some noise in the background. It sounded like she was opening and closing cabinets.

"Did you get to the pool scene?"

I heard her sharp intake of breath, and my pulse spiked. Not just about the scene—though it had been hot. But Olivia's reaction to it.

"Yep," she chirped. "It was...yeah. Hot. But perhaps slightly unrealistic."

I tilted my head to the side. "How so?"

"Um." She cleared her throat, and I sensed her nerves through the phone. "You know—the fact that she, um, climaxed so many times."

I frowned. "What's unrealistic about that? He fingered her. He licked her clit. And then they had sex."

Her laughter was breathy and nervous. “I, um... Okay.” She practically gulped. “Sure.”

“And that’s unrealistic because...?” I asked, still trying to understand.

“Can we please talk about something else?” Her tone was defensive, and I felt bad for pushing her. But not bad enough to stop. God, I was a bastard.

“It’s unrealistic because that hasn’t been your experience?”

“I certainly haven’t had ‘mind-altering’ sex,” she said with a derisive snort. “And come on, butterflies at first sight? Kisses that make your toes curl? It’s called fiction for a reason.”

“I didn’t take you for a cynic,” I said, surprised by her reaction. She was typically so positive.

“I prefer realist,” she sniffed.

“Care to make a wager?” I asked.

“What kind of wager?” she asked. Cautious. Curious.

“I’d be willing to bet that if we had sex,” I said, enjoying her shaky inhale. I could just imagine the same sound echoing through my bedroom as I pushed inside her. “You’d be singing a different tune.”

She barked out a laugh. “Someone’s awfully cocky.”

I smirked. “Just stating the facts.”

After that, our conversation turned to other topics, but I couldn’t get what she’d said out of my mind. These days, it was rare that Olivia wasn’t on my mind.

And as I fell asleep that night, I wondered if I’d ever get to meet her. If I’d ever have the chance to change her mind about sex. Because if it were up to me, I’d prove to her that toe-curling kisses and mind-blowing orgasms were, indeed, very real.

## CHAPTER NINE

*Olivia*

“Hey.” Connor’s voice echoed through the speaker on my phone, filling my house with his presence. “What are you doing?”

Boy was his voice sexy. Deep and rich. I kept trying to imagine the man behind it.

It had been weeks since we’d started talking, and we rarely went a day without checking in. I felt like I knew so much about him, and yet, I still had no idea what he looked like. I had an image of him in my head, but I had no way of knowing if it fit him. It was both exciting and infuriating, but it wasn’t like I was going to ask him to send me a selfie. Not unless I was willing to send one back—and I wasn’t.

I crouched down, filling Luna’s bowls with fresh food and water. “I just got home. I’m feeding Luna.”

“Hey, Lunakins,” he called in a cutesy voice that made me smile. She weaved through my legs before darting for the food bowl.

“Any more issues with your boss at work?”

“He’s backed off—for now. How was your day?” I asked, hoping he’d leave it at that. I still hadn’t explained Seth’s request, and I didn’t want to.

“Mostly good.” I could hear the smile in his voice, but I also sensed his exhaustion. “I had my final doctor’s appointment and officially graduated from physical therapy.”

“That’s great!” I said, genuinely excited for him. “Does that mean you get to go back in the field?”

“Not yet,” he said, and I couldn’t get a read on his tone.

“Still, it’s a step in the right direction. And one that definitely calls for a celebration.”

“I’d love that, but I don’t think it’s in the cards.”

“No? Why not?” I placed the food bag back in the pantry and went over to the chair that looked out my big front window.

“One of my buddies was protecting a high-profile principal. There was no visible threat beyond the obvious ones. No stalker. No...” He paused. “Sorry. I shouldn’t be talking about this with you.”

“Don’t stop,” I said, gripped with fear. “What happened?”

“There was a chase. The principal only had minor injuries, but my buddy...” He sighed, and I heard the weariness in his voice when he said, “He’s in the ICU.”

I placed a hand to my chest, suddenly realizing that easily could have been Connor. He’d been injured, not that long ago. But I’d never stopped to consider the very real danger he faced every day. Hadn’t wanted to.

“I’m so sorry, Connor. Is there anything I can do?”

I didn’t push for more. Whether he didn’t want to talk about it or wasn’t permitted to, it didn’t matter. Either way, he was concerned. He might no longer be a SEAL, but his job was no less hazardous or confidential.

He was quiet for so long, I thought maybe he’d hung up. But then he said, “I actually visited him the other day.” He chuckled. “Read to him.”

“Really?” I asked, though it didn’t surprise me he’d done that. That was just who Connor was. “What did you read?”

“*Unforgettable.*”

“*Another* Meghan Hart book?” I asked, trying not to laugh. I could just imagine this huge, former Navy SEAL sitting at

the bedside of his friend, reading a romance novel.

“Yes. Is something about that amusing?”

“No.” I shook my head, smothering my laugh. “Not at all.”

“I’m glad to hear it. And thank you for offering to help. That means a lot.”

“I’ll be thinking about him. I hope he’s okay.”

“Thanks,” he grunted. “It’s part of the job. We sign up knowing this could happen. But when it does, that knowledge doesn’t make it any easier.”

I nodded, absorbing his words. I just wanted Connor to know that I was there for him, that I was listening. That I cared. Because whether I liked it or not, admitted it or not, I was invested in this man.

I went to sleep thinking about him. When I woke up, he was the first thing on my mind. And talking to him was often the best part of my day.

“So... How are you enjoying our latest read?” I asked, sensing he needed a change of subject.

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that. I’m not going to be able to finish it.”

“No problem,” I said. “I understand if you’re too busy or distracted with what’s going on at work.”

“That’s not it.” I heard rustling and wondered if he was lying down. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine him and what he was doing. “I don’t want to read a story that contains domestic abuse.”

His answer surprised me. I’d figured—given the things he must see in his line of work—that it wouldn’t faze him. I hadn’t even given it a second thought. I felt bad that I’d just assumed...

“Even if the main character overcomes it?” It was sort of a spoiler, but I was speaking in general terms.

“I’m all for it, for overcoming adversity, but...” He blew out a breath, and I sensed there was more he wasn’t telling me.

“That certainly wasn’t my reality.”

I froze at his words, at his admission, and silence fell between us. The sun was dipping low in the sky, palm trees swaying in the breeze. But where Connor was, the sun had likely already set. Still, it was comforting to think that we were both looking at the same sky, even from across the country.

“Connor?” I finally asked.

“My father was abusive.” His tone held a steeliness I hadn’t heard before. An edge that spoke of both anger and strength.

*Abusive?* I sucked in a sharp breath, the air slashing my lungs. I didn’t want to think of anyone hurting Connor. Especially not the man who was supposed to love him, protect him.

“I’m sorry.” It seemed like such an inadequate sentiment, but what more could I say? All I wanted to do was wrap him up in a hug. But he was across the country, and we’d never even met. Might likely never meet.

More and more lately, that idea seemed unfathomable. The fact that I knew so much about this man and might never see him in person.

He sighed. After a long pause, he said, “My parents always had a volatile relationship, but my mom did her best to shelter me from it.”

“So, your dad...”

“No, he never hit me.”

I released the breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding. I was still heartsick at the idea of Connor as a little boy in a situation like that—at the idea of his mom...

“But I wish I’d done more to try to defend my mom,” he continued. “I wish I’d tried to get her to leave him. To get her help.”

My heart clenched as I realized how much guilt he carried. But the situation was beyond his control. He’d been a child, for god’s sake.

“And then, by the time I was finally big enough to hit back, she was gone.”

“Gone?” I gasped, afraid to push.

“Car wreck. A drunk driver T-boned her when I was eleven. It’s especially ironic since my dad’s an alcoholic.”

“My god, Connor.” I was ready to hop on a plane just to see him. Comfort him. “I’m so sorry. But I also know that it’s not your fault.”

He scoffed, and I could tell he didn’t believe me. “What’s not my fault? The fact that he hit her? That I never said anything? That I couldn’t make him stop?”

My parents had never had a great relationship, but compared to Connor’s, it was practically a fairy tale. Infidelity, divorce—those seemed inconsequential in comparison. I shuddered, imagining the horrors he must have experienced.

“Did you know that boys who witness domestic abuse are twice as likely to become abusers themselves?” His voice was solemn, and I realized he was afraid. Afraid that he’d become abusive like his father.

Was that why he’d been so opposed to having children of his own someday?

“I...I didn’t. But I do know that you are *not* your father.” When he didn’t respond, I said, “Connor, are you listening to me?”

“Yeah. I heard you.”

“Are you sure?” I asked, growing more passionate by the second. “Because you are kind. You are honorable. You’re a hero.”

“Mm-hmm.” It certainly felt like he was blowing me off.

“Don’t make me come to New York to prove my point.”

He chuckled. “I don’t know, that sounds pretty appealing.”

I stilled, realizing it was the first time either of us had mentioned meeting in person, even if it had been in jest. Even if it was often on my mind.

“You know what I mean.” I rolled my eyes, my cheeks heating at the idea of seeing him.

“I’m not sure I do. Do you really think you’re prepared to go up against a six-foot-two Navy SEAL? I mean, what are you, like five-two?”

“*Former* Navy SEAL. And I’m five-ten, thank you very much.” I sniffed, toying with the edge of a blanket.

“Mm. Interesting.” God, his voice was sexy. It was one of the reasons I loved talking to him. That, and the fact that he was smart, funny, and a good listener.

“What?” I asked.

“I’ve just been trying to picture you in my head.”

My cheeks pinched from smiling so hard. “Really?” I asked, tucking one leg beneath me.

I’d been trying to picture him too, but it was different hearing him admit it aloud. I wondered what he imagined when he thought of me. Would he find me attractive?

“Send me a picture. *Please.*”

“I’m not sending you a picture.” I stood from the chair, pacing around the room. There was no way I was sending him a picture. “If you want to see me, you’ll just have to come visit.”

*What am I doing? Am I crazy?*

A man like Connor would accept that as a challenge. And I knew he wouldn’t back down from it. The idea was both terrifying and thrilling.

Talking online then on the phone had really given me the chance to get to know him. To be vulnerable with him. Was I willing to jeopardize that by meeting in person?

“Is that a promise?” he asked while I was still mulling over my words.

“I, um...” The sun had set, and I could see my reflection in the window at the front of my house. I was still in my work clothes—a navy cropped pant with a high waist, cream blouse,

and suit jacket. I looked nice, but I was positive a guy like Connor would never be attracted to a girl like me. Even without seeing him, I knew he was most certainly out of my league. Not that he'd ever made me feel that way. In fact, he was one of the few people who'd ever made me feel "seen," which was especially ironic, considering the fact that he'd never set eyes on me.

"Sure," I finally said, figuring it would never happen. "If you come to LA, I'll meet you."

"Deal."

We were both quiet a moment before I said, "What do you think it would be like—meeting in person?"

"Strange. Exciting. I don't know. What do you think it would be like?"

I bit my lip, considering it. I'd imagined it so many times I'd lost count. But it was a fantasy, and it should stay that way.

Part of the reason talking to him was so much fun was because we were both free to imagine, free to pretend. Meeting in person could very well ruin everything.

"I don't know," I said. "I've met some of my bookstagram friends in person, but that's different."

"Why?"

"Well, for one, they aren't guys."

"So..."

"And I've usually seen their profile picture, so I have an idea of what they look like even if they use an avatar."

"I offered to swap photos."

"I know. I know," I sighed. "But then you wouldn't have an incentive to visit." I was teasing. Sort of.

I secretly worried that if I sent him a picture, he'd either (a) figure out who I was—daughter of Harrison Hayes. Or (b) he'd decide that he wasn't attracted to me after all.

“Don’t worry. Even without the photo, you only need to know one word about me—sexy.”

I laughed, knowing he was only half joking. “And also... humble.”

“Obviously.”

We both laughed.

“Well, I was voted most handsome in my unit,” he said.

“You were not.” Laughter bubbled out of me, and Luna shot me a look of pure annoyance. I stuck my tongue out at her. I loved Connor’s playful, flirty side. And I was relieved that he already seemed lighter after everything we’d discussed.

Even so, I couldn’t stop thinking about what he’d witnessed as a child. How devastating it would’ve been for him. And how it affected him still.

“You’re right,” he said, bringing me back to the present. “I was voted best with my hands.”

“Oh my god.” I shook my head, going over to the kitchen so I could make dinner. “You are so ridiculous.”

Why was he so easy to talk to? I’d never had this kind of effortless banter with any of the other guys I’d dated. Not that Connor and I were dating. But I’d never felt so comfortable in my own skin.

*Because there’s no risk.*

I rolled my eyes, even though I knew it was true. Connor and I lived on opposite sides of the country. And I had a feeling that even if we met, nothing would change. He lived in New York, and my life was here.

“You love it.”

He was right; I did. But I wasn’t going to admit that. It would be too close to admitting how I felt about him. That I liked him as more than just a friend. And I was scared to ruin what we had by meeting in person.

“What’s for dinner?” he asked.

“How do you always know what I’m doing?” I teased.

“Well, it is about that time, and we don’t want Olga coming for a visit,” he joked, referring to my imaginary evil twin.

“No. Definitely don’t want Olga to make an appearance.”

“So, what’s on the menu tonight?”

We often talked around this time, and it had become something of a ritual. I’d put the phone on speaker and talk to him as I cooked. It almost felt like he was here with me. Sometimes, I wished he were.

“I don’t know.” I peered into my fridge. “Chicken and green beans or lasagna.”

“Lasagna. Definitely lasagna.” I could practically hear him salivating through the phone.

I laughed. “Yeah. You and my stomach most certainly agree.” *Mm. Melty cheese. Salt. Umami.*

“See? You should listen to me... I know what you want.” His seductive tone hinted at knowing about more than just my stomach, but I shook away the thought. “I wish I were there. For the lasagna,” he added.

It was on the tip of my tongue to agree, but then someone called for him in the background. “Cujo,” they said, using the name I’d discovered was his call sign. “Lucy’s here.”

Who the heck was Lucy? His girlfriend?

*Oh god.* I covered my face with my hands, grateful he couldn’t see me. In a split second, I’d gone from feeling like I knew everything about him to nothing at all. And it was a good reminder that he had a life I didn’t know about, friends I’d never met, and perhaps even a girlfriend.

When Connor spoke again, his tone was completely different from the earlier flirty, teasing one I’d come to expect from him. “Hey. Can I call you back?”

“Oh, um, sure.” I frowned at the phone on the counter. “Talk to you later.”

He said a clipped goodbye, and I continued to stare at the phone even after the line went dead. All this time, I'd assumed he was single. I'd assumed he was flirting with me, interested in me. And now, I was just sick to my stomach.

I sank down on the chair, stroking Luna absentmindedly when she jumped on my lap. Had I read the situation all wrong?

We'd opened up to each other. I mean, he'd told me about his parents. And I didn't get the impression it was something he shared with most people.

Apart from the more serious conversations, there were the flirty ones. Even Alyssa had been convinced Connor was into me. And she had a lot more experience with dating and relationships than I did.

I was about to call her to ask for advice when my doorbell rang. I jolted, shaking my head to clear it as I walked over to answer the door. I glanced through the peephole and saw my dad standing on the porch.

I forced a smile as I swung open the door. "Hey, Dad."

"Hey, sweetie." He frowned. He'd always been able to read me like an open book. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah." I brushed some hair away from my face. "Yeah. Of course. What are you doing here?" Had I forgotten that we had plans to eat dinner together?

"I missed my favorite girl and was hoping to surprise you with dinner." He held up a takeout bag.

I stepped aside, allowing him to enter. "Come on in."

Luna darted toward my bedroom as he set the bags on the table. Typical. She rarely liked guests. She barely seemed to tolerate me half the time.

"So...how were the Maldives?" He'd recently returned from a photo shoot, though he'd sent me a few pictures during his trip.

"Gorgeous, as always. Exhausting." He grinned, showing me the side of Harrison Hayes no one else saw.

“What’s new with you?” he asked when we sat down to eat.

I didn’t meet his eyes. “Not much. Just busy with work.”

He nodded, taking a bite of his dinner. “Have you talked to your mom recently?”

I’d told him all about our brunch.

I shook my head. “No. Not since her visit.”

That had been weeks ago. She hadn’t reached out—not that that was unusual. But neither had I.

“I can understand why you’re upset. Do you want me to talk to her?”

I stared at my plate, pushing the food around. “No. But thanks. I just wish it didn’t feel like she’s always trying to ‘fix’ me.”

“Livie,” he said, placing his hand on mine. “You’re perfect just the way you are.”

I appreciated my dad saying that. We’d always been close, but hearing those words from him was validating.

“Mom sure doesn’t think so.”

“She loves you. I think, sometimes, she just doesn’t know how to show it. But I’m proud of you for standing up for yourself. I’m sure that wasn’t easy.”

I nodded, staring at the table. It all felt so petty in comparison to Connor’s family history. And yet, he’d never made me feel that way.

“Thanks, Dad. I just don’t know where we go from here.”

“You’ll figure it out.” He patted my hand. “I’m positive of it. And I’m always here if you need to talk.”

I smiled, feeling better already.

“So what else is going on with you?” he asked. “You seeing anyone?”

“Dad!” My eyes were wide when I glanced up at him.

“What?” He shrugged. “You’re beautiful, young. Surely you have a number of interested suitors.”

“Suitors?” I teased. “What is this—the nineteenth century?”

“You know what I mean, Livie.” He narrowed his eyes at me.

“Yeah. I do. And, no, there isn’t anyone.” Not really. A romanticized idea of a relationship with a man across the country who might not be single certainly didn’t count. “What about you?” I asked, enjoying the way Dad squirmed when I turned the question around on him.

After the divorce, my dad had never remarried. Never so much as dated anyone seriously, at least not that I was aware of. I knew he’d been burned by my mom, but he was still young. He was still very handsome. And I wanted him to be happy.

“You know you’re the only girl for me,” he quipped, throwing me his usual answer. “How’s work?”

While I was grateful for the change of subject, I wished it had been to something else. I still hadn’t told him about Seth’s request, and I didn’t intend to.

I didn’t want to put my dad in that position. And I didn’t want him to feel like he needed to agree. I wanted to succeed on my own merits.

So I merely said, “Fine.”

He furrowed his brows. “Just fine? Usually you’re raving about the latest book you’ve read or the elevator clings you helped design for an event.”

I lifted a shoulder. How could I tell my dad that I was crushing on a guy I’d met over the internet? A guy who, as it turned out, very likely had a girlfriend.

## CHAPTER TEN

Connor

“Come in,” Clay said from across his office. His back was turned to me, and I shut the door behind me.

I sank down into the chair, though I didn’t feel at ease. Decker and I were still at odds. Katie avoided me in the office. And worst of all, Olivia was acting weird—cagey or something. Ordinarily, I considered myself skilled at reading people, but at the moment...I couldn’t seem to get anything right.

It would help if I could see Olivia. If I could convince her to FaceTime, then I could read her facial expressions for clues. As it was, it felt like I was flying blind—trying to decipher the feelings of a woman I’d never met and likely never would.

“How’s Spines for Soldiers going?” Clay asked.

“Good.” I smiled, thinking of Olivia. “Really good, actually.”

He sat back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. “Well, this is certainly a change from when I first told you about the program.”

He arched an eyebrow, as if inviting me to elaborate. I didn’t, even though I knew I probably should.

“Tatum says you’re making good progress.”

That was encouraging, even if every session with the company therapist felt like a slog. It was as if I were trying to swim in the dark through thick and murky water. But I had to admit, I was feeling lighter.

“And I’ve been cleared by my doctor for more active duty,” I said, feeling hopeful.

I was chomping at the bit to get back out there. I felt restless and a bit useless, sitting on the sidelines while all my buddies were in the field. And I wanted to prove that they could still trust me, rely on me. That I was a valuable part of the team.

“How would you feel about going out to California?”

I tried to maintain a neutral expression. The fact that Clay wanted to send me to California could mean any number of things, from a training opportunity to a chat with Maverick—the founder of Hudson Security. Actually, I had no clue what it meant. “Temporarily or...?”

Was he asking me if I was interested in transferring to our LA office?

“Yes, temporarily. Just for a few days. Igloo Books is hosting a panel on the Spines for Soldiers program. They want feedback on what’s working, and I think they’re hoping for some good publicity. What would you think about attending?”

“You’re kidding?” I choked out, wondering why Olivia hadn’t mentioned it. Though, maybe she wasn’t in charge of the panel.

A darker thought occurred to me. Maybe this was why she’d been evasive lately. Maybe she hadn’t mentioned the panel because she didn’t want me to attend. Because she didn’t want to meet. I quickly pushed it away.

He shook his head. “Is that something you’d be interested in?”

I tried to hold back my smile. A free trip to California? Hell yeah! “Absolutely. The program has been very helpful, and I’d be happy to speak about it.”

*And meet Olivia.* Oh god, I couldn’t wait to meet Olivia. This was the best damn news I’d had in a long time.

“Also, we have reason to believe you were right about George.”

*Well, shit.* That made me feel both better and worse.

“What are we going to do about it?” I asked, feeling both vindicated and sick at the thought of that monster hurting his wife and daughter.

“Nothing—for now,” Clay said, and I clenched my fist. “But I spoke with Maverick and Wyatt, and we all agree—your suspension is over.”

*Fuck yes. Finally!*

“I can return to the field?” I asked, hoping this wasn’t the end of it with George. I had faith in Clay, and the fact that they’d continued to monitor the situation was encouraging. Even if I wanted to do something immediately.

“Not yet. But you can return to the office and assist the teams with recon and surveillance.”

It was a start, even if it wasn’t exactly what I’d hoped for. And the fact that they’d kept watching, digging. That they believed me...

“I know I just came off suspension, but would it also be possible for me to use some leave to extend my trip? I’d like to stay through the following weekend, if possible.” Assuming Olivia wanted to spend time with me. God, I hoped so because I was dying to hang out with her.

He shuffled some papers on his desk. “That was the other thing I wanted to discuss. The ambassador is suing Hudson Security.”

I stared at him, mouth agape. “You’re fucking kidding me.”

He shook his head, massaging his temples. “I wish I were. But it means that your vacation comes at a good time.”

I sagged in my chair, afraid to ask what this meant for the future. But I didn’t have to wonder long.

“It’s bullshit, and we will do whatever we can to fight it,” he said.

“What about the fact that his son was abusive?”

“We don’t have any proof,” Clay sighed. “And even if we did, George has diplomatic immunity.”

“Well, fuck.” I dragged my hand over my head. “Surely there’s something we can do?”

“Trust me,” he said. “There isn’t. Maverick and I have already talked to legal about it at length.”

I hung my head. “Shit. I’m sorry, Clay.”

I wasn’t sorry I’d hit the bastard, but I was sorry for how it was affecting Hudson Security. And the impact it was having on my friends and coworkers. I tried to sort through the options. At the moment, I only saw one.

“I think I should resign.” I didn’t like it. Didn’t want to. But if that was what needed to be done, I would.

“Fuck no.” He ran a hand through his hair. “The guy’s a pompous ass, and we never should’ve taken him on as a client. Reagan and some of our other assets are looking into leverage.”

I nodded. “I appreciate that, but…”

Clay leaned forward. “It’s not going to come to that, but I applaud your willingness to do what’s in the best interest of the unit.”

I nodded, hoping he was right. It would kill me to resign, but I’d do it. I’d do it for my family. Because that’s what we were at Hudson. “Of course.”

He rubbed his temples, and I sensed he had more to say. “You know why I suspended you, right?”

“To try to defuse the situation with the ambassador.” And probably to make an example of me.

“Partially, but I was more worried about you than what he’d try to do to Hudson.”

I… Wow. I hadn’t even thought of that.

“You have leadership potential, Connor. But if you want to advance at Hudson, you’re going to have to remember to put the best interests of the unit above everything else.”

I nodded. "I will. I promise."

"I have faith that you will. Like I said, I know that incident was out of character. But I'm glad that you've been taking your suspension seriously. I received a certificate of completion for the Spines for Soldiers program. And Tatum says that he's seen great progress."

I nodded. "Despite my initial reluctance, I enjoyed the program. And I've found my conversations with Tatum and his insights beneficial." So much so that I planned to continue meeting with him even after I was no longer required to attend therapy.

"Good." He assessed me. "How's your knee feeling?"

"I completed physical therapy, and my doctor cleared me for normal activity."

"I know that." He all but rolled his eyes. "I read it in the report. But I want to know how it feels."

"Not quite one hundred percent, but nearly there."

In addition to the exercises my physical therapist had given me, I'd worked out to maintain and build strength. And I'd completed numerous online training sessions.

"Wow." He lifted his chin, crossing his arms over his chest. "I'm impressed."

"Thank you. I worked really hard during my suspension."

"I can see that. But that wasn't what I was referring to. I'm impressed that you admitted that you're not one hundred percent. That wouldn't have been the case in the past. You would've tried to cover up any perceived weaknesses."

Well, shit. Maybe I hadn't been as good at hiding my shortcomings as I'd thought.

"I'm glad," he said. "It shows me that you're willing to put the good of the unit above your own personal wants."

"Yes, sir. Always."

"Good. Word is Abby Taylor is going on tour, and she's going to need to beef up her team for that. Keep doing what

you've been doing, and we'll talk about adding you to the team."

*Fuck yes.* I'd always enjoyed working with Abby in the past. She was a sweet kid and one of a handful of clients who actually listened to our recommendations. And this was a huge opportunity.

"Thank you," I said.

He stood, and I followed suit. "One more thing. We're having a party for Maverick's birthday next week. It'll mostly be some of the guys from our SEALs class, but you should come since you'll already be in LA."

"I'll be there."

He walked me to the door, opening it before saying, "Enjoy your vacation."

"Thanks," I said.

I stepped into the hall, trying to make sense of everything that had just happened. And while I should've been focusing on my future, all I could think about was the fact that I was going to California. That I would finally get to meet Olivia and have a conversation face-to-face. I only made it a few steps down the hall before pressing her name on the contacts in my phone. It rang twice before she picked up.

"Hello?" The sound of her throaty voice went straight to my cock. Fuck, it was sexy. She was sexy.

I glanced at my watch and realized just how early it was. Just past five in the morning her time. *Shit.* "Did I wake you?"

I sped toward my office and shut the door behind me.

"Connor?" I heard rustling, and I imagined her sitting up in bed.

I groaned at the image, wishing I were there. I still had no idea what she looked like, but I didn't need to. I was attracted to her, even without seeing her.

I smiled to myself as I remembered that, soon, I would be there. With her. Maybe not in her bed, though I certainly

wouldn't complain if that happened. But in the same state, the same city, the same room. Breathing the same air.

God, I sounded like a love-sick fool. And that had me pausing.

*Me? A love-sick fool?* I'd never been in a real relationship. Never let myself get emotionally invested with anyone like I had with Olivia.

"Is everything okay?" she asked, sounding more alert.

I cleared my throat, trying to get it together. "I have good news."

"Is it about your friend in the ICU?" she asked, making me realize I hadn't gotten a chance to update her. And she'd been sweet enough to worry about him and ask.

"He got moved to a regular room last night."

"Oh good. I'm so glad." I could hear the relief in her voice.

"But that's not what I was calling to tell you." I rocked on my heels, excitement coursing through me for the first time in months. And it wasn't even about my suspension ending. "I'm coming to California. Get this—to participate in a panel on Spines for Soldiers."

"You what?" she practically shrieked. I told myself it was out of excitement, but I wasn't entirely convinced. "I mean, that's great that you're willing to talk about your experience."

I frowned, figuring it had been her idea. *Okay.*

She'd started the program, but I didn't know how much of an ongoing role she had, apart from being my reading buddy. Well, she was more than my reading buddy, but I didn't plan to divulge that to the publishing company she worked for.

"And I have some unused vacation time. So...I was hoping we could hang out. Meet face-to-face."

There was a long, silent, pregnant pause. "I-I don't think that's a good idea."

My chest tightened, and I stared at the floor, trying to make sense of her response. What had changed since the other

night?

“Why not?” I started pacing in front of my desk.

“Because I’m not sure your girlfriend would like that.” She said it so matter-of-factly.

“Girlfriend?” I frowned. I didn’t have a girlfriend, and I had ended things with Katie weeks ago.

“You know...Lucy?”

I laughed but quickly sobered when she didn’t join me. “Lucy’s not my girlfriend. She’s my aunt. She raised me after my mom died.”

“Oh.”

“Olivia,” I said in a teasing tone, relief coursing through me. “Were you jealous?”

“What?” Her voice pitched high. “No. Of course not. I just didn’t want to cause a problem.”

“I can appreciate that.” Especially considering what had happened with her own parents. “Just to be clear,” I said. “Do you have a boyfriend?”

It was something I should’ve asked weeks ago, but I’d always been terrified to find out if she was seeing someone. Now that I was going to California, I had to know. And I prayed that Olivia was single.

She laughed so hard, she snorted, and it was fucking adorable. “No. I don’t.”

“Good.” Relief coursed through my veins—relief and excitement. “Because I’m taking you out when I come to LA next week.”

“Are you even going to ask me?” she teased.

“You promised.” I said, an idea already forming in my mind.

“I did.” Despite her confusion, despite her earlier hesitation, she sounded excited.

“Just check your email, okay?” I said, unable to hold back my smile. There was a knock at my door. “I have to go.”

“Bye, Connor,” she said in a soft voice.

“Bye, Olivia. I’ll see you soon.”

I might not know what the future held, but one thing was for certain—I couldn’t wait to meet Olivia.



“YOUR DAD WANTED ME TO GIVE THIS TO YOU,” LUCY SAID, handing me a letter.

She’d invited me over for a homemade meal, and part of me still couldn’t quite believe that she’d visited my father. That he was actually dying. I’d half expected to find out it was yet another ploy to get me to see him. But based on what Lucy had said after her visit, I knew it was true.

It had been seventeen years since my mom had died. Seventeen years since the last time I’d seen my father. And I wasn’t sure I ever wanted to see him again.

I took the letter from Lucy but didn’t read it. And I wasn’t planning to. I shoved it in my pocket.

Lucy went to check on dinner, and my phone buzzed with a new text message.

Olivia: Finished. That was one hell of a story.

Right? Fucking awesome. Tell Alyssa she did good—again.

Olivia: I’m scared it will inflate her (already large) ego.

Maybe. But maybe if you stroke her ego, she'll give us another one.

Olivia: Are you turning into a romance addict?

I WAS TURNING INTO AN OLIVIA ADDICT, BUT I DIDN'T SAY that. And after how quiet she'd been the past few days, I was just grateful she was texting me more frequently again. The situation with my dad had been weighing on me, but it was nothing compared to how I felt when faced with Olivia's absence from my life. And that terrified me.

It's all your fault.

Olivia: Right. Sure it is.

Olivia: Actually, there's a new release I've been interested in reading.

I TYPED OUT A QUICK REPLY.

Romance? Fantasy? General fiction?

Olivia: Romance.

Tropes?

Olivia: Age gap. Opposites attract. Bodyguard romance.

Can you sense me rolling my eyes from New York?

Olivia: Why? Because of the age gap?

SHE WAS TEASING. WE BOTH KNEW IT. BEFORE I COULD respond, a new message came through.

Olivia: Seriously? I thought it could be interesting. You can fact-check it.

I can tell you right now, it's going to be mostly wrong.

Olivia: Oh, come on. Give the author a little credit. ☐

Why? Is this a fantasy of yours? Bodyguard romance. 😺😺

THREE DOTS APPEARED THEN DISAPPEARED. THEN REAPPEARED again, dancing on the screen. What was she thinking?

Olivia: Wouldn't you love to know. 😊

*SERIOUSLY?* THIS WOMAN WAS MADDENING AT TIMES.

If it is, I might know someone who could help you fulfill that fantasy.

Olivia: Clay?

I CLENCHED THE PHONE IN MY HAND, NEARLY SHATTERING THE screen. She better be joking.

Me: No. He's married.

BUT EVEN IF HE WEREN'T—FUCK NO. SHE WAS MINE.

*Mine?*

Another text arrived while I was processing that thought.

*I am so in over my head.* And yet, I couldn't stop.

Olivia: Let me think...

There is only one correct answer.

“WHO'S OLIVIA?” LUCY ASKED, LEANING OVER MY shoulder.

*Shit!* I immediately put my phone to sleep, feeling like a teenager caught texting a girl. I only hoped my aunt hadn't seen much of our text exchange. Though the fact that she'd referred to Olivia by name told me she had been there longer than I'd realized.

“A friend,” I said.

Damn. I'd been out of the field for six weeks, and my skills were going to shit.

“Really? That's it—a friend?” Lucy asked. “Because I've never seen that look on your face when Decker or Zeke texts you.”

I rubbed the back of my neck.

“Oh.” She grinned, taking the seat next to me. “You really like this girl, huh?”

“Yeah, but it's not like that.”

“Not like what?” she asked.

“You're going to laugh if I tell you.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Try me.”

“I, um, I’ve never actually met her.”

“Ah. Online dating.”

“Something like that,” I said, figuring it was easier than explaining the truth.

Plus, I knew if I told my aunt about Spines for Soldiers, then I’d have to tell her what had happened with George. She already had enough going on with my dad and his bullshit; I didn’t want to add anything else to her plate.

But it was more than that. I worried she’d be disappointed in me. That she’d see my father’s mistakes repeating in me. That I’d be another statistic—the worst possible kind.

“So,” Lucy said as we sat down to eat. “Tell me more about Olivia.”

So, I did. I told Lucy about how kind and good Olivia was. And all the while, I thought about my father—that piece of shit. I thought about how he was dying and I still didn’t want to see him.

And I wondered what Olivia would think. What she’d do if she were in my situation. Knowing her, she’d probably find it in her heart to forgive him. But I couldn’t. Wouldn’t.

Did that make me a bad person? And if so, would I ever be good enough for someone like Olivia?

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

*Olivia*

“Hey, Seth.” I kept my body angled toward the computer, typing out a business email, as if that would deter him from staying.

Lately at work, it felt as if I were walking a tightrope. I didn’t like that Seth had put me in this position—making me feel like a promotion I’d worked my ass off for was now conditional on my dad’s cooperation.

“Olivia.” He took a seat. “I wanted to check in with you. See how things are going.”

“They’re great.” I brightened, turning to face him. “Everyone seems to be enjoying the Spines for Soldiers program.”

“Excellent.” He rubbed his hands together. “Have you, uh, had a chance to speak to your father? We’re really hoping to get the ball rolling on this before football season. Which means that something would need to be decided in the next two weeks.”

I gathered my courage, channeled my inner badass Olga—the one who flirted with former Navy SEALs, who told my mom what she thought, who was confident—and said, “I think you should start looking for someone else.”

It wasn’t a firm no, but I wasn’t leading Seth on either.

Seth leaned forward, resting his forearms on his thighs. “Your annual review is coming up. You might want to consider how the biography could affect your position—for

better or worse.” He stood, not giving me a chance to respond when he left my cubicle.

Oh, so now he’d moved on from incentives to threats. *Great.*

While I’d sensed that Seth’s patience for my dad’s biography had been wearing thin, this was the first time he’d made his position clear. If I wanted that promotion—heck, if I wanted to keep my job—I needed to get my dad to agree. What a mess.

I needed a big glass of wine. A good book. And a warm bath.

I stood and grabbed my purse, grateful it was close enough to the end of the day that I could slip out. I went straight home, took off my bra, and poured myself a large glass of wine. I stewed for a little bit, but then I opened Connor’s and my latest book on my e-reader and tried to lose myself in the author’s words.

When I finished my second glass of wine, I poured another before heading to the bathroom. I switched on the faucet to the tub, eager to sink into a hot bath after a long day. My conversation with Seth was stressing me out.

Then there was the upcoming Spines for Soldiers event. I’d been running around, preparing for the panels and the meals and everything else, and I was exhausted. But the future of the program—and very likely, the future of my job at Igloo—depended on this. I only hoped everything I’d done would be enough.

It was a good distraction. A necessary distraction from the fact that I was going to meet Connor in just a few days. Part of me still couldn’t believe it. Another part was nervous as hell.

Hence the bubble bath. And the third glass of wine.

The lights were low, the candles lit. I was just about to silence my cell phone when it rang. Connor’s name flashed on the screen, and I hesitated a moment before answering.

“I can’t talk long,” I said, holding the phone to my ear as I dropped a bath bomb into the water. It immediately bubbled

and hissed, colors swirling out into the water as the scent of vanilla and orange filled the air. It reminded me of my grandma's famous orange-spice loaf. The one she always made at Christmas. "Maybe five minutes."

"What happens in five minutes?" he asked, his tone light and teasing. "What's that in the background? Is that... Are you about to jump in the shower?" His voice was strangled, and I nearly laughed at his tone.

"Bath, actually," I said. "And my bath bomb just detonated, so you have four minutes now."

"I-I—" he stuttered, and I smirked.

I shouldn't enjoy this as much as I was, but it was nice to catch Connor off guard for once. He was always flirting and teasing, taunting me. And now I was giving him a little taste of his own medicine.

"Three minutes." I slid out of my clothes. "Did you call to talk about the book?"

"Fuck the book. You're taking a bath?" he groaned.

I grinned, loving the desire in his tone. "I'm about to be."

"Are you naked?" he all but growled, and the ache forming between my legs spiked.

That voice. The words he said.

"You are, aren't you?" he pressed when I didn't answer. His voice oozed confidence and sexuality, and I could just imagine how good he'd sound whispering filthy words in my ear.

"Maybe," I said, biting my lip. He couldn't see me, yet I felt bared to him.

My body cried out in desperation, but my mind cautioned me it was a bad idea. It was too much, too soon. I was already in over my head.

"God, I wish I were there." The rawness of his voice scraped over my skin, leaving goose bumps in its wake.

I closed my eyes and admitted the truth. "So do I."

“But what the hell is a bath bomb?”

I giggled. *Okay, maybe I should slow down on the wine.*  
“You don’t know what a bath bomb is?”

“I don’t typically take many baths, unless they’re ice baths.”

“Bleh.” I shuddered. “You couldn’t pay me enough money to climb into a tub of ice.”

“They’re good for recovery.”

“I don’t care what they’re good for. I’m a fan of not freezing my delicate bits.”

“Mm.” I could hear the smile in his voice. “Tell me more about these delicate bits.”

I squeezed my eyes shut and shook my head. “I should get going.”

“Why?” he asked.

“Because...” I couldn’t think of a good reason. Not one.

“Am I making you uncomfortable?” he asked in a softer tone, concern lacing his words.

“No. I’m just... I’ve never done this before.” God, that was embarrassing to admit. But this was Connor. I felt as if I could tell him anything and he wouldn’t judge me.

“Done what? Talked to me on the phone?” he teased.

“Connor,” I chided. “You know what I mean.”

“I just want to hang out with you. If you also happen to be taking a bath, then so be it.”

“But I’m...” My voice came out strangled, so I whispered, “Naked. And you know it.”

“True, but it’s not like we’re on FaceTime. Though, we could be if you wanted.”

I checked the water temperature but said nothing.

He was silent for a moment then he asked, “Would it make you feel better if I was naked too?”

Great. And now I was imagining him naked. Instead of answering, I asked, “Do you have any tattoos?”

He chuckled. “Nah. Makes you too easy to identify.” I arched a brow. “What about you?”

I shook my head, then remembered that he couldn’t see me. “No. No tattoos. Just one piercing.”

“Belly button, right?” he joked.

“Obviously,” I said, feeling more at ease.

“Tell me what you’re doing,” he rasped, though it was more of a demand.

“I’m sinking into the tub,” I said, slipping into the water and turning off the tap. It was heaven, the warm liquid enveloping me like an embrace. I put the phone on speaker and set it on the side of the tub. “Where are you? What are you doing?”

“Lying in bed. Talking to you.” I could just imagine him reclining against his headboard, one arm behind his head. “Thinking about you.”

“Oh yeah?” I asked, desperate for him to say more.

“I’m always thinking about you.”

I melted at his words, his honesty.

“So am I,” I said. “I mean, thinking about you. Not myself.” I laughed, but it sounded nervous to my ears.

He chuckled, the sound spreading liquid heat throughout my insides, and I could feel the stress melting away.

“How was your day?” he asked, and I was grateful for the momentary reprieve. The return to more familiar territory.

As excited as I was that he’d be visiting soon, I was also terrified. But right now, I didn’t want to think about that. I just wanted to enjoy talking with him.

But then I remembered what he’d asked, and my expression soured. I sighed, tilting my head back against the wall.

“That bad, huh?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Want to talk about it?”

It was a sweet offer, especially considering it would effectively be putting the brakes on what we’d been doing. And it showed me that Connor cared about me. That he would put my needs before his own.

“Not really,” I said.

“I could help you relax.” His tone was both teasing and seductive.

My eyes widened. *Oh my god.* Was he suggesting what I thought he was?

“Oh yeah?” I asked, feeling hot and flustered and so turned on I might actually combust. I’d never had phone sex, and this was definitely new territory for us. “And how would you do that?”

“Mm. Well—” He shifted, the blankets rustling with his movement. “If I were there with you, I’d sit behind you with you between my legs.”

I hummed, closing my eyes and imagining just that. His large body behind me, his powerful legs bracketing mine.

“I’d begin by washing you. Taking my time to care for your body, starting at your shoulders. I’d caress your skin, massaging the soap into your muscles. Helping you relax after a long day.”

That sounded...so nice. Relaxing and sensual and I ached for him to hold me. To caress me.

“Then,” he continued. “I’d slide my hands over your collarbone, down your breasts, taking my time to make sure they were thoroughly clean before moving to your stomach.”

“And then what?” I asked, feeling incredibly brazen. Feeling like the characters Meghan Hart described.

“How long is your hair?” he asked.

“It grazes my collarbone.”

He hummed his approval. “What color is it?”

I smirked at his attempt to get me to describe myself. It was working, though. “Light brown. You?”

“Brown, but it’s buzzed close to my scalp.”

Interesting. It didn’t surprise me, but I’d never been with a man who didn’t have longer hair. I wondered if I’d miss running my fingers through it. Since it was Connor, though, I doubted it.

“Eyes?” he asked.

“What does that have to do with my hair?” I teased.

“Just trying to get the full picture.”

“Mm.” The hot air curled around me, tendrils of my hair sticking to my skin. “Green. You?”

“Technically blue, though they often look more like gray. And I think we’re getting sidetracked. Now, where was I?”

“In the bath with me,” I said, shocking myself. “Washing me.”

In the past, I would’ve been way too shy to do something so bold. But Connor had always made me feel safe to be myself. He’d helped me realize that I was wonderful just as I was.

He was quiet a moment then he said, “Once the soap was rinsed. I’d brush your hair aside and kiss my way down your neck and shoulder.”

I slid my hand up my stomach, my skin slick from the water. I ached to feel his hands on me, his lips tracing the same path he’d described. But then I remembered that he was in New York, and that fantasy popped like one of the bubbles in my bath.

It didn’t matter that he was coming to visit soon. He wouldn’t be staying. And that meant that our relationship could never go anywhere, even if I wanted it to.

“I should...” The water sloshed around me, and my skin heated. “I should go.”

“Olivia,” he growled. “Don’t overthink it.”

*How did he...? How had he known what I was thinking?*

“I can’t help it,” I said, torn between ending the call before things got even more out of hand and letting myself give in. To this man. To what I really wanted.

“Do you want to go?”

“No,” I said, my voice barely loud enough to hear.

“Do you want to stop? Because we can. We can just go back to talking about work or books or whatever you want.”

I considered it a moment then said, “Don’t stop. Please.”

He made a satisfied sound. “Then touch yourself,” he said, and I could hear him shifting. “Pretend it’s my hands caressing your breasts.”

His words reignited my earlier desire, though I still had concerns. But those seemed somehow less important at the moment.

Unable to resist any longer, I slid my hand up to my breasts, teasing the sensitive skin.

“Are you doing it?” he asked.

“Yes.” Was it the wine or his voice that was having such a strong effect on me?

“Good. How does it feel?”

“So good,” I said, my breath hitching.

“What kind of touch do you like?” he asked, his voice like velvet. “Would you want me to be gentle or rough? Or do you want a little of everything?”

“That,” I panted. “Yes.”

“Mm,” he hummed his approval.

“What about you?” I asked.

“What about me?” he taunted.

He was going to make me say the words, wasn't he? So I gathered my courage and asked, "How do you like to be touched?" My voice was breathy, the warm air and this conversation making my head spin. "Tell me what you'd want me to do to you."

"Everything," he said on a sigh. "But this is about you, Olivia. Shit. I want to touch you so bad. I want to feel you in my arms, taste you on my lips." I could hear movement in the background, and I imagined him sliding his hand down his abs and under the waistband of his pants, reaching in to fist his hard length.

I took a big sip of my wine then asked, "Are you hard?"

"Yes," he rasped. "God, the things you do to me. It's fucking crazy."

His words emboldened me to ask, "Are you touching yourself?"

"Yes. Now, describe what you're doing." He wasn't asking anymore; he was commanding. God, that was sexy.

"I'm—" I gasped, twisting and tweaking my nipple. "I'm pinching my nipple."

"What else?" he demanded. I shivered from the unspoken promise of what would surely follow.

"I'm sliding my other hand down my stomach." I cried out when I reached my clit and started circling the sensitive nub, imagining it was Connor's hand instead. "What are you doing?"

"Thinking about you. Imagining how you look with your skin flushed and your eyes closed in bliss." His words spurred me on, made me feel even sexier as my remaining inhibitions fell away.

"Thinking about how you taste." His voice was gruff, masculine. "And how hard I would make you come with my tongue. My fingers. My cock."

*Holy shit.* I swallowed hard. The image he'd painted...

“Tell me, Olivia. Would you like that?” he asked as I continued to touch myself.

“Yes.” I could feel myself getting close. We hadn’t been talking long, but hearing his voice echoing off the walls of the bathroom had my muscles tensing and my temperature rising.

He groaned, his breathing picking up pace. “The feel of your ass in my palms. Your hands on my chest. The way you’d arch your back.”

“Yes,” I said, drawing out the word. I leaned my head back against the tub and closed my eyes, my movements almost frantic now.

“That’s it,” he said, coaxing my release. Making it build. “That’s it,” he grunted, and I could tell he was close.

So was I. “Oh god.” The pleasure was building and building and...

“Come with me,” he growled.

I couldn’t have resisted if I’d wanted to, and as pleasure consumed me, I knew I was a goner. I surrendered to Connor, surrendered my fears, letting go as I rode out my release.

As the waves subsided and my vision cleared, I struggled to catch my breath. Connor hadn’t even touched me, and yet it was the most intense orgasm I’d ever experienced. And I still didn’t know what he looked like.

“Whoa,” I said between pants. I sank deeper into the water, my limbs limp and my mind clear.

“Yeah,” he said, panting. “That was...something else.”

We were both quiet for a moment, catching our breath and perhaps collecting our thoughts.

“You okay?” he finally asked.

“Yeah.” My exhale was shaky like my limbs. “Yeah. Wow.” I was still trying to wrap my head around what we’d just done. And what it meant, if anything.

“Are you feeling more relaxed now?” he joked.

“For sure.”

“I can’t wait to see you,” Connor said.

“Just a few more days.”

I was giddy, my skin flushed with excitement, and I was smiling so hard it hurt. This might be the most reckless thing I’d ever done, but at the moment, I couldn’t find it in me to care.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Connor

I sank back on the pillow, a huge fucking grin on my face. A towel was draped over my lap, containing the giant mess I'd made. Olivia was...well, damn. I replayed what we'd just done, my cock twitching at the reminder of her breathy sighs and sexy moans as she'd come on the phone with me.

*Fuck me, that was hot.*

And in a few days, I'd get to see her. Touch her.

I couldn't fucking wait.

I rolled over and caught sight of my dad's letter sticking out from beneath one of the books on my desk. I gnashed my teeth and cleaned myself up before putting on a new pair of boxers.

Part of me was tempted to open the letter. Another, bigger part of me was tempted to burn it. What did he even want?

When my mom was alive, he'd treated both of us like shit. He'd effectively ignored me for nearly two decades. Had never reached out until a few months ago. And now that he was dying, he wanted what? Forgiveness?

I rested my elbows on my thighs, my gaze turned to the floor. I wondered what my mom would do. What she would tell me. I honestly didn't know. Didn't think she was the best judge when it came to my dad.

I sighed. I'd spoken at length with Tatum about my parents, trying to understand their motivations. Especially my mom's seeming inability to leave my dad.

He'd pointed out a few things that had helped me empathize with her. Not that I was judging her for her actions. Merely...trying to understand.

Tatum had talked about the effects of abuse on self-esteem, and how that alone could make it feel impossible to leave or find a fresh start. He gently explained how dangerous it could be for someone to leave an abusive relationship, and the difficulty of breaking the cycle of control.

Until Tatum had mentioned that, I'd forgotten my mom's failed attempts to leave my dad. The blowup that always inevitably followed. And then the brief honeymoon period that would come after that. The whole cycle of it made me sick—for my mom. For me. For Olivia and my future.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. I was getting ahead of myself. Olivia and I had never been in the same zip code, let alone the same room. I had no idea how I'd feel about her once I actually met her in person. But for the first time, I was nervous.

I mean, what kind of relationship could I offer someone, especially someone like Olivia, if I'd never seen a healthy, loving relationship modeled? Hell, based on what Olivia had told me about her parents, neither had she. So how could there be any hope for the two of us?



“FLIGHT 2468 TO LOS ANGELES WILL BEGIN BOARDING soon,” a woman's voice announced over the airport PA system.

I opened my text messages and smiled at the most recent one from Olivia. A message from last night, wishing me sweet dreams. What a joke. I'd barely slept, excitement and anxiety and everything else rolling through me.

I was tempted to send Olivia a message now, but it was still early. I didn't want to risk waking her, especially considering how tired and busy she'd been lately. She'd been doing a ton to prepare for the Spines for Soldiers event, and I was so damn proud of her.

I only wished she'd tell me what was going on with her boss. The longer the situation dragged on, and the less she said, the more anxious I grew.

I double-checked my boarding pass and wondered if Zeke was going to be a no-show. I scanned the crowd again, taking note of everyone's body language. Even though I'd been doing it for years, I'd picked up some new tricks in my recent training, and I was using this as an opportunity to practice. It was a good distraction from the thoughts threatening to overwhelm me.

The gate agent had invited the first group to board when Zeke joined my side. "Hey, man." He held up his fist with a wide grin.

"Hey, Disco." I bumped his fist with mine. "Cutting it a little close, huh?" I teased.

"You know how I am." He tilted his head.

"Always living on the edge," I supplied.

"That's right, Cujo." He adjusted his backpack. "Gotta keep things interesting."

I nodded. My life had definitely been interesting lately. I was taking a vacation for the first time in years. To meet a woman I'd only ever spoken with on the phone. A woman I was extremely attracted to, despite never having seen her. And I was quite possibly falling for her.

*Falling for her?* I pushed that thought away.

I had zero experience with relationships, and I was becoming too emotionally attached. Especially knowing that Olivia wasn't at all interested in a long-distance relationship. At least, that's what I kept telling myself.

"How was your last assignment?" I asked Zeke.

“Man, it was good to be back in the field. Even if the job was pretty dull for the most part. Though, the principal was hot.”

Zeke’s wrist had healed, and he’d returned to the field weeks ago. He’d been assigned to protect actress Cece Golden while she was in New York, and I hadn’t seen him at all while she’d been in town for filming.

It almost made me grateful for my injury. Not that the pain or the recovery had been fun, but it was the longest break I’d had from being in the field in years. It had given me time to think. Time to get to know Olivia.

And that worried me.

What would happen when I went back to fieldwork? Would Olivia understand my unpredictable schedule or the fact that I would likely be living with the principal? Protecting them. For the first time since I’d joined the SEALs or started with Hudson, I found myself evaluating my choices under a different set of standards.

I found myself considering her feelings, and how my choices might affect us. Part of me even wondered if I wanted to return to the field if it meant less time with Olivia. An idea that would’ve seemed inconceivable in the past.

I needed to slow down. Back off a little.

I hadn’t even met the woman. Had no idea what she looked like. And yet I was ready to upend my life for her?

“What about you?” Zeke asked. “When are you back in the field?”

“Hopefully after I return from vacation,” I said. “My suspension is over.”

“I’m glad.” He clapped a hand on my shoulder. “And I hope you’re doing better.”

“I am,” I said, and I meant it. “I know I’ve said this before, but thanks for having my back.”

His brown eyes met mine. “Always.”

“Even so, I want to apologize for how everything went down.”

He nodded. “It’s cool, man. We’re good.”

“I lost control, and—” I dropped my head. “I’m sorry you got injured.”

“I don’t blame you for what you did. The guy was a dick. His dad too.”

There was no doubt about that.

I lifted my gaze to his. “You don’t?”

“No. Of course not, but I can’t lose this job. My granny...”

I clapped a hand on his back. “I know, Z. I’m sorry for ever putting you in that position. It won’t happen again.”

“Good.” He clapped a hand on my back. “It hasn’t been the same without you.”

“Thanks,” I said, needing to change subjects. “Are you excited to meet your reading partner?”

“Yeah. I mean, she’s nice and all, but I’m more excited about the paid vacation.” We shuffled forward, joining the line to board the plane.

I laughed. “Yeah. The vacation will be nice.”

“What do you want to do first? Check out the nightlife? Go to the beach?”

“Actually—” I held up my phone so the gate agent could scan the boarding pass on it. “I already have plans.”

“Really?” Zeke followed me down the jet bridge. “With someone from the LA office?”

I knew a few of the guys out here, but most of the former SEALs had been recruited from the base in Coronado, California. Whereas the guys in the New York office had come from Little Creek, Virginia, where I’d been stationed for most of my naval career. Even so, that wasn’t who I was going to see.

I shook my head. “My reading partner.” Though Olivia was so much more than that.

“Nice. What are you doing? Maybe I should tag along.”

*Fuck no.*

“I’m taking her to a bookstore.”

Zeke scrunched up his face. “Sounds...nerdy.”

I laughed. Once upon a time, I might have thought that too. But I’d changed. Olivia had changed me.

“She’s going to love it,” I said. At least, I hoped so. Hell, part of me was afraid she wouldn’t show up. But I knew that was just the fear talking.

“Wait.” Zeke paused, backpack in midair on the way into the overhead bin. “Is this a date?”

I rubbed the back of my neck and sank down into the window seat. “Yeah. I guess it is. At least, I want it to be.”

“Damn, Cujo. Is she hot?” He took the seat next to me.

I smiled to myself, thinking about Olivia. “I honestly have no idea.”

He jerked his head back. “What?”

“I don’t know what she looks like.”

“You’re shitting me,” he said, buckling his seat belt.

“Nope.”

“Cujo, you are one crazy motherfucker.” He chuckled, and I wasn’t sure if he meant it as a compliment. “So...no more Katie?”

I shook my head. “Nah. That ended a while back. You’ve been out of the loop, man.”

“I guess so. So, tell me about this girl. What’s her name again?”

“Olivia Hayes,” I said.

He tapped something on his phone. “Shit. There’s at least five girls with that name on Insta.” He held up the screen to

show me.

“Seriously?” I rolled my eyes, pushing his phone away so I wouldn’t see the images there. “Instagram is your go-to?”

“Yeah. It’s not yours? I get DMs on there all the time.”

I shook my head. “First of all, we don’t even know if she’s on Instagram.”

“Pretty much everyone in our generation is except you.” He gave me a meaningful look.

“It’s a security hazard.”

“That’s why you don’t use your real name or any identifying information.”

“So, images of you doing pull-ups don’t count?” I joked, knowing that Disco’s feed was just one big thirst trap.

He resumed scanning social media, and it wouldn’t have surprised me if he was looking for an LA hookup. I switched on my e-reader and turned my attention to my latest read. Or at least, I tried to. I stared at the words on the page without absorbing anything.

I was too damn excited. Too nervous. I kept trying to imagine what it would be like to finally meet Olivia. To see her in person. Would I recognize her?

I kept replaying what she’d told me about her appearance. Light brown hair that grazed her collarbone. Green eyes.

I could feel the adrenaline building, and I needed to do something to get it out. Sitting on a plane wasn’t helping.

“You don’t know how many hot women are on there, looking for guys like me.” Zeke tapped on his screen. “Ew. Too young.”

“Your latest DM?” I asked.

“No. One of the Olivias. But damn, this one is hot.” He held up his phone.

“Dude!” I pushed his phone away again. “Don’t make me break your phone.”

“You wouldn’t.” He scowled.

I leaned back in my seat, crossing my arms over my chest and letting him know I meant business. “You put it in my face again, and that’s exactly what’s going to happen.”

“God, the suspense would be killing me. I can’t believe you didn’t look her up. Weren’t you even tempted?”

I scoffed. “Of course I’m fucking tempted.” Hell, I’d almost caved and looked her up last night when I couldn’t sleep. But I didn’t. Wouldn’t.

“So…” Zeke gave me a pointed look. “Just do it. What’s the big deal? It’s not like she’s going to find out unless you tell her.”

“Even if she never found out, it would still be a violation of her trust.”

“But what if she’s hideous?” He pulled a face.

“Seriously, Disco?” I glared at him.

“Yeah. Seriously. She could be ugly with a capital U. And you’re going on a date with her? It’s not like you can ditch her. You’ll still have to see her at the panel. Shit could get awkward real quick.”

The thought had crossed my mind—about things getting awkward. What if we weren’t attracted to each other? That seemed impossible, considering our chemistry over the phone.

Even so, what was she expecting out of this week? What if I wasn’t enough to give it to her? But then I remembered how much Olivia and I had shared already, and I immediately felt calmer.

“I know it’s a risk, but she gets me.” I’d never felt this way about anyone. Which was a big reason why it was so terrifying.

“Oh man. You’ve got it bad, huh? What do you like so much about her? Since it’s clearly not her appearance.” He snickered.

“Everything.”

“Well, shit.” He shook his head. “You love her.”

*Love?* That seemed a little premature. Though, I did care about her. She’d become one of the most important people in my life.

“Next thing I know, I’ll find out you’re transferring to the LA office weeks after the fact.”

I barked out a laugh. “You’re getting ahead of yourself.”

“Hell, maybe I should transfer too. Then I could spend a little more time with my last principal. Give her a little Vitamin D.” He wagged his brow.

“I sure as hell hope you’re joking.” We all knew the number one rule of executive protection: don’t sleep with the principal. And definitely don’t fall in love with them.

“I’m kidding. Jeez.” He rolled his eyes, and I knew he’d never cross that line, no matter how tempted he might be. He couldn’t lose this job, or he wouldn’t be able to pay for his granny’s expensive care. “Besides, you’re the one who’s breaking the rules.”

“How?” I asked. Olivia wasn’t the principal or even a client of Hudson Security.

“Did you not read the Spines for Soldiers program guidelines?”

“Fuck no,” I said. Hell, for a while, I hadn’t even planned to participate.

“You should. Because I specifically remember a rule against meeting outside of designated program activities.”

I stared at him a moment, studying the microexpressions on his face. Waiting for him to start laughing at any moment and tell me it was a joke. “You’re shitting me.”

He shook his head. “I’m not.” He pulled out his phone and scrolled through his emails until he’d found what he was searching for. “Here. Look.”

I skimmed the program guidelines. Olivia and I had already broken a number of them—exchanging phone

numbers. Agreeing to meet in person. I understood they were meant to keep participants safe, but I'd never do anything to hurt her.

“Meh. I prefer to think of them as suggestions. It'll be fine.”

At least, I hoped it would be. I wouldn't have been so concerned if not for the fact that Olivia had spearheaded the program. But I didn't tell Zeke that. Breaking the rules was the least of my worries at the moment.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# Olivia

**A**lyssa stood behind me in the mirror, wrapping my hair around the barrel of the curling iron. She was almost done, and it looked amazing—romantic and sexy at the same time. I felt beautiful, but what would Connor think?

I still couldn't quite believe I'd be meeting him in a little over an hour.

“Ah!” she squealed. “This is so exciting. Can I go with you if I promise not to interrupt, *please?*”

I laughed. “Um. No.”

“But you are going to send me a picture of him, right?”

I frowned at her in the mirror. “I'm not taking a covert picture of him. That would be weird.”

“What's *weird* is the fact that you haven't stalked the hell out of him online.” She gave me a pointed look.

“It just seems wrong.”

“And you don't think he's searched for you on the internet?”

I didn't even have to think about it. “No. I actually don't.” I trusted Connor.

She sighed. “Are you sure about the picture?”

I rolled my eyes. “Positive.”

“You're no fun. Why can't you take one? Just one?” She held her hands together in prayer.

“No,” I said more firmly, even as I tried not to laugh.

“Well then, ask him to take one with you. You know—to commemorate the fact that you actually met.”

I laughed, though the idea was tempting. “We’ll see. Besides, you’ll get to see him soon enough.” At the panel in a few days.

“True.” She wound another piece of my hair around the barrel. “But you wouldn’t make your best friend wait that long, now would you?”

She batted her eyelashes at me, and I laughed.

“I make no guarantees.”

We fell silent for a minute, her concentration on my hair. I’d never expected this day to come and now that it was here, well...

“So...how are you feeling?” She set down the curling iron and picked up the hair spray. I closed my eyes and held my breath as she spritzed it over my hair.

“Nervous. Excited. Like I might throw up.” I held a hand to my stomach.

“You’re not going to throw up.” She nudged my hand aside. “That’s just the butterflies.”

I wasn’t so sure. Though, Connor did make me believe that the things we read in romance novels weren’t as mythical as I’d once believed.

Finally, she stood back, admiring her work in the mirror. “There.”

I moved my head from side to side, watching the curls as they bounced. And trying to ignore those pesky butterflies, as she called them. Because right now, they felt like they were trying to make a break for it. “Gorgeous. Thank you.”

“Wow.” She leaned her hip against the bathroom counter. “You’re actually admitting that you look good? This is big.”

I rolled my eyes, even though I knew she was right. “I’ve been working on it.”

She wrapped an arm around my shoulder and squeezed. “I’ve noticed. And I’m glad. You’re beautiful, and it’s time you realized that. It doesn’t hurt to have a hot guy interested either.” She winked.

“Yeah, well...it’s not like we know whether he’s hot.”

Even if he wasn’t, his friendship had certainly boosted my confidence. Connor was... He’d never seen me, yet he was still interested in talking to me. He always made time for me. I didn’t need to see him to know I was attracted to him. I often wondered if he felt the same. And I only hoped the image I’d built of him in my head would match up to reality.

“Do you think this is the right outfit?” I asked, agonizing over my clothes for the millionth time. It was the first time Connor and I would see each other in person. It was important.

She crossed her arms over her chest. “We’ve been over this.”

I sighed. “I know. I’m just second-guessing everything. I mean, is this even a date?”

She rolled her eyes. “Yes.”

“He said he was taking me out. So, not technically a date. Besides, he invited me to get coffee.”

She blew out a breath, brushing some of her hair aside. “He probably just picked a coffee shop so it would be less pressure. Besides, it’s not just *any* coffee shop—it’s the coolest bookstore on the planet. And one of your favorite places.”

“True.” I leaned forward, fluffing my hair.

I did love The Last Bookshop. It was my happy place. And I was impressed that Connor had chosen it. I’d never mentioned it to him, so he had to have researched it himself. This date was already off to a much better start than my last one. It was more *me*.

“Are you listening to me?” She grabbed an eye shadow palette.

“I am. But...well, what do you think he’s expecting?” I toyed with the hem of my shirt while she dug in her makeup

bag for supplies. “We haven’t talked about where he’s staying. Do you think he’s hoping to stay with me?”

“Hell yeah!” She grinned. “But no.” She sobered when she saw my panicked expression. “I’m sure he’s staying at a hotel. Didn’t you say that Igloo is putting up some of the guys?”

“For a night or two, not an entire week. He had some leave saved up.”

“Which means there’s time to figure it out. Why don’t you just go meet him and see what happens? You can figure out the rest later.” She dabbed at the eye shadow palette. “Close.”

Right. The rest... As in sex. The future.

I breathed through my nose, relaxing slightly as she gently brushed on my makeup. I trusted Alyssa to make me look good. She’d already done wonders with my hair.

“Do you think he’s expecting to have sex?” I finally asked.

“*Expecting?* I sure as hell hope not.” She shifted, as did her tone—her voice becoming softer. Gentler. “But it wouldn’t surprise me if he’s thinking about it. Aren’t you?”

“Yes,” I breathed, my heart racing. Especially after what we’d done the other night.

“Your cheeks just got really pink.” She grinned. “What are you thinking about?”

I rolled my lips between my teeth and shook my head. “Nothing.”

She narrowed her eyes at me. “That face—” she used her finger to draw a circle in the air “—is not ‘nothing.’ Tell me.”

“We, um—” My cheeks heated even more if that was possible, and I probably looked like a tomato at this point. “Things may have gotten a little heated the other night on the phone.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh my god, Olivia. Did you have phone sex?”

“Maaaybe,” I said, dragging out the word as I bit back a smile.

“Yas! You go, girl.” She lifted her hand for a high five, and we slapped palms. “How was it?”

“Hottest orgasm of my life,” I admitted.

“Damn.” She shook her head. “And he wasn’t even touching you. And you have no idea what he looks like.”

I nodded. “Exactly. So you can see why I’m freaking out even more about meeting him. I mean, this is crazy, right? Meeting someone from the internet. Inviting him into my home.”

“Close,” she said, then continued applying my eye shadow. “First of all, you don’t have to invite him to your house. And you shouldn’t unless you feel safe with him and you want to.”

I heard the click of the palette closing, and I opened one eye to watch her. She picked up a different palette and brush, her tongue sticking out from between her teeth. I closed my eyes again as she resumed her application.

“Besides, people meet online all the time and fall in love,” she said.

“Whoa. Whoa.” My eyes shot open. “I was talking about sex, not love.”

“Well, whatever it is, if you’re feeling it, I say go for it.” She grinned.

“Have sex with a stranger,” I said. Both a question and not.

“Well, he’s not a stranger, not really. You guys have been talking for months now. And it’s allowed your relationship to develop without the physical stuff getting in the way. For the most part.” She winked.

I nodded, accepting the eyelash curler from her. She was right. All the hours spent emailing and talking on the phone had established a strong foundation. Connor was easy to talk to, and I loved talking to him. But still...we’d never met.

I had no idea what he looked like and vice versa. Would our chemistry translate to an in-person meeting? What if all this insane attraction we’d built up over these months just... fizzled out the moment we saw each other?

I curled my lashes then applied mascara before finally standing. I smoothed my palms down my thighs and checked my reflection once more. My boobs looked good, but when I turned to the side, I worried that my butt looked big in these jeans.

“You look fantastic,” Alyssa said, coming to stand beside me.

She ushered me toward the door. “Ooh! This is so exciting!”

I placed a hand to my stomach, which churned with unease. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

I hadn’t stepped foot out of her apartment, and I was already a bundle of nerves. How on earth was I going to make it through meeting Connor? Not to mention holding a conversation. *Oh god.*

“I think this is a mistake,” I said, backing away from the door as the reality of what I was doing suddenly crashed down on me.

“I think—” Alyssa placed her hands on my shoulders, grounding me “—that you’re scared, and that’s okay. But I also know that if you don’t go, you’ll wonder ‘what if’ for the rest of your life.”

“The rest of my life? Jeez. Dramatic much?”

But even I knew she was right. I didn’t want to have regrets. I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life wondering.

“Come on, Olivia. You can do this. You’re not marrying the guy, just meeting for coffee.” I was positive her smile was meant to be reassuring, but nothing was going to ease my anxiety.

I was meeting someone I’d fantasized about for months. What if he didn’t live up to the image in my head? Worse still, what if I was nothing like he’d expected? What if this was one big letdown?

“I bet he’s just as nervous as you are,” she said.

I barked out a laugh. “I wouldn’t be so sure about that.”

The way he spoke, the confidence in his deep voice, the things he said...all made me believe that he was experienced, especially when it came to women.

“What if I’m not, you know, what he expected?” I finally voiced my greatest fear aloud.

“What if you’re even better than he hoped?” She grabbed my arm and pulled me toward the door. “You’ll never know unless you meet him.”

“Yeah, but I’m not...me when I’m with him.”

She furrowed her brow. “Huh?”

“I’m braver, more confident.”

The corner of her mouth tilted into a smile. “Have you ever thought that maybe *that’s* who you really are?”

I stilled, considering her words. Was it all just an act, or did Connor bring out the best version of me?

“Please just meet him,” she huffed.

“You’re only pushing this because you’re hoping he has some hot friends I can introduce you to,” I teased.

“Quit stalling.” She placed her hands on her hips. “And, yes—that would be awesome. But that’s not why I’m pushing this. I see the way you light up when you talk about Connor. You’ve never even met the man, but there’s clearly something between you two.”

I nodded, knowing she was right. There was definitely something between us, and I’d be an idiot to ignore it.

“Okay.”

“Okay?” She danced around, making me laugh. “Call me as soon as you get home. I expect a full report.”

I saluted her. “Yes, ma’am.”

She grinned and shook her head. “Have fun.”

I hopped in my car, hoping I’d allotted enough time for traffic. The drive was relatively smooth, even if I was impatient and anxious. And by the time I parked my car at The

Last Bookshop, I was so preoccupied, I could barely recall how I'd gotten there.

My phone rang, my mom's name flashing on the screen, and I quickly ignored it. *Good vibes only*. After another glance in the mirror and a quick pep talk, I headed for the entrance, hoping I wouldn't regret this.

When I opened the door, I couldn't help but smile despite my nerves. Just the aroma of the books made me happy. Plus, the store always had such amazingly creative displays. I wandered down the shelves, passing through the tunnel—a lit archway of books—before making my way through the labyrinth. I was totally stalling, but I needed a moment to collect myself before I entered the coffee shop. And being around books—being in my happy place—certainly helped settle my nerves.

I took a deep breath and forged on, the hissing of the coffee machine growing louder with every step. When I emerged into the coffee shop, I scanned the room, my eyes quickly coming to rest on a man whose back was to me. His rigid posture and muscular physique matched what I'd imagine for a former SEAL who now worked in executive protection. Plus, his hair was short—buzzed close to the scalp. But I couldn't see his face.

His shirt and build fit Connor's description, but he was talking to an elderly man. And gah! "Blue button-down" was so vague. Was it cobalt? Turquoise? Navy?

I tried to maintain my smile as I scanned the other patrons. Several women wearing yoga clothes with babies in tow. An elderly couple. A group of students huddled around their laptops. Yet my attention kept returning to the man in the pale-blue shirt. It had to be him. I couldn't imagine Connor being anything but punctual. And if it wasn't him, then he'd stood me up, and that wasn't an option I wanted to contemplate.

I was on the verge of approaching when the man turned to face me. We stilled, and my breath caught at the sight of this tall, muscular man holding a bouquet in his hand. He looked like a hero straight out of a Meghan Hart romance novel. And

when he smiled, a dimple winking at me from his cheek, I honest to god thought I might go weak in the knees.

*Holy shit.*

*Please be Connor. Please be Connor.*

The man's smile was tentative as he approached. "Olivia?"

His voice matched Connor's, but...*no way*. I shook my head, momentarily at a loss for words.

*Wow.*

He was so handsome, so...imposing. Intimidating, but not in a way that I'd ever question my safety. More that I feared for the safety of my heart.

His smile fell, and he retracted the bouquet. "Sorry. My mistake."

"No." I reached out for him, nearly knocking over a stack of books in the process. "Connor, wait. It's me, Olivia."

I tried to right the books, and when I looked up at him again, I saw how still he'd gone. I realized then that his eyes were scanning me, drinking me in. They were a pale gray color, reflecting honesty and happiness.

"Hi." He smiled, and it struck me like an arrow to the heart. "These are for you." He handed me the gorgeous white hydrangeas. My favorite.

"Thank you." I accepted the bouquet, trying not to knock anything else over when I reached out to give him a side hug.

Instead, he pulled me into his arms, the paper around the flowers making a crunching sound from the movement. *Oh wow*. I blinked a few times, my entire world tilting at the contact. Connor smelled amazing, and he felt even better.

His strong arms banded around me, giving me a sense of safety and security. Belonging. All the while, my body hummed with excitement.

I rested my head against his shoulder. "Hi." My words were muffled by his chest, and it was as if the universe had shifted, everything finally settling into place.

“Hi.” He buried his face in my neck and breathed me in. I nearly melted on the spot.

After a minute, he released me and took a step back.

I lifted the hydrangeas to inspect, grateful to have something to do with my hands. “Thank you again. They’re beautiful.”

“So are you.” He rubbed the back of his neck, meeting my gaze with a sheepish grin. “Wow, um, that was cheesy. Must be all those romance novels you’ve been making me read.”

“*Making* you?” I swatted at him with the bouquet, but he dodged it with agility. “Who finished the latest Meghan Hart book first, huh?”

We laughed, some of my earlier anxiety fading. This was Connor, the man I’d joked with over the phone. The man I’d shared my hopes and fears with. He knew me better than any man I’d ever met, and he was really here. And wowzers was he hot—so much hotter than I’d even dared to imagine.

“Do you want to sit?” He gestured toward an empty table.

I nodded, surprised when he moved to pull out my chair. Was he for real? I was tempted to pinch myself because this certainly seemed too good to be true. “Thank you.”

“I’ll grab us some coffee. Latte with oat milk, right?”

I smiled, both surprised and impressed that he’d remembered. “Yes. That’s perfect.”

*Just like you.* Hot. Attentive. Considerate.

“Do you want anything to eat? A muffin or a cake pop?”

I shook my head. I was worried enough about keeping my cool around him. I didn’t want to add another thing to the mix.

He nodded. “I’ll be right back.”

He turned for the counter, and I took the chance to watch him shamelessly. His dark hair, those broad shoulders, that perfect butt.

I glanced down at myself, wondering what he saw when he looked at me. Was I what he'd expected? Taller, perhaps? When he'd first spotted me, he'd seemed pleased. But maybe that was just wishful thinking.

"So how was *Unbreakable*?" I asked when he returned to the table with our drinks. I needed something safe to talk about. I needed some familiarity.

"You haven't read it yet?" He asked.

"I've been a little busy organizing stuff for the panel." Plus, picking the perfect outfit for tonight and shopping for some sexy new lingerie at Alyssa's insistence. But I didn't tell him that, instead taking a sip of my coffee. "Thank you for this, by the way."

"Excuses. Excuses." Connor smiled. Gah, he was so freaking handsome. I couldn't stop staring. I *needed* to stop staring. This was going to get embarrassing. "You need to read it. It's her best book yet."

I cupped my drink, the warmth seeping through the mug and into my hands, filling me with a deep sense of contentment. If I'd had to suffer through all those awful dates just to get to this point, I was okay with that. "And you're an expert on her books, huh?"

"Well, I have read two-thirds of them now. So, yeah."

My jaw hung open. "Seriously?"

I'd had no idea.

He chuckled. "Yep. I'm kind of addicted."

And a whole lot sexy.

"Well, that's...a twist I didn't see coming." I sipped my coffee.

I'd spent countless hours emailing with Connor and texting with him and talking to him on the phone. But nothing could've prepared me for the reality of seeing him in person. And my brain was still trying to reconcile the version of Connor in my head with reality.

It was—*he* was—a lot to take in. And I wasn't sure my heart was prepared for it.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Connor

“So, what are you hoping to do while you’re here?”  
Olivia asked in that sweet voice of hers.

*You.*

I shook my head to clear it, though I couldn’t deny the idea was appealing. That wasn’t why I’d come to LA. Why I’d wanted to meet her. But she was... God, she was gorgeous. Those full hips and luscious breasts. And her long legs.

I wanted to explore her, to get lost in her curves. Especially after what we’d done on the phone the other night. *Fuck*. It had been one of the hottest nights of my life.

“I’m open to ideas. Other than the panel, I was mostly planning to bum around the beach. I haven’t ever really taken a vacation.”

“Ever?” Her eyes went wide. “You’ve *never* been on a vacation?”

I shook my head, not wanting to dwell on the reasons for it. She knew my family history, and that was more than I could say for any other woman I’d dated. My aunt Lucy hadn’t had much extra money when I was growing up, and she’d worked two jobs just to take care of me.

Once I’d joined the SEALs, I’d rarely taken leave. What was the point? Apart from my aunt, there was no one I’d really wanted to spend my vacation with.

And then I’d joined Hudson Security—a fast-paced working environment with long hours. I’d taken a few

weekend trips to a beach house with some of the guys from the office, but otherwise, I'd focused solely on work.

“Well, that is completely unacceptable.” Olivia's expression was so stern, I nearly laughed. “And we're going to have to remedy that immediately.”

“Oh yeah?” My tone was playful, teasing.

It was so easy to talk to her. Be with her.

“Yeah. Consider me your personal tour guide.” She drained the last of her coffee, her tongue darting out to lick her lips.

I clutched my thigh beneath the table, fighting back the urge to kiss her. The evening was winding down, and the coffee shop would be closing soon. But I wasn't ready for our time together to end. Somehow, despite countless hours on the phone, numerous emails and texts, and now spending hours together, we still hadn't run out of things to talk about.

I wasn't sure where we went from here, but I knew I wasn't ready to say goodbye. Definitely not tonight and perhaps not anytime soon.

When an employee made a show of bussing a nearby table, I said, “You want to get out of here?”

Olivia nodded and stood, and I placed my hand on her lower back without even thinking. When I pushed open the door, I got a fresh whiff of her scent—vanilla and sugar, like cookies. Like heaven. I wanted to lick her from top to bottom. I wanted to eat her up and go back for seconds. Thirds.

We stood outside on the sidewalk, and she kept glancing around as if debating what to say. Finally, she seemed to come to a decision, meeting my eyes. “Do you want to come back to my place?”

*Fuck yes.* I licked my lips, wanting more than anything to kiss her. *Play it cool, Cujo.*

“I'd like that.” I smiled. “I grabbed an Uber to get here from the hotel. I can order another or...”

“Don’t be silly. You can ride with me. I’m just over here.” She pulled out a set of keys, and the lights blinked on a Range Rover.

*Swanky*. Expensive. I tried not to let my surprise show as I followed her over to the car.

Part of me wondered how she’d afforded the luxury car on a marketing assistant’s salary in a city with such a high cost of living. Another part of me was grateful it had high safety ratings.

I settled into the leather seat and laughed when a song by Abby Taylor blasted through the speakers. Abby was a good kid, a good singer. Olivia quickly reached for the controls, flustered as she attempted to turn it down or switch it off.

“Sorry about that.” She flashed me a sheepish grin.

“Someone was rocking out,” I teased, bumping her elbow as I tried to imagine it. The sunroof open, windows down, her singing along to the radio. The image made me smile.

Luckily, traffic was relatively light, and we made it to her house in about twenty minutes. Along the way, she pointed out various landmarks, and I wondered if she was nervous. She wasn’t usually quite so eager to fill the silence when we spoke on the phone. That and her tight grip on the steering wheel told me she wasn’t as calm as she’d have me believe.

“This is me,” Olivia said, pulling into a driveway.

Cute, charming, welcoming were the first words that came to mind when I saw the Craftsman. Her house fit her perfectly.

I followed her up the stairs to the front door, small lights dotting the path. The grass had been recently trimmed, and all it was missing was the white picket fence and two-point-five children. I had a brief vision of a child with Olivia’s doe eyes and chestnut hair swinging from the tree out front, and I shook it away. *What the hell?*

I was here for a week. *One* week. And then it was back to New York. Back to reality.

“Come on in.” She pushed open the door, and I followed her inside.

The smell of freshly baked cookies wafted through the air, filling me with a sense of warmth—of home—I’d rarely experienced as a child. My mother had loved baking, especially at Valentine’s Day, though fuck if I knew why. My father had been the least romantic man on the planet. He’d been more likely to give her bruises than flowers.

I thought about the note from him, still lying unopened on my desk. Why now? Apart from the fact that he was dying? And why couldn’t I just throw it away?

“Connor?” Olivia placed her hand on my arm.

“What?” I shook my head as if to clear it. “Your house is very cozy.” I noticed a panel for a security system on the wall, but she hadn’t turned it off when we’d arrived.

“Thank you.” Olivia smiled.

I was dying to touch her, especially after finally getting to feel her in my arms. But instead, I focused on the house. A large picture window overlooked the front yard, and original wood details had been preserved, even if some of the home had been modernized.

The architecture was nice, but I was more concerned with Olivia’s safety. The big window was a liability, even if it was charming. I’d surveyed the exits and determined the weaknesses of what I could see. There were a number of security improvements that needed to be made, but those could wait for now.

I heard the scratch of claws on the wood floor and a meow before Olivia said, “Uh-oh.”

I glanced to where she was looking and saw a beautiful large gray cat sauntering toward me with a haughty air. Though, didn’t all cats have that same attitude—imperialistic?

“And you must be Luna.” I grinned as she brushed against my leg. I reached down and scratched her chin as she purred with contentment.

“Wow. Um, okay. I didn’t see that coming.” Olivia shook her head as if she couldn’t believe her eyes. “She usually runs from strangers, especially men.”

“Clearly she recognizes my voice.” I turned to Luna. “Don’t you, Lunakins?”

Olivia laughed. “That must be it.” She kicked off her shoes, and I followed suit. “Do you want anything to drink?”

“Some water would be good.”

She turned for the kitchen and busied herself with putting the hydrangeas in a vase, while Luna climbed on the armchair by the window and proceeded to groom herself. I walked over to the fireplace, curious about the framed pictures on her mantel. Olivia walking along the beach as a little girl, with a woman I assumed was her mother.

“Wow.” I picked up one of the frames to get a closer look. “Is this you and your dad?”

It had to be—they had the same eyes, the same chin, the same smile.

Olivia set the drinks on the coffee table but stilled when she saw what I was holding. “Yes.”

“You guys really go all out for Halloween, huh?” I chuckled, amazed by how realistic her father’s football uniform was. He’d really committed—with pads and sweat dotting his forehead. And Olivia was in one of his arms, decked out like a dedicated sports fan.

She frowned. “Halloween?”

“Yeah.” I set the picture back on the mantel. Was I missing something?

“You don’t know who my dad is?”

I glanced at the photo again, then back at her. “Should I?”

She regarded me a moment before a huge smile spread across her face. She seemed incredibly pleased by my response. “Nope.”

“Now I’m curious,” I said. “Is he famous or something?”

“Or something,” she said, but laughter bubbled out of her. “I take it you’re not a football fan.”

I shook my head. “I’ve always been more into soccer.”

“He used to play for the Hollywood Heatwaves. He’s a color commentator now.”

I thought back on our first phone conversation. When I’d been frustrated with rehab, and she’d mentioned how change could be good. And suddenly it all clicked—she could’ve been talking about her dad retiring from football.

“That’s cool, but you say it like it’s a bad thing.”

“It’s not. I mean, I’m proud of him. But being the kid of a celebrity isn’t always as fun as everyone thinks it is.”

“Ah.” I tilted my head back. “I get that. Everyone thinks executive protection is sexy and glamorous, when most of it isn’t.”

“Exactly,” she said. “See! I knew you’d get it.”

“I’m sure there are some perks,” I said, glancing at the photo again.

“Yeah. I guess.” She sighed.

“What’s that sigh about?”

“Apparently, my dad is the key to keeping my job.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “You know how I told you my boss, Seth, asked me to do something.”

I nodded. “Yeah.” How could I forget?

“Even though I’ve never been responsible for acquisitions, Seth expects me to get my dad to agree to do a biography for Igloo Books.”

Considering her success with *Spines for Soldiers*, I was shocked that her position was conditional on something so... ridiculous. On something that had absolutely nothing to do with her or her ability to perform her job.

“Fuck that,” I spat.

“Yeah.” She laughed, but it felt like she was blowing me off as she returned to the kitchen for something else.

“I’m serious, Olivia. You don’t need Igloo.”

But then I thought about my conversation with Zeke, and how he needed his job. And how many rules Olivia and I were breaking and how that might impact her position. For all I knew, she *did* need this job.

She rummaged in the cabinets, while I continued to peruse her photos. The next one was of Olivia and a redheaded girl about a foot shorter than her—both of them wearing flight jumpsuits.

“Did you go skydiving?” I asked, unable to hide the surprise from my tone. “Or was this taken at one of those indoor air places?”

She laughed, setting a plate with some cookies on the coffee table. “I can tell you think so highly of those indoor air places.” She mimicked my disdain.

I lifted a shoulder. “I just think nothing compares to the real deal. But somehow, I can’t imagine you wanting to jump out of a plane.”

“Alyssa and I went for my twenty-fifth birthday.”

“Surely that wasn’t your idea, though. It seems...out of character.” I kept glancing between her and the photo as if trying to make sense of it.

“It was, and it wasn’t. Have you ever been?” She sank down on the couch, and I joined her. “Why did I even ask?” She rolled her eyes. “Of course you’ve been. It was part of your training for the SEALs, right?”

I nodded, distracted by her proximity, by her vanilla scent. We were talking about skydiving, but all I could think about was kissing her. Pressing my lips to hers and...

Luna pounced on something, and I cleared my throat and glanced toward the cat. “It is. Though it’s a bit different from jumping as a civilian.”

“Sorry.” She waved a hand through the air. “I’m sure you don’t want to talk about work—not when you’re finally on vacation.”

I leaned forward to take a sip of my water. “Doesn’t bother me. But I’d rather hear more about you.”

“God, you are smooth, aren’t you?” I couldn’t tell if she was amused or what.

I leaned back, draping my arm over the back of the couch. “Only with you.”

She glanced away, but I placed my hand beneath her chin, guiding her attention back to me. For the first time since I’d met her, I saw uncertainty in her gaze. Why? Why did she doubt my interest in her? My attraction?

She was always on my mind. And that attraction I’d felt from thousands of miles away had only intensified upon seeing her.

Was this scary?

Terrifying.

But did it feel right?

Absolutely.

I’d been a fool to think I could somehow shut off my feelings for her. As if they could ever be denied.

“Olivia—” I waited until her eyes met mine. This close, I realized they had a hint of blue to them as well. They were enchanting. “You’re all I can think about. All I can see. You’re everything I want.”

Olivia’s eyes searched mine as I cupped her cheek, her skin soft against my callused palm. And then she leaned into my touch, melting into my hand. “I want you too, Connor.”

I stared at her a moment longer, our faces mere inches apart. She was captivating. Everything about her held me hostage. Those gorgeous green eyes framed by dark lashes. The pouty lips that were fuller on the bottom...

I moved even closer, the tension vibrating between us. Her breath warm against my lips. And then, I slanted my mouth over hers.

That first moment felt like the second after a bomb had detonated. Everything froze—movement stalling and sounds becoming distant. And then, a second later, you started to feel the impact. And it could topple whole cities, just like this kiss.

A kiss that was shocking but also natural. Because when our lips met, our tongues exploring, tangling, it felt right. It felt as instinctive as breathing.

She gasped, her hands roaming my back. Touching, exploring, teasing. *Oh god.* My eyes nearly rolled into the back of my head when she scraped her fingernails against my scalp.

I pulled her onto my lap, never breaking our connection. She moaned into my mouth as I gripped her hips and deepened the kiss. I needed more. And when she started writhing, I couldn't think straight.

“Do you know how many times I've imagined this?” I panted. “Imagined you.”

“Show me,” she said, her breath tickling the shell of my ear. Her breasts practically begging for me to take them in my mouth. “Show me what you've wanted to do to me.”

“Olivia.” I groaned, claiming her lips once more. “*Yes.*”

Months of pent-up desire poured into the kiss, into our every touch. It was frantic and hot, and I wanted more. Needed more.

I removed her shirt, groaning at the sight of her luscious tits. They were barely encased in a lacy emerald bra, delicate creamy skin spilling over the cups.

I kissed the valley between her breasts, reveling in their fullness. In the vanilla scent that permeated her skin.

Before I could remove her jeans, she started unbuttoning my shirt. Her hands were shaking, and I smoothed my hands over her shoulders, her back, everywhere I could reach. Part of

me still couldn't believe I was touching her. And she was so much more than I'd ever imagined.

"I was wrong," I said after we'd stripped down to our underwear. Hers were a deep emerald color and lacy like her bra, and they hugged her curves in the most delicious way.

I kissed away her frown, loving the feel of her lips against mine. It was addictive—kissing her. With every inch of clothing we removed, with every kiss and sigh, I wanted it all.

"You're not just beautiful." I held her gaze, wanting her to feel my sincerity. "You're breathtaking."

Her answering smile was warm, at least before it turned into a smirk. "You're not so bad yourself." She gave my bare chest a pointed look.

"Not so bad." I narrowed my eyes at her because I knew she was messing with me. "Not so bad?"

She nodded, covering her mouth to stifle a giggle.

"Oh, you're going to pay for that." I picked her up, hauling her over my shoulder.

She squealed, pounding her fists playfully against my back. "Connor James, put me down!"

"All in good time." I smacked her ass with a satisfying thwack that made her cry out in surprise and pleasure. "Where's your room?"

"I can walk, you know," she said. "Besides, you really shouldn't be carrying me. I'm concerned about your knee."

"Don't make me spank you again," I threatened.

"Is that a promise?" she teased, and I groaned before she added, "End of the hall, on the right."

I kicked open the bedroom door, laughing when Luna darted past. I hadn't realized she'd come in here, but I'd been so absorbed with Olivia, I doubted I would've noticed if a bomb had detonated. That wasn't entirely true. Even as distracted as I was, I was still scanning her house for potential threats.

“Good kitty.” I kicked the door closed behind me. I didn’t want any interruptions. “Now it’s time to make another pussy purr.”

Olivia’s laughter was muffled by my back. “Oh my god. You did *not* just say that.”

“What?”

I tossed her gently on the bed, ready to make good on my promise. But when I saw her lying on her back, hair fanned out against the pale-pink comforter, all I could think about was how incredibly lucky I was.

Everything about her was perfect—from her full tits to her hips. To the trust she’d placed in me. And those lips, that mouth...my imagination had certainly not prepared me for this. For her. I pressed against my dick, aching to be inside Olivia, aching for release.

She propped herself up on her elbows, her breasts swaying from the movement. “Connor.” She bit her lip. “Is something wrong?”

“No, baby.” I crawled up the bed, over her body, peeling away her bra. Now that we were together, everything felt right in the world. Anything else could wait.

She relaxed, sighing into my touch. And I drank her in—the color of her nipples and the way they pebbled. The freckle on her stomach.

“Fuck, you’re sexy,” I rasped, placing kisses all along her bare skin. “I want to see you,” I said between kisses. “All of you.”

She sucked her lower lip into her mouth, just like I wanted her to suck my cock, and I groaned. This woman was going to be my undoing.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# Olivia

Connor kissed his way up my legs, kneading my muscles as he blazed a trail toward where I needed him most. His hands provided firm pressure, helping me relax. Even as his lips moved higher and higher until my knees were bent and my thighs were shaking with anticipation and nerves.

He moved up to his knees, placing his hand gently on my stomach. “Olivia?”

“What?” I asked.

“Are you nervous?” He smoothed his hands over my knees and back down my legs. “You’re shaking.”

“I’m...” Words failed me as I scanned his nearly naked form. His boxer briefs did little to conceal the outline of his erection, and I still couldn’t believe how hot he was. How *big* he was—everywhere.

I wanted to rub my hands all over his broad shoulders, that muscular back and powerful chest. Muscles I didn’t even know existed were carved into his skin. Was this even real? Was he real?

“What’s wrong?” he asked, caressing my cheek. The pad of his thumb was callused, but it felt so good against my skin. His touch gentle, reverential, despite his strength.

“I, uh—” I shifted, trying to move to a seated position. “God, this is embarrassing.”

“What?” he asked, his hand still resting on my thigh. “You know you can tell me anything. And if you want to stop, we’ll

stop. Okay?”

He dipped his head to meet my gaze. “Okay?” he asked again.

I nodded.

“So what’s going on in that pretty head of yours?” His smile was reassuring.

I was still trying to wrap my head around the fact that Connor was here—in my bed. And we were practically naked. But hearing his voice was a comforting balm. It was familiar.

He was patient, his eyes filled with concern. For me. This big, beautiful man cared about me. And I cared about him.

“I don’t have much experience with...what you were about to do.”

“Do you want me to stop? We can cuddle, read a book, watch a movie. Hell, I can go back to my hotel if you want me to.”

“What?” I reached out and grabbed his hand. “No. I don’t want you to leave. I just feel a little nervous about—” I gestured to my lap. “That.”

“Do I make you nervous?” he asked in a gentle tone.

I shook my head vehemently. “No. Of course not. I only ever feel safe with you.”

His shoulders relaxed at that, and he pressed a kiss to my forehead. “Good.”

He caressed my back, my thighs, encouraging me to continue. “I haven’t been with many guys. And when they went down on me—” My skin flushed with heat, embarrassment mingling with desire. “It wasn’t the best experience.”

He glowered. “I’m not sure whether to be happy or sad about that.”

“Huh?” I furrowed my brow.

“Sad that you haven’t had the pleasure, but happy that I’ll get to be the one to give it to you.” He cupped my cheek then dragged his thumb down my lip, his gaze intense. “That is, if you want me to.” His expression was so honest, so open, that I couldn’t help but want to trust him with this too.

“I…” I could barely think straight. “I do.”

He kissed me again, this time more slowly. There was no rush. And the more we kissed, the deeper I fell under his spell until we were both lying on the bed, bodies intertwined.

“I could spend all night kissing you,” he said, propping himself up on one elbow.

I could gladly spend all night kissing Connor, too.

He brushed my hair aside, his fingers skimming my shoulder then my back. Every movement was slow, and I luxuriated in his touch, completely content. He leaned forward and kissed my shoulder, my collarbone, the top of my breasts as I rolled onto my back with a sigh.

I couldn’t stop touching him, running my hands over his skin as he dotted kisses in the valley of my breasts. The underside. The side. Everywhere around my nipples but not actually on them in a way that had me squirming for him to suck one into his mouth.

“Is this okay?” he asked, the warmth of his breath wafting over my already heated skin.

“Yes,” I sighed, arching my back, my breasts aching for more of his touch.

He kissed closer to my nipple, running his tongue along the outside before finally sucking it into his mouth. It was both too much and not enough.

He stayed there, teasing my breasts, making me writhe with want. And then he was kissing down my stomach. His eyes still locked on mine. Every time I looked at him, his gorgeous gray-blue eyes were on me, as if he was afraid I’d disappear if he looked away.

I smoothed my hand over his head, enjoying the way his hair tickled my palm. I caressed his cheek, still struggling to believe this was real and not just another fantasy I'd concocted while we were on the phone late at night.

He hesitated above my underwear, his nostrils flaring. "Olivia," he said through gritted teeth. "I'm barely holding on here. I'm dying to taste you. But only if that's what you want."

"I want it," I said without hesitation. Based on everything he'd done so far, I knew it would feel amazing.

He used his thumb to stroke me lightly through my underwear, the fabric slick with my desire. "If you want me to stop, just say so. But I doubt that will be the case." He smirked.

I laughed. "There's the cocky guy I know and..."

But when he pressed his mouth to my sex, I nearly bolted off the bed from the pleasure. He took his time, teasing me through my underwear, letting me get used to the idea. The entire time, his eyes were glued to mine, his expression intense. His desire overpowering as he stared at me from between my legs.

My underwear was soaked, and I kept moving my hips, wanting more, needing more.

He pulled back, and I whimpered. "I take it you'd like me to continue."

I squeezed my breasts, antsy for his touch. Eager for him to fulfill the promises he'd made the other night while we were on the phone.

His eyes darkened, and he looked as if he might pounce on me. "Tell me what you want."

"Your mouth," I croaked.

"Where?" he rasped, slipping his fingers beneath my underwear and sliding them down my legs.

"Everywhere."

"Good answer." His words rumbled out of his chest.

“And...” I hesitated, but only briefly. “I want you naked.”

He smirked. “Even better.”

He stripped out of his boxer briefs, and his cock bobbed against his stomach. My mouth went dry at the sight. And when he gave his erection a tug... *Holy Hail Mary...*

He returned to his position between my legs and resumed his ministrations, using his mouth and his fingers to coax sounds from me I'd never made before. The pleasure wound tighter and tighter, but he didn't let up. He didn't stop—not until I was crying out, my hands twisting the sheets, the pleasure hitting me so hard that I thought I blacked out for a moment.

And then my body relaxed with a shudder. I felt...floaty. Incredible.

Connor pressed one last kiss to my clit then leaned back on his knees with a satisfied smile. It was almost as if giving me pleasure had pleased him. I'd never been with a man like that.

“Hey,” he said, leaning over me and pressing his lips to mine. My taste mingled with his, and I wrapped my arms around him, bringing him closer to me.

“Hi.” I smiled up at him, his arms bracketing my head. I wrapped my legs around his waist, his cock sliding against my wet folds.

We writhed against each other until he squeezed his eyes shut. “I'm going to come if we don't stop.”

I reached over to my nightstand and pulled a condom out of the drawer. I'd bought them the other day, *just in case*. “Here.” I handed it to him.

He rolled over and sat against the headboard, ripping open the package and sliding on the condom. And that alone might have been one of the hottest things I'd ever seen. His ab muscles flexing with the movement. His corded forearms. Those long, dexterous fingers working over his cock.

He crooked his finger. “Come 'ere.”

“You want me on top?” I asked.

“Hell yes,” he said as I straddled him. “And the next time I eat you out, I want you sitting on my face.” He gripped my hips, his large hands splaying over my skin like they were built for it. “Assuming you want there to be a next time.”

“God, yes,” I sighed, both in answer and in pleasure as I sank down onto his erection until he was buried to the hilt.

He sighed, leaning his head back against the headboard. “Fuck me. You feel amazing. Just like I knew you would.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck, brushing my lips against his ear. “You feel so good.” I inhaled his clean scent. “You smell...” I shuddered as I began to move, sliding up and down. “So good.”

Our bodies were as connected as we could be, and his hands were everywhere. Gripping my hips. Sliding over my ass. Cupping my breasts and bringing my nipples to his mouth to tease and lick and suck. Yet his eyes never left mine. And it was one of the most intimate and intense things I’d ever experienced.

“Fuck, you’re sexy.” He slid his hands down my breasts, caressing my stomach as if it was exactly what he’d always wanted. I’d never felt so sexy. So desired, despite the softness of my folds.

“Feels. So. Good,” I said between pants, smoothing my hands over his chest, shoulders, back, biceps. Anywhere I could touch.

He pressed the palm of his hand to my breastbone. “Lean back on your hands,” he rasped.

I did as he said, and then he glanced down to where we were connected. “God. I wish you could see what I see.”

“Tell me,” I said, my pleasure building and building.

He rubbed my clit with his thumb. “You look so good, taking my cock. Your pussy is so perfect.” His eyes were hooded, his breathing ragged.

I moaned at his words, his touch. “I’m...so close.”

“Me too,” he said, his eyes latching on to mine. “Come with me.”

The moment he said those words, I knew we were both thinking of our phone call the other night. Of how badly we’d wanted to be together. And now we were.

He increased the pace, pumping in and out of me harder, faster. And when he added pressure to my clit, I couldn’t take it anymore. I shattered in his arms, crying his name as he unleashed himself.

Until we collapsed in a heap, sated and spent. His body wrapped around mine. His lips pressed to my forehead.



MY PHONE BUZZED ON THE NIGHTSTAND. BEHIND ME, CONNOR shifted, the warmth of his body, his scent, permeating the sheets. *My sheets.*

Holy shit. I still couldn’t believe he was here. In my bed.

I wanted to ignore my phone, ignore everything but him, and I would’ve, if not for the notification of ten missed calls. I blinked, trying to clear the sleep from my eyes as I peered at the display. Alyssa’s face flashed on the screen as it continued to vibrate in my hand. I cringed and glanced over my shoulder to make sure Connor was still sleeping.

He was facing me, but his eyes were closed, his breathing even. I’d still be sleeping too, were it not for Alyssa’s call. But I had a feeling she’d come over soon if I didn’t answer. Or worse—tell my dad she was worried, and then he’d stop by. Just what I didn’t need. My dad showing up to find me in bed with Connor.

At that horrific thought, I slipped out of bed as quietly as possible and pressed the button to connect the call. “Just a

sec,” I whispered, grabbing Connor’s shirt from the floor and slipping it around me.

“Oh my god. Is he still there?” She squealed, totally not taking the hint to be quiet. “Get it, girl!” Or discreet.

I squeezed my eyes shut. It was too early. I needed coffee.

“Shh,” I hissed, glancing over my shoulder as I pulled the door closed. Even though all I wanted to do was crawl back in bed with him.

“Can you talk now? I’m dying here!”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, desperate for caffeine. “Just...give me a minute,” I whispered, padding across the floor toward the kitchen. I brewed some coffee then headed out to my back patio once it was finished. “Okay, I can talk for a minute or two.”

“Nuh-uh. I’m going to need more than a minute. What’s he like? Is he what you expected? How was the sex?” Her questions were rapid-fire, and I struggled to keep up after my marathon night of sex.

“He’s...” I smiled, glancing out at the palm trees. “Amazing.”

“The sex too?” she asked.

I sighed, thinking of the things we’d done. Him on top, me beneath him, his lips, his hands all over my skin as he worshipped me. Thoroughly.

“That good, huh?” I could hear the smile in her voice. I would’ve been annoyed by her smug tone were I not floating on a high of orgasms. Multiple, glorious orgasms.

“Whatever you’re thinking, it’s even better.”

Unlike the other men I’d been with, Connor had no problem making me climax. He’d certainly proved me wrong about sex in romance novels being a fantasy. But still...maybe last night had been a fluke. Further research was definitely necessary. I smirked into my mug at the idea.

“Damn.”

I turned when I heard a noise but saw nothing. “Look, I should probably get going...”

“But I want details!” she whined.

“Soon,” I said, not wanting to gossip about Connor when he was still inside my house. “But not right now... I have a feeling he’s going to be up soon.”

“Up for another round?” she chuckled, amused by her own cheesy joke.

“Probably.” I cupped my hand over the speaker. “The man is insatiable.”

The long stretch of silence on the other end of the line amused me. Alyssa was never silent.

“Damn, girl. I’m totally jealous, but I hope you have fun!”

“Oh, I will.” I grinned, bringing my coffee mug to my lips to take a sip.

“Look at you, all confident. I knew I liked him.”

So did I, and that was a problem because he was leaving in a few days. This was temporary. Fun. A fling. Nothing more.

I didn’t want to dwell on it. Especially not when I spied Connor in the kitchen. He was still here, and I intended to make the most of our time together.

“I’ll see you on Monday,” I said to Alyssa before ending the call.

Connor walked outside not two seconds later, his chest and abs on full display. Damn him for looking so perfect after rolling out of bed. His gray eyes sparkled, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips. His boxer briefs rode low on his waist, showcasing amazing abs and a perfect V that led to his...

I gulped and pulled his button-down shirt a little closer, suddenly self-conscious in the harsh morning light. Why hadn’t I taken the time to look in the mirror? Swish a little toothpaste in my mouth? Dab on some lip gloss or even brush my hair?

The man was a god, and I was...

“Morning, beautiful.” He leaned down, pressing his lips to mine. His voice was gravelly, and he looked even sexier with a bit of scruff lining his angular jaw.

*Beautiful.* He thought I was beautiful. My heart did a little pitter-patter, despite my worries.

“Morning.” I smiled, hoping my breath didn’t taste awful. Maybe the coffee would cover any morning breath?

He sat on the chair next to me and pulled my feet into his lap. Completely and totally at ease. “Sleep well?”

“When I actually slept, yes,” I teased as he started massaging my feet before working his way up to my calves.

He smirked as he leaned back in his chair, his hips shifting forward. Those thighs... That expression. The man was totally shameless and absolutely sexy. And he wanted me.

I rested my head against the chair, the sunlight warming my skin. His words from last night echoed through my head. *You’re everything I want.*

Beneath his hands, I melted like butter, and some of my earlier concerns vanished.

“Oh god.” I moaned. “That feels...so good.”

He chuckled, and the sound went straight to my core. I rubbed my legs together, seeking to ease the ache.

I opened my eyes, gasping as he slid his hand even higher, caressing my thigh and resting there a moment. In the distance, I saw one of my neighbors sunning in her backyard, her perfect body a reminder of everything I wasn’t. Of everything my mother had always wanted me to be, and it was as if I’d been doused with a bucket of cold water.

“What do you want to do today?” I asked, wriggling away and removing my feet from his lap.

He frowned at my feet but then adopted a more neutral expression. “I’m game for whatever. Though I’ll need to drop by the hotel to grab fresh clothes.”

“Great. Let’s do that.” I leaped out of my chair, seizing on the excuse. So much for my newfound confidence. “I’ll go shower so we can head over.”

“Okay.” He furrowed his brows, and I wanted to smooth any worries away. “Sure.”

I went inside and closed the door to the bathroom and switched on the shower. A glance in the mirror only confirmed my fears. My hair looked like a rat’s nest. His shirt barely covered my thighs, and Connor was a big guy. Years of my mother’s “suggestions” came crashing down on me.

Before I could strip out of his shirt, there was a knock on the door. “Olivia.”

“Yeah?” My voice sounded timid. *What am I doing?*

The door swung open. Connor stood in the opening, arms crossed over his chest. “What just happened?”

“I just...thought we should get ready,” I squeaked, though it sounded more like a question.

“You sure? Because it feels like you’re avoiding me.” He stared me down, waiting for an answer.

“I-I—” I glanced away, unable to handle the intensity of his gaze. The room was heating up, and it had nothing to do with the steam billowing out of the shower. Despite the fact that we’d just met, Connor knew me. He could read me—better than anyone.

His feet came into view, and he placed his finger beneath my chin, lifting. “Are you having second thoughts about last night?”

“What?” I frowned. “No. I’m just—” I closed my eyes and took a shuddering breath. “Afraid you might.”

He barked out a laugh. “Regret a night of amazing sex with an incredible woman? Right.”

“I’m sorry. I’m still trying to wrap my head around everything. I mean, we met online. And now...you’re here. And you’re—”

“I’m...?”

“Well, you.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“It’s not.” I scanned his bare chest. “*Definitely* not a bad thing. It’s just...surprising.”

“Surprising?” he asked, tilting his head.

I twisted my hands together, all my fears—all my mother’s words—bubbling to the surface. “That someone like you would be interested in someone like me.”

He clenched his jaw. “Someone like you? You mean someone who’s sweet and caring and smart and fucking gorgeous?”

I dipped my head, grateful when my hair fell over my face. “Um. Yeah. I guess?”

He tucked my hair behind my ear, cupping my cheek. “Olivia, I was attracted to you before I ever met you. *You*.” He placed his hand over my heart. “Not your appearance or anything else, but you.

“And now that I’ve seen you—” His erection dug into me, and he gave me a look that burned with desire. He blew out a breath and shook his head. “Well...have I not made it clear just how much I like you?” He ground against me, and I was hit with a strong pang of need.

I laughed, burying my face in his chest, grateful to be teasing again. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Perhaps I need to show you again.” He flashed me a mischievous grin.

“Perhaps you do,” I joked as he pushed the shirt off my shoulders, allowing it to pool on the floor.

We spent the rest of the day in the shower, in bed, on the couch, trying to prove just how much we liked each other.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Connor

It was late afternoon by the time Olivia and I were finally ready to leave the house. She said goodbye to Luna and grabbed her purse on the way to the door.

“Aren’t you going to set the alarm?” I asked in a casual tone as I slipped on my shoes.

She hadn’t set it last night before bed, but I’d shrugged it off then. I was here, and she probably didn’t set it when guests were in the house. But now that we were leaving, I figured surely...

“I never do.” She fumbled with the buckle on her heeled sandal.

“Ever?” I asked, trying not to let my emotion show as I knelt to the floor before her. I wrapped my hand around her ankle and brought it to my thigh, securing the clasp for her.

She lifted a shoulder. “My dad insisted I install it when I bought the house, but the neighborhood has always been very safe.”

I guided that foot to the floor then took her other ankle in hand and secured that sandal as well. “Mm. Now why would he insist upon having it installed, only for you to never use it?” I peered up at her, caressing her ankle. Bending forward to kiss her skin. *Mm. Vanilla.*

When I met her eyes once more, she was glaring down at me.

“You know I’m right,” I said.

She huffed. “I know that you can be bossy and overprotective just like him.”

“I’m going to take that as a compliment since I know he loves you and wants the best for you. And if your dad is as big of a celebrity as you say he is, you could be a target.”

She shook her head. “No one cares about me.”

I stood and grasped her chin in my fingers. “*I* care about you.”

“You know what I mean,” she sighed. “But thank you for saying that. I care about you too.”

“Then you’ll understand why I want you to be safe.” I pressed my lips to hers briefly before releasing my hold on her chin.

This entire situation was foreign to me. I was used to caring about my clients, my friends, my aunt, but never to this extent. The feeling was as unsettling as it was persistent.

“Now come on, Olga. Let’s get you some food,” I teased, surprised by the intensity of her reaction. Clearly, I needed to feed her.

“Oh, is Coleman the bossy one?” she asked.

“We’re both bossy. It comes with the territory. I work for an elite private security company. I was a SEAL before that. What do you expect?”

“Mm.” She crossed her arms over her chest.

I didn’t like that *Mm*. It sounded...ominous.

“What?”

“Connor, do I ever say anything about your job?” she asked. I shook my head. “About how I hate that you willingly put yourself in danger, even though I admire you for it? That I worry about you and dread the day when you tell me you’re going back into the field?”

“No.” I frowned, surprised that she felt so strongly about it. She’d never mentioned it.

“Then don’t try to tell me how to live my life.” She spun and grabbed her keys from a bowl in the entryway.

“I’m not—” I shoved my hands into my pockets and rocked on my heels. “That’s not what I’m trying to do. I just want you to be safe.”

“Safe from what?” she asked, spinning around. “I know you live in a world where you’re constantly on high alert. I saw the way you scanned the café and the parking lot for threats. But that’s your world, your life, not mine.”

“It’s *the* world,” I said, gnashing my teeth. There was no difference between the two; it was only a matter of perspective. “And the world isn’t always the happy, safe, beautiful place you want it to be.”

“Fine.” She jabbed a code into the alarm, and it started beeping. She strode toward the front door.

I was surprised to see her so riled up. But I didn’t care if she was annoyed with me—hell, I was used to dealing with clients who didn’t want to heed my advice because it was an inconvenience or an annoyance. I was insistent with them because it was my job. I was adamant with Olivia because she was my heart.

I stilled. *My heart?*

Oh fuck.

“Are you happy now?” she asked.

“It’s a start,” I said, grateful to have something else to focus on besides my inconvenient feelings. “I’d be *happy* if you let my team install some security updates. Exterior cameras. Motion-detecting lights.” I pulled the door shut behind me. What she had was better than nothing, but it was far from enough. Especially if she wasn’t actually using the alarm system.

Her shoulders were tight as she locked the door then headed for the car. I probably should’ve stopped while I was ahead. Waited until she was naked and screaming my name to attempt to persuade her.

But then Decker's words came back to me. His accusation that I did what I wanted, what I thought was best, without regard for others. As if I steamrolled everyone else into submission. I never wanted to make Olivia feel like that.

"Look—" I grabbed her by the hand, tugging so she was in my arms. "I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to upset you. I was just trying to protect you."

"I know." She wrapped her arms around my neck. "I do. And I appreciate that. It's just...I don't like arguing."

"Neither do I, especially not with you." I kissed her nose.

"And this might surprise you, but it's really hard for me to stand up for myself."

"I know," I said, hoping she could hear the pride in my tone. "And I'm glad you stood up to me, even if I don't agree. I hope you'll always be honest with me."

She smiled, some of the tension between us dissipating. "You're the one person I've always been honest with. I don't want to stop now. But I also don't want to spend the rest of your visit arguing about the pitfalls of my home security."

"Mm." I stepped closer, resting my hands on her hips. Sliding them down over her ass. "But making up could be so much fun."

She grinned. "I'm sure you're right."

"Tell you what," I said, backing her toward the car. "I'll make it up to you at the hotel." I kissed her behind the ear. "In your bed." I kissed lower still. "Wherever you want," I rasped.

"I think I can handle that," she said, her voice breathy with want. "Now get in the car before I change my mind about leaving."

I chuckled and leaned past her to grab the door handle, opening the driver's side and waiting for her to climb in. I dropped a kiss on her temple and then closed the door before rounding the hood to the passenger side. Maybe I wouldn't be as awful at this whole relationship thing as I'd originally feared.

“Where to?” she asked.

I plugged my phone into her car, the hotel already selected on the map. Though I’d booked a room at the Huxley Grand for the week, Olivia had convinced me to cancel the rest of my reservation and stay with her. I’d been all too happy to agree.

“Let’s swing by the hotel so I can change and grab my stuff. Then dinner?” I asked.

I’d done some research before coming to LA, and I had a few places I was hoping to take her during my visit. As much as Olivia loved food, she wasn’t the type of woman who wanted to be wined and dined. That said, I wanted to make her feel special. Because she was.

She nodded. “Sounds good.”

Traffic sucked, but we spent most of the drive talking about our latest read and her favorite local places. I scanned the scenery, marveling at the difference from Manhattan.

“Wait...” A billboard caught my eye, and I leaned forward to get a better look through the windshield. “Is that your dad?”

“Yeah.” She laughed.

He was wearing a suit and tie, a football field in the background. He looked...kind. Handsome.

I thought about how different he was from my own dad. A man who had abused his wife and abandoned his son. Would I even recognize him if I saw him? I tried to imagine how I’d feel if he died and I never saw him again.

“Hey.” Olivia placed her hand on my thigh. “Where did you go just now?”

Talking about my dad seemed like such a heavy topic for a date. And yet, this wasn’t the typical second date.

“I was thinking about my dad.” I stared out the window. “He has stage four cancer and wants to see me.”

“Wow. That’s...a lot.” When I met her eyes, they were filled with questions and concern. Never judgment. Olivia never judged me. “What are you going to do?”

I slid my hand over hers and returned them both to her lap. I didn't want to distract her while she was driving, but the traffic was moving so slow at the moment we may as well have been parked.

“Honestly?” I asked. “I don't know.”

We were both silent a moment, then I said, “He wrote me a letter.”

“Have you read it?”

I shook my head, my eyes focused on the Hollywood sign. “No.”

“What do you think it says?”

“I'm sorry. I'm different. Who knows?” I clenched my free hand then released it.

“Do you think seeing him would help or hurt?”

I groaned, dragging my hand down my face. “Not a fucking clue.”

Tatum had asked me the same thing when I'd told him about the letter and my dad's request. And I hadn't had an answer then either.

“I'm sure you'll make the decision that's right for you.” She gave my thigh a squeeze as we finally pulled into the circular drive at the front of the Huxley Grand.

I hoped she was right.

She handed the keys to the valet, and then I slid my hand into hers. I'd never really done the hand-holding thing. But with Olivia, it felt natural.

We stepped inside the elevator, and I draped my arm around her shoulder. She smiled up at me, her glossy pink lips irresistible. I dipped my head and captured her lips with a kiss, loving the feel of her mouth against mine.

The elevator chimed, and the doors opened to my floor. “Come on,” I said, guiding her down the hall.

I flashed the keycard and opened the door for her. She stepped inside, admiring the room. “I love the Huxley Grand,” she said with a happy sigh.

It was nice. Parquet flooring. Wood details. Fresh flowers. But I much preferred her home.

“You’ve stayed here before?” I asked.

“Yeah. My dad once had a big awards event and took me as his date. We got ready here.” Her wistful smile told me it was a good memory.

I came to stand behind her as she stared out at the skyline. I got the feeling Olivia was used to the finer things in life, even if her home was relatively modest. If I wanted a future with her, then it was a good thing I made a six-figure salary working for Hudson. I saved most of it and invested.

“Would you rather stay here with me for the week?” I asked, wrapping my arms around her and tucking my chin on her shoulder. I didn’t really care where we stayed so long as we were together.

She shook her head. “Not unless you’d be more comfortable here. I know my place doesn’t have the security you desire.”

She’d delivered the words in such an even tone, I almost didn’t pick up on what she’d said. But when I saw her smirk in the reflection of the large glass window, I pinched her side. She gave out a yelp and tried to twist in my arms, but I held her in place.

“Connor.” She wriggled against me, and it had my cock hardening against my zipper.

“Olivia,” I said in a poor attempt to mimic her tone.

“You’re terrible.” She said it in a chastising manner, but she smiled the entire time.

I leaned down so my mouth was next to her ear. “You started it.”

She laughed then, and I finally released her, willing my body to calm down. We were supposed to go out to dinner. Go

for a real date.

She turned to face me and wrapped her arms around my neck. I placed my hands on her waist, peering down at her. She fit perfectly, as if she was made for me. And I couldn't stop touching her.

"Hi." She smiled. Her sparkling green eyes were full of such trust and adoration, it nearly took my breath away. I'd never had someone look at me the way Olivia did. I wasn't sure I deserved it, but damn did it feel good.

"Hi." I smiled back.

She tugged on the hem of my shirt, pulling it over my head.

"What are you doing?" I asked as she smoothed her palms down my back.

"Helping you change." She kissed my pec. The center of my chest. My stomach. My skin electric everywhere her lips touched.

When she unbuckled my belt and started to unbutton my pants, I clenched my fists at my sides. "*This* is not going to get us to dinner any faster."

She knelt to the floor and peered up at me with those doe eyes. "Do you want me to stop?"

"Fuck no," I rasped, barely hanging on to my remaining shred of control. "But what about Olga? Won't she get hungry?" I teased, though I could hardly think straight.

Olivia grinned. "That's what room service is for."

She licked my cock from root to tip. I groaned, both at what she was doing with her tongue and the fact that I'd wanted to take her out. I'd had a plan...

But then she took me in her mouth, and I gave up. It was too hot. Too wet. The way she looked up at me from on her knees. The way she swirled her tongue around my tip.

"I fucking love..." *Shit*. I'd come so close to admitting something I had no right to. But this woman did funny things

to my brain. Funny things to my heart. Like make me want what I couldn't have. "When you do that."

But when she pumped my shaft at the same time as she took me in her mouth, thoughts of anything else fled my brain. Because all I could think was—need. I *needed* this woman.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

# Olivia

“So,” Connor said, twirling my hair around his finger. I was resting on his chest, enjoying the sight of this sexy man in a quiet hotel room, the city bustling outside far below us. “Any remaining doubts about how much I like you?”

I laughed, the sound throaty, sexy even. Connor had been both vigorous and thorough in his efforts to prove how much he liked me. And I definitely wasn’t going to complain. Especially not while my body was still humming, happy after my latest orgasm. “No. But I think I’m going to be sore later.”

“Then I’ll just have to kiss it better.” He smiled, his dimple making an appearance.

How could one man be both adorable and incredibly sexy? His smile melted my heart, even as his naughty words heated my core.

“You hungry?” he asked, reaching over to grab his phone. “It’s getting late, but we could still go somewhere.”

I burrowed into his chest. There was nowhere I’d rather be than here, in his arms. “I don’t think I can move. You’re going to break me.”

“That’s not what you said a few minutes ago.”

I slapped his chest, but he merely chuckled as he grabbed my hand. He folded it into his and held them both to his chest.

“What about room service?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Is it going to be up to your standards?” he teased.

“Standards?” I sniffed, lifting my nose into the air. “You make it sound like I’m a snob.”

“Foodie. Snob. Same difference.”

I grabbed a pillow, ready to pummel him with it. But he was too fast. He pinned me to the mattress, the pillow caged beneath me. “You forget who you’re dealing with, sweetheart.”

His body felt so good draped over mine. All warm skin and solid muscle. And the dangerous edge to his voice made my core quiver with anticipation.

“I’m not a snob.” I struggled to get free, inhaling sharply when his cock nudged my ass. He was already getting hard.

I glanced back over my shoulder “Again? Seriously?” His body seemed to deny the laws of biology.

“It’s your fault.” He reached beneath me, squeezing my breast, wrapping his hand under my hip and pulling me closer. “This is what you do to me.”

His heart beat against my back, his scent wrapping around me. It was one of the most intimate and wonderful moments of my life. And then my stomach let out the loudest, most embarrassing, ill-timed growl. I squeezed my eyes shut and flattened my face to the mattress.

“Come on,” he said, nudging me. “Let’s decide what to order, and then we can watch a movie while we eat.”

I rolled onto my back, pulling the covers over my chest and peering up at the hotel tablet he held above us. He’d already pulled up the menu for room service.

“Do you want to share some appetizers?”

“Of course,” I said, grinning. The man definitely knew the way to my heart.

“Focaccia?”

“Good choice. And maybe the cheese platter.”

“With no nuts,” he said, before I could even mention it.

I turned and kissed his cheek. Connor was always watching out for me. Whether it was by buckling my sandals earlier—swoon. Insisting on setting my alarm. Positioning me away from the street when we walked on the sidewalk. Or knowing my coffee order and making sure my food was nut free, he took care of me.

“What was that for?” he asked, turning to look at me. His gray eyes seemed lighter, despite what he’d told me earlier about his dad. And I wanted to believe I’d had something to do with that.

“Just because.” I smiled, hoping he knew just how wonderful he was.

He smiled and held my gaze for a beat then turned his attention back to the tablet. “Entrée? I was considering the striped bass.”

“Me too,” I said. “That or the steak.”

“Let’s get one of each and share.”

“I love the way you think. Ooh. And dessert.” I pointed to the screen. “I want apple pie.”

“One slice or two?” he asked.

“Hmm.” I tapped my finger to my lips.

He chuckled. “Let’s just get two.”

“Good idea. We can always save any we don’t eat for later.”

“Mm.” His eyes were hooded. “Later as in when you need a midnight snack after our next round?”

“Something like that.” I grinned. “But I want to shower first.”

“Go ahead. I’ll order dinner.”

I’d just finished showering and was bundling up in a big fluffy robe when Connor entered the bathroom. He was naked and glorious, and my mouth went dry just looking at him.

“How was it?” he asked.

“Heavenly,” I said, inhaling deeply to enjoy the botanical-scented body wash. “I love the scent of their soaps.”

He frowned, leaning in and curling a lock of my hair around his finger before inhaling.

“What?” I asked.

“It smells nice, but I like your vanilla scent best.”

Wow. He’d noticed?

Of course he’d noticed. Nothing about me seemed to escape his attention. And it made me feel desired, sexy, cared for.

“When we go back to my place tomorrow, I promise to bathe myself in it.”

He gave me a wolfish grin. “I’ll help.”

“Deal. But we can’t spend all day in bed tomorrow. I have some work I have to do.”

“That’s fine. I have some things I need to take care of too.”

He started the shower, and I headed back out to the bedroom. I hadn’t brought extra clothes since we hadn’t planned on staying long, and I was grateful for the robe. I flopped down on my stomach and opened the e-reader app on my phone, eager to see what happened next in my story.

The water shut off just as there was a knock at the door. Wow. I knew room service at the Huxley Grand was fast, but this was quick, even for them. That, or I’d been reading longer than I’d realized, which was a very real possibility.

I opened the door but frowned at the man standing before me. He was big, like Connor. His dark skin was covered in tattoos. And I’d rarely seen a man wear so much jewelry outside of some of my dad’s former teammates. Beaded bracelets the color of his skin. Several silver necklaces layered together. A large diamond stud in his earlobe. I briefly wondered if he was a pro athlete who’d come to the wrong room.

“You’re not room service,” I said, tempted to duck behind the door. His physique was intimidating, but his expression was friendly. Curious.

“And you’re not Cujo.” He scanned me from head to toe with a quirk of his eyebrow.

“Olivia?” Connor called, joining me at the door. “Disco? What are you doing here?”

*Disco?* Connor had mentioned Zeke before, and I’d always wondered about the story behind his call sign.

“Just came to see if you wanted to go out, but it looks like you have plans.” He and Connor seemed to communicate without saying a word.

“Yeah.” Connor rubbed the back of his neck. “Zeke, this is Olivia. Olivia, this is my buddy Zeke.”

“Hi.” I waved, feeling a bit sheepish meeting one of Connor’s friends and coworkers in my robe. Especially when it was obvious what Connor and I had been doing.

“Hey. Nice to meet you,” Zeke said to me before turning his attention back to Connor. “I’ll catch up with you on Monday.”

“Right. The panel,” Connor said as one of the hotel staff approached with a cart of food.

Zeke waved and headed down the hall, while Connor ushered the waiter inside. The employee set up the food, and then Connor paid him a tip and shut the door behind him.

“I wish I’d known I was going to meet your friend,” I said, giving my robe a pointed glance. I sat on one of the chairs, tucking my foot beneath my leg and admiring the spread of food. “I thought it was room service.”

Connor dropped his head and shook it, radiating disappointment. “*Always* look through the peephole.”

“I—” He was right. “I should’ve. I just...yeah. I won’t let it happen again.”

“You’re too trusting.” He dipped a piece of focaccia in olive oil and held it up to my mouth.

I moaned as the rosemary exploded in my mouth. And the olive oil—god. It was so light, yet flavorful.

He grinned. “I love it when I make you moan.”

I laughed. “The food made me moan.”

“That good, huh?” He winked, and I knew he wasn’t referring to the bread.

“Yes.” I tore off a piece and held it up to his lips.

He opened his mouth, sucking on my fingers on their way out. It was hot.

We continued feeding each other, and conversation turned to other matters as we devoured dinner. It was one of the most delicious meals I’d ever tasted. That, or I was ravenous after the marathon sex I’d had with Connor.

He said nothing more about the incident with Zeke, and neither did I. After dinner, we cuddled up in bed, opting to save our dessert for later. Connor logged in to Netflix and navigated to a movie I’d been wanting to watch.

“Really?” I asked, surprised he was even suggesting it. It was a story that had been adapted from a book.

“Yeah. I saved it in my queue so we could watch it together.”

My heart was melting. This man was... He was too much. Too good to be true. “You’re totally getting laid later.”

He smirked, tucking my hair behind my ear. “Later, huh?”

I started the movie before he could get any ideas. As tempting as the idea of sex was, I needed a little time to recover.

“You haven’t mentioned your mom in a while,” he said.

“I haven’t talked to her since her visit.”

He massaged my hand, my forearm. It was so relaxing. “Is that unusual?”

I shook my head. “No. Not really. Though she did call me while I was driving to The Last Bookshop yesterday. Why?”

“Just curious.”

I turned to face him. “What’s with the sudden interest in my mom? Is it because you realized who she is?”

He furrowed his brow. “Who she is?”

“Camille Howard.”

“What—is she famous too?”

I barked out a laugh. “Yeah. She’s an actress. She’s been in a few movies, but now she focuses on stage work.”

“Huh.” He furrowed his brow. “I had no idea. But it’s not like Broadway is my typical scene.”

“But surely you’ve been to a show, right?”

“Only when a client wants to go. But I’m more focused on the crowd than the performance.”

I stared at him, aghast. “Wow. Seriously?”

“Yes.” He gave me a quick peck. “Why? Is that a deal-breaker for you?”

I laughed. “No. But I do love going to the theater. And if I lived in New York, I’d go as often as I could.”

“Do you ever visit?” he asked.

“Not really. I typically try to catch my mom’s opening performance, but that’s about it.”

“I just figured with it being a publishing hub and all...” He trailed off.

“My job is here. Igloo is based in LA. They don’t have a New York office. That was part of what attracted me to them. I didn’t want to work at a satellite office. And I didn’t want to move to New York.”

“Why not?”

“It just never really appealed to me. I hate the cold. And my dad is here.”

He started massaging my other forearm. My hand.

“What about you?” I asked. “Do you ever come to LA?” Hudson had an office here.

“It’s rare.”

He shifted beside me and grunted. I turned to look at him. “You okay?”

“My knee’s just a little stiff. I tried to do a longer run for the first time the other day.”

I rolled to my side to face him. “Crap. I totally forgot about your knee. I’m so sorry.”

He continued to stare at the ceiling, but a smile played at his lips. “I’m not.”

“Still—” I dipped my hand beneath his robe, smoothing my hand over his chest, tracing his insane muscles. “We should take it easy. I’d hate to be the cause of any further damage.”

He chuckled, though it lacked mirth. “Thanks, but it might not matter anyway.”

I frowned. “What does that mean?”

He grabbed my hand, lacing our fingers together, holding it over his heart. “I might be on desk duty permanently.”

Though it would be a relief in some aspects, I knew Connor would hate not being in the field. For him, executive protection was more than just a job. It was a lifestyle.

“What? Why? You graduated from physical therapy. And I thought you said your knee was healing nicely.” I frowned, trying to make sense of it.

“I did. And it is, but...” He tucked his arm behind his head and stared at the ceiling, but I could see his struggle. See him warring with himself. “I can’t really talk about it.”

“Oh.” I glanced away. “Right.”

I knew that many aspects of his job were confidential. But it felt like more than that. It felt as if he was shutting me out.

And it stung, especially when all I'd done was let him in.

“Olivia,” he said, tilting my head to meet his gaze. “Even if I could tell you, I wouldn't. There are parts of my job that aren't very...well, glamorous. But they're necessary.”

“So?” I asked, trying to understand.

“So—” He kissed me gently. “I would never want to burden you with the knowledge.”

“It wouldn't be a burden,” I said, and I meant it.

His jaw set in a line. “It's not up for discussion.”

“Connor,” I said. “You know you can tell me anything. I'm not going to judge you, if that's what you're worried about.”

He scoffed and mumbled something that sounded like, “I wouldn't be so sure about that.”

“I know there are...sacrifices involved with being a soldier. Difficult—impossible—decisions. And I'm sure the same holds true for your work at Hudson. I get that.”

“Do you?” he asked, his gaze suddenly intense. “Do you really?”

“Maybe not,” I said, placing my hand on his forearm. “But I want to. I want to understand you.”

“Olivia, I'm not sure you could ever understand. I mean, you leave your security system off, for fuck's sake. And I'm glad you feel safe enough to do so. But you only have that sense of security because of the things that people like me do.”

“I know,” I said in a gentle tone. “I do. And I'm so very grateful for everything you and all the brave men and women of our country have done.”

“Thank you.” He sighed. “But can we please just talk about something else? We have so little time together, and I feel like I'm fucking it all up.”

I softened at his words. At the expression on his face. I straddled him and pressed my lips to the crease between his brows. “You're not fucking anything up.”

He seemed to relax a little at my words, his hands stilling on my hips before smoothing up my ribs. “Mm. I like this position.”

“Connor,” I chided. I got the feeling that he was intentionally trying to distract me. And it was working, my chest rising and falling as he lifted his hands, cupping my breasts.

“What? I’m hungry.” He started untying my robe slowly. Pushing the material over my shoulders. I shivered from his touch and the look in his eyes.

“You want me to get the apple pie?” I asked, letting him get away with trying to distract me—for now.

He shook his head, dragging his thumb down my lip. “I had something else in mind.”

“Are you sure your knee is okay?”

“Never better.” He flashed me a wolfish grin. “Now, I want you to sit on my face.”

“I—” I shivered. Oh god, the man had such a filthy mouth. And I was more than happy to oblige.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Connor

I groaned, mesmerized by the sway of Olivia's ass as she rolled away from me and climbed out of her bed. Was it really Monday already? I shook my head. This entire trip was passing by too quickly.

After checking out of my hotel yesterday, we'd come back to her place. She'd done laundry and worked on her computer, while I'd gone for a run then installed some external lights that she'd finally agreed to. It wasn't nearly enough as far as I was concerned, but it was a start.

I scrambled across the bed, grabbing her hand and hauling her back onto the mattress. She giggled, and my dick slid between her thighs, seeking out her heat. "Do we really have to go?"

"Yes." She gave me a quick peck, squirming in my arms, which only made me want her that much more. "And even if we didn't, we already spent most of the weekend in bed."

"You say that like it's a bad thing," I teased.

"It is." She frowned, and it was fucking adorable. "I've been a terrible tour guide."

Somehow, she managed to get free, but she lingered, her eyes greedily scanning my bare chest. I'd lost count of the number of orgasms I'd given her, and she still wanted more. I knew the feeling. I wasn't sure I'd ever get my fill.

I told myself it was just the result of months of built-up tension. At least, I tried to. I was only here for a few more days. And yet...I knew what we had was special. Different.

“The best tour guide.” I cupped the back of her neck, pulling her to me for a passionate kiss that left us both breathless. “There’s no place I’d rather be.”

“Connor.” She rested her forehead against mine. “You’re torturing me.”

“You’re one to talk.” I gave my hard-on a pointed glance.

“You’re incorrigible.”

“Insatiable,” I corrected with a smirk as I wrapped my arms around her, rolling us so I was on top of her. Her breath came in shallow pants, her pupils dilating as we ground against each other.

“I’m giving a speech, and we cannot be late,” she said, but her protest was weak.

“Then we better be fast.” I flashed her a wicked grin.

She hesitated for only a second then nodded quickly, and I grabbed a condom. I kissed her again, my tongue mimicking the thrusts of my hips. I swallowed her moans as I tried to hold back my own release. She was so fucking beautiful, so... I squeezed my eyes shut. I was torn between needing that release and wanting it to last as long as possible.

It was too intense.

I didn’t deserve this. Her. Any of it.

Which was why it felt so shitty that I hadn’t told her about my suspension or what had happened with George. I’d brushed off her questions, claiming it was confidential. And it was, but I could’ve told her about it in vague terms. Instead, I’d clammed up. And while part of me wanted to shelter her from it, another part knew I was keeping secrets from her.

“Look at me,” she said, and I returned my focus to her. “Be here...with me.”

I nodded, resting my forehead against hers as our bodies moved in sync. Her breasts swaying, my cock throbbing, heart pounding. I’d never felt more connected to someone, more in tune with their needs and vice versa.

How the hell was I going to say goodbye in a few days?

Olivia had been against long-distance relationships in the past, but I'd hoped that maybe now that we'd met, she'd feel differently. I'd tried to broach the topic with her the other night. See if she ever came to New York, but I hadn't gotten very far. And the conversation hadn't been encouraging.

I pushed the thought away. Determined to enjoy this moment. This woman. For however long she'd have me.

"You're so sexy." I traced her cheek with my hand, threading my fingers through her hair. "That's it, baby," I rasped, feeling her clench around me. "Let go."

A moment later, she cried out, clutching me to her as she chanted my name.

"Fuck. Yes," I grunted, holding off as long as possible. Needing to have her come first and hard like always. Preferably multiple times.

Finally, I could take it no more, groaning as I pulsed inside her, her walls gripping me as we rode out our release.

I'd barely come down from the high—was still trying to catch my breath—when she hopped out of bed. I flopped back against the mattress, draping an arm over my forehead. Needing a fucking minute to recover when it felt as if my whole world had shifted.

I wanted to pull her into my arms, to lie in bed all day caressing her skin, but we couldn't. Not when I knew how important this was to her.

"Get a move on, sailor. We have a work function to attend."

"Yes, ma'am." I saluted her and followed her to the bathroom.

After a very quick shower, we sped across town to the hotel where Igloo Books was hosting the Spines for Soldiers event. Despite countless orgasms, Olivia seemed on edge during the drive. I placed my hand on her thigh but said nothing as I studied the streets and buildings we passed. I'd

listen if she wanted to talk, but I got the impression she needed a moment to process her thoughts.

It wasn't until she was pulling into a parking spot that she spoke. "Okay, so...please don't mention the fact that we're..."

"That we're...?" I prodded in a teasing tone, knowing exactly what she was thinking but wanting to hear the words all the same.

"Connor, this is important. I spearheaded this program, and I don't want to undermine it by making people think it's a hookup service or something."

I barked out a laugh but sobered when I saw her serious expression. I took her hand in mine. This was more than a hookup, but now was not the time to dispute her on that. So I merely said, "I know it's important. And I would never do anything to undermine you or your success."

She let out a sigh, but the tension remained in her shoulders. "I know."

This was a big day. An important day—not just for the program, but for Olivia. It was a chance to prove how important the Spines for Soldiers program was. To celebrate its success, but also to justify its continued existence. It was no wonder she was stressed. It was her baby. And from what she'd told me about her boss and her upcoming performance review, it was even more critical.

"Come on, Goody." I bopped her on the nose.

"Goody?" She furrowed her brows, and I tried not to laugh.

"Yeah. I think it should be your call sign," I said over my shoulder as I got out of the car, waiting for her to join me before striding toward the building.

"As in Goody-Two-Shoes?" she asked as I held open the door, letting her walk ahead of me.

"Precisely."

But that wasn't the real reason why I'd chosen the name for her. Yes, she was a bit of a Goody-Two-Shoes. She liked to

follow the rules, and I respected that. But it was more that she was a good person. She had such a kind, giving heart, and she made me want to be a better person.

She shook her head. “No way. Nuh-uh.”

“Sorry, Goody.” I shrugged. “You don’t pick ’em. They pick you.”

“Easy for you to say. Your call sign makes you sound like a badass.”

“If the name fits...”

She gave me a playful shove as we entered the elevator. “I’m not a Goody-Two-Shoes.”

“You’re not?” I taunted.

“No.” She crossed her arms over her chest as the doors slid closed behind us, the elevator beginning its ascent to the ballroom.

“Prove it.” I stepped closer, invading her space. I cupped her cheek, sliding my hand over her shoulder and down to palm her breast.

“Connor,” she gasped when I squeezed her nipple through her bra, my lips ghosting over hers. She pressed her palms to my chest, gently pushing even when it felt like she wanted me to stay. “We can’t.”

I stepped away, leaning against the metal wall as I struggled to get my raging hard-on under control. “That’s what I thought.”

“I’m not making out with you in an elevator to prove a point. Do you really want security to see us?” Her cheeks were flushed, eyes a bit wild.

“Goody...” I stalked toward her, caging her in with my arms. “Your body is for my eyes only. And—” I glanced over my shoulder, up at the security camera “—the camera isn’t even on.”

She whipped her head to look at it. “It’s not? How do you know?”

“It’s what I do, remember?”

She bit her lip and then tugged me to her so our bodies were flush. We fit together like puzzle pieces—a perfect match. “Like I could forget it. God, you look so sexy.”

I’d worn a suit for the occasion, and I’d seen the way she looked at me when I’d stepped out of the bathroom. I’d stood a little taller, knowing that she liked it. Now, I definitely liked it when she crushed her lips to mine.

I was so lost in her that I barely registered the ding signaling we’d arrived. But when the doors started to slide open, I forced myself to release her. Her eyes went wide, and she hastily stepped away from me, smoothing down her hair.

I chuckled to myself, placing my hand on her lower back. “Come on, Goody. You look beautiful.”

Her cheeks turned a lovely shade of pink. I smiled to myself as we joined the crowd, walking among the guests and making small talk. Large round tables were spread throughout the room, covered in white tablecloths and topped with red, white, and blue decorations. Chandeliers glittered overhead, and the décor was elegant and patriotic.

She introduced me to a number of people, including several of her coworkers. And even though she’d said no touching, I couldn’t seem to help myself when it came to her. Especially not when she was wearing a fitted skirt that clung to her shapely ass, emphasizing her narrow waist and wide hips.

I met a few other soldiers—and then her boss.

“Seth, this is my reading buddy, Connor. Connor, this is my boss, Seth.”

Olivia excused herself to handle something for the event, and I eyed Seth up and down. Finally, begrudgingly, I shook his proffered hand.

“It’s nice to meet you,” I said, deciding to seize the opportunity. “Olivia has told me how much she enjoys working for Igloo. And judging from this event—” I swept my arm wide “—it’s clear that she’s a huge asset to the company.”

“Oh, she is.” He nodded, wide-eyed.

“Good.” I clapped a hand on his shoulder, giving it a firm squeeze. “I hope you’ll make it clear just how much you value her.”

Everyone was invited to take their seats, and Seth gestured toward the stage. “I, um—” He breathed. “Yeah.”

He climbed to the podium and cleared his throat, his eyes meeting mine before scanning across the crowd. He said a few words about the Spines for Soldiers program before giving Olivia a warm welcome. *Good.*

I was so damn proud, watching her walk across the stage. Even more so when she began her speech.

“Thank you all for coming.” She cleared her throat, and even though I could tell she was nervous, I doubted anyone else could. She was poised and classy and...fuck. I was pretty sure I was falling for her. Pretty sure I already had before we’d ever met.

“I’m touched by the outpouring of support for Spines for Soldiers,” she continued. “Even in the short time it’s been running, the response has been amazing. So, thank you for being part of that.”

A round of applause erupted before she continued.

“My grandfather served our country, as have several dear friends.” She sought me out, meeting my eyes in the crowd. “To those of you who serve—thank you. I’ve seen the sacrifices you make, and I’m pleased that Igloo Books can offer you some solace from the harsh realities of your service.”

She glanced down at her notes, her hand shaking only slightly. “I’ve also had the pleasure of participating, and I’ve loved—” she swallowed, forcing a smile “—every minute of it.” She gave some statistics about the program, some background on Igloo Books. And then she said, “Now, let’s hear from some of the other participants before we break into smaller groups.” She glanced down at the podium. “First up, Shane Williams.”

She made a quick introduction, and the audience applauded as a guy in army dress strode toward the stage. He spoke candidly about the struggles he'd been facing and how just knowing someone else was out there, someone who cared, had helped. I couldn't have agreed more.

When it was my turn, I headed for the stage, flashing Olivia a big smile.

"First of all," I said, "I'd like everyone to give a big round of applause to Olivia and the team at Igloo for this amazing program."

She blushed, and all I wanted to do was march across the stage, take her in my arms, and kiss her. Instead, I gripped the lectern and focused on my speech. This wasn't the time or the place. And as much as I wanted her to be mine, she wasn't.

I honestly wasn't sure what the hell had come over me in the elevator. It was as if I'd been staking my claim, telling her she belonged to me, when I had no right to. Because in just a few days, I'd be back in New York, and she'd still be here.

And then I remembered that the audience was waiting. Watching. God, I was a fucking mess. All because of this amazing woman. A woman who was smiling up at me now, counting on me.

I cleared my throat. "I was nominated for the program after injuring my knee. As Olivia will attest, I wasn't too thrilled about it at first. That's an understatement. I acted like an asshole." The audience laughed, as did Olivia.

"I hadn't picked up a novel in years. For so long, reading had seemed like a waste of time. But then I started the first book, and it gripped me. I had to talk to someone about it." I laughed, thinking back on our early emails and how much had changed since then.

"I'm so incredibly thankful for this program." I met her eyes, feeling as if an invisible string tethered us together. Even in a roomful of people, it was just her and me. "And I know it has made a positive impact on my life. *Olivia* has definitely made an impact on me."

She dabbed at the corner of her eyes, and there was a pang in my chest. *Fuck*. If this was difficult, it was going to be damn near impossible to say goodbye.

I made it back to my chair in a daze. There were several other speeches, but I didn't hear most of what was said. Even as I participated in the panel discussions, my mind was elsewhere—with Olivia. Like my heart.

The event was winding down, and I was exiting the bathroom when a woman called my name. I glanced over to find a fiery redhead eyeing me up and down, arms crossed as she leaned against the wall. I recognized her from the skydiving picture on Olivia's mantel.

"Mm. So you're the sexy SEAL," she said, seeming to accept my acknowledgment as confirmation.

I walked over to her. "Alyssa, right?"

She pushed off the wall, and we shook hands. She was petite, but I knew better than to underestimate her. From everything Olivia had told me, Alyssa was a firecracker. I also knew her opinion was important to Olivia, which meant it was important to me.

"That's right." She circled me. "Attentive. Good-looking. Smart." She narrowed her eyes at me. "Surely you have some flaw."

I lifted a shoulder, afraid she'd see right through me. "No one's perfect, right?"

"Olivia's about as close to perfect as they come." She glanced over to where Olivia was talking with some of the other soldiers.

To think that she'd started this program and had such a positive impact on so many people's lives—military and civilians. It was incredible. *She* was incredible.

"I can see you think so too," Alyssa said.

I nodded, a smile playing at my lips. "She is pretty amazing."

She was kind, passionate, giving, hot, and—to top it all off—an amazing cook. She was the full package.

I could easily imagine coming home to her after a long day or upon returning from an assignment. She always seemed to know when to push and when to just listen. And she could brighten the whole room with her smile.

“She’s not as strong as she seems,” Alyssa said, interrupting my thoughts.

I nodded, understanding her unspoken warning. She didn’t want to see her friend get hurt. Neither did I.

“But she’s stronger than she thinks,” I said with conviction.

Alyssa appraised me, and I waited for her verdict. Finally, she clapped me on the shoulder. “You seem like a good man, Connor James. I hope you’ll stick around. You’re good for her.”

My chest puffed with pride but quickly deflated. “I would if she’d let me,” I admitted, surprising myself.

“She won’t do long-distance,” Alyssa said. “Not after—” She shook her head, and I tried not to let my disappointment show. “Well.”

“Her parents,” I supplied. I kept my focus trained on Olivia, even as I scanned the room for any threats. I felt this intense need to keep her safe. Even if that meant protecting her from me.

“Yeah.”

Olivia said her goodbyes to the other soldiers and turned in our direction. One of the men checked her out from behind, and I clenched my fists, fighting the urge to claim her. To declare to the room and the world that she was mine. But she wasn’t—not really. And that left a sour taste in my mouth.

“I see you two met,” Olivia said, redirecting my attention.

Alyssa grinned. “We did.” She turned to me. “It was nice chatting with you, Connor. I’m going to go mingle and try to find my own sexy soldier.”

I laughed. That girl was something else. But it was good to know that someone was looking out for Olivia. That Olivia would have someone after I returned to New York. My chest tightened.

I ignored it and placed my hand on Olivia's lower back and leaned in. "You were amazing." I grazed the shell of her ear with my lips, gratified when she shivered.

"Thank you. And thank you for what you said in your speech. I had no idea you felt so strongly about the program."

"Are you kidding?" I asked, coming to stand before her. "I can't tell you how much this program means to me." *How much you mean to me.*

"Thank you." She dipped her head, and my heart rate ratcheted up.

There was so much more I wanted to say, but I didn't. I smothered those feelings. Because in a few days, I'd go home, and her life would return to normal. Without me.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

# Olivia

I pulled a tray of cookies out of the oven and placed them on a rack to cool. Connor reached out to grab one, and I slapped his hand.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “No more cookies.”

I was completely at ease with this mountain of a man after just a week together. In some ways, it felt as if he’d been here forever, as if this was where he belonged.

It didn’t seem possible—how quickly things could change. But they hadn’t, not really. This past week together had merely built on the relationship we’d already established. Like a natural extension of our conversations on the phone.

Except, we’d been able to continue those conversations while visiting the Huntington Gardens or walking on the beach. While grocery shopping and cooking at home together. Cuddled up on the couch, watching movies while Luna fought me for Connor’s attention. Or in bed, when we were reading or...driving each other wild.

“But they’re so good,” Connor groaned, sending a fresh wave of desire to my core. “Please.” He pouted, batting those beautiful gray eyes at me.

“Nuh-uh.” I shook my head, trying to ignore the way his gray T-shirt clung to the muscles of his chest. Muscles I had explored and licked, yet still couldn’t believe were real. “You already had two. If you keep eating them, there’ll be none left for the party.”

“So?” He lifted a shoulder.

“So.” I glared at him, placing my hands on my hips. “I’m not showing up at your boss’s house empty-handed.”

“Technically, Maverick’s not my boss.” He smirked.

“Right,” I scoffed, spinning to move the cookies from the baking sheet to the cooling rack. “He’s just the owner of Hudson Security. No big deal.”

I wasn’t sure what I was more nervous about—being the outsider at a work event, or the fact that Connor had invited me at all. Whether either of us realized it or admitted it, we were letting each other in. And the deeper I got, the harder it was going to be to extricate myself when it came time to say goodbye tomorrow.

*Tomorrow.* My heart stilled.

Oh god. He was leaving tomorrow.

Not in a few days. Not at the end of the week. But in less than twenty-four hours.

His arms slipped around my waist from behind, his body warm and secure. “It really isn’t a big deal, Olivia. You’ll see—it’s pretty low-key.”

I fought to concentrate on his words instead of my rising panic. How was I possibly going to say goodbye to this incredible man who had turned my world upside down?

He brushed my hair away from my neck, and I closed my eyes. He leaned in, my back to his front as he pressed a kiss to the delicate skin of my neck. I shivered as he continued his assault, dotting kisses down my neck, my shoulder.

“Connor.” His name came out as more of a sigh.

“Yes, Goody?” He didn’t stop, just continued to leave a trail of kisses that electrified me.

“We have to...” I let out a breathy moan as he slid his hands up over my breasts.

“We have to...?” I could hear the smile in his voice, the amusement mingled with desire. But he was just as affected as

I was, and I could feel the hard evidence digging into my backside.

“Just one more,” he said, and I wasn’t sure if he was referring to the cookie or another round of sex. At this point, I was prepared to give him anything he wanted.

He swept my dress aside as he trailed his hand up my leg. I closed my eyes, leaning my head back against his chest. I loved the feel of his hands on my skin, his rough calluses sliding over my smooth, bare legs. I loved the way he surrounded me, made me feel safe.

He toyed with me over my panties, the material already wet with my arousal. I was panting, needy, and I rocked into his hand, silently begging for more. His deep chuckle in my ear was the sexiest thing I’d ever heard, but the slow pace he’d set was infuriating.

“More,” I whispered, pleaded.

*I want more of this. More of him.*

He pushed my panties aside, slipping his finger up and down in a way that had me writhing my hips with need. He made me wild. Desperate.

Finally, when I thought I could take no more, he slid his finger inside me. I gasped as he clutched me to him, power and control radiating from his body. I’d never been with someone so...so overwhelming in every sense of the word. He consumed me, body and soul, making it impossible to think about anything or anyone but him.

“Give it to me, Goody,” he rasped, rocking into me. “Give me everything.”

My legs shook, body clenching around his finger as my release barreled toward me. I closed my eyes, powerless to stop it. But he was there, supporting me the entire time as always, catching me as I floated back down to earth.

Connor held me a moment, seemingly in no rush to leave, then smoothed my dress back down. When I turned to face him, his eyes were hooded. He lifted his hand to his mouth, sucking on the finger that had just been inside me.

“Mm.” He moaned, licking it clean. “Tastes even better than your cookies.”

I shook my head with a laugh, surprised that his comment didn't bother me. In fact, it was such a turn-on that I knelt to the floor, feeling emboldened and wanting to return the favor. Wanting to make him feel as good as he'd made me feel.

“What are you doing?” he asked as I unbuckled his belt.

“What do you think I'm doing?” I peered up at him from beneath my lashes.

“You don't have to...” But he couldn't complete the thought because I took him in my mouth, swirling my tongue around the tip as I held his gaze.

He gripped the counter, his mouth forming an “o.” And despite my lack of experience, I felt like a queen. Even though I was the one on my knees, he was at my mercy. For all his powerful muscles—thighs, insane abs, and broad chest—I was the one in control. I'd never felt more powerful or sexier than I did in that moment.

I continued my ministrations, licking, sucking, teasing him as he hissed through his teeth, “Fuck, Goody. Fuck. So good.”

But then a moment later, he pulled me off him with a pop. He lifted me onto the counter, frantically pushing my dress aside. “I need to be inside you.”

I nodded, biting my lip as I watched this strong man struggle to maintain control. He sheathed himself, his movements precise despite his haste. A second later, he yanked my undies aside and thrust inside me.

I leaned back on my elbows, feeling everything so deeply. The cool bite of the counter in contrast to the warmth of his skin. His lips on mine. His hands in my hair.

He hadn't just invaded my home and my life this week; he'd laid siege to my heart. And I wasn't sure how I'd ever recover.

He tilted his head to mine, our foreheads kissing as our ragged breaths mingled in the air between us. “Olivia.”

It was so intense, too intense. I'd never felt so connected to someone else, so in sync. I shut my eyes to try to stem the onslaught of emotion. But it was too late. I'd already let him in.

He cupped the back of my neck—the touch both comforting and yet somehow commanding. “Look at me, Goody.”

I shook my head. Connor would be leaving soon. And what would happen then?

I couldn't. I couldn't do it. I panted, trying to catch my breath both from what he was doing and the way my heart clutched painfully in my chest. It would break me. But I also couldn't refuse.

His gray eyes were filled with just as much emotion, just as much love as my own. And seeing it reflected back at me, I knew... I would never be the same again. Connor owned me.



I STARED UP AT THE LARGE MANSION, NESTLED IN AN exclusive gated community in Pacific Palisades. I'd visited the neighborhood once—to attend a party with my dad at the home of Crew Dixon, billionaire and owner of the Hollywood Heatwaves.

“Damn,” Connor said, marveling at the structure before us. “Hudson has one hell of a house.”

I laughed. “He certainly does. Though, you should see Crew Dixon's house.” I hooked my thumb in the direction of Crew's house. “He lives down the block.”

“Friend of yours?” Connor asked. His jaw was tight, and I wondered if I'd said the wrong thing.

“My dad's. Crew owns the team my dad played for.” Connor seemed to relax at that. Even so, I found myself

asking, “Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“Of course.” Connor rounded the car, reaching into the back seat to remove the box with the chocolate crack cookies I’d baked. “Violet said I was welcome to bring a guest.”

“Yeah, but...” I glanced at the cars lining the street. There were so many of them. “She probably meant a significant other, not—” I lowered my voice “—a fling or...whatever.”

He frowned, and it was then I realized just how intimidating he could be as he loomed over me, blocking out the sun with his glower. “Is that what you think you are to me?”

I rolled my bottom lip between my teeth, unwilling to say more, especially not as a couple approached on the sidewalk. A pit formed in my gut, sadness threatening to overtake me. Had Connor ever indicated otherwise? Had we ever discussed what would happen after this week? No, because there was nothing to discuss. When he went home, this would end.

“Connor, hey,” the man said, stopping to shake his hand.

Like Connor, the man was tall. But it was his arms that really stood out—they were massive and covered with tattoos. Despite his intimidating appearance, he flashed me a warm smile. And the woman standing at his side was...stunning. She had black hair and blue eyes that were shrewd, assessing. Together, they made a striking couple.

“Hey.” Connor placed his hand on my lower back. “Clay. This is Olivia. Olivia, Clay.”

“Nice to meet you,” Clay said as we shook hands. “This is my wife, Reagan.”

We chatted for a moment before following them up the path to Maverick’s home. Connor kept his hand on my lower back, but it did nothing to calm my nerves. Especially not when he leaned in and said, “This conversation isn’t over.”

I stared ahead but nodded. Though, really, what else was there to say? This was fun, temporary. And wishing for something more was both unrealistic and foolish.

We entered the house, and Connor assessed the situation. He was fascinating to watch—always on alert, constantly scanning for potential threats. I knew he did it out of habit more than anything else, but it made me feel safe, protected.

But also...sad, somehow. Did he ever just relax? Was it a product of his training, or did it have more to do with his traumatic childhood?

“Pumpkin,” Clay boomed.

I followed his gaze to the top of the stairs, where a man stood with his hands on the banisters like the captain of the ship. Scruff lined his angular jaw, and he seemed far too serious for a celebration.

He chortled. “Pigeon. What the hell are you doing here?”

“Couldn’t miss your forty-fifth birthday, now could I?”

*Pumpkin? Pigeon?* I turned to Connor. “I assume those are call signs,” I said, struggling to keep up. Between the real names and call signs, it was a lot to take in. Especially since everyone else seemed to know each other.

Connor laughed, dropping the cookies on a food table before looping his arm around my shoulder. “You’ll get used to it.”

He said it like he expected me to hang around. And while he’d been pissed earlier when I’d referred to this as a fling, I didn’t know what else to call it. He was leaving soon.

“I think I’m going to need a chart.”

He chuckled, pressing a kiss to my forehead. “You’re too cute.”

We floated from one conversation to another before finally heading out to the backyard. Everyone I’d met so far was incredibly welcoming—not to mention, gorgeous. It was as if you had to be beautiful to be a member of their social circle. Even so, I saw myself easily fitting into the group. Which was strange because apart from Alyssa, I didn’t have many friends. I didn’t let many people in, and I often preferred the company of my books or Luna to others.

“Connor, good to see you,” Maverick said, clapping a hand on Connor’s shoulder. “Let’s go inside. Catch up.”

“Nope.” Maverick’s wife, Violet grabbed his arm, her long brown hair swaying from the movement. “No work tonight. You promised!”

“It’s not work.” He grinned, though I didn’t need SEAL training to know it was a lie. Still, I worried it had something to do with Connor’s job. He was always vague when he talked about it, cryptic even. And while I understood that it was confidential, it felt as if he was keeping things from me.

Maverick leaned over to whisper something in Violet’s ear, and her expression softened. They were so in love, it was almost painful to watch. I forced myself to look away.

“Boys,” she said, rolling her eyes as they headed across the lawn.

“Thanks for letting me crash the party,” I said once we were alone.

“We’re happy you joined us.” She led me over to a table where drinks were being served. “It’s nice to have so many of Maverick’s friends here. Most of them live in New York, and I’m glad they could make it. And I’m thrilled Connor brought you.”

“Thank you. It’s nice to put faces to the names.”

She was such a gracious host, and—at least from the outside—she appeared to have the perfect life. A husband who doted on her and their two beautiful children. And both she and Maverick had their own businesses and loved their careers. Was it really possible to have it all? Because Violet and Maverick made it seem effortless. And I hadn’t realized how much I wanted those things until that moment.

“You seem familiar,” she said, her eyes searching my face for clues. “Have we met before?”

I shook my head. “I don’t think so.”

“Are you sure?” She tapped a finger to her lips. “I swear I know you from somewhere. Do you take yoga at the Lotus

Studio?”

I shook my head, figuring I already knew the answer. I might as well end her frustration. “My dad is Harrison Hayes. He played for the Hollywood Heatwaves.”

“Ah.” She tilted her head back, the pieces sliding into place. “That makes sense. I’ve done some work for Reggie Harrington.”

“Yes.” I laughed. “Reg is the best.” He was my dad’s best friend and my honorary uncle.

“Your mom is an actress, right?” she asked.

I nodded. Despite the fact that my mom had always been more into stage productions, Violet knew her stuff. My parents were celebrities, but they weren’t popular enough that the paparazzi followed them around these days.

“So...I know what your parents do,” she said. “What about you, Olivia?”

“I work in marketing for Igloo Books—a publishing company.”

“Oh yes.” She placed her hand on my forearm with a genuine smile. “We have been thrilled with the Spines for Soldiers program. When I heard about it, I just knew we had to get some of our guys enrolled. Please give my gratitude to whoever came up with that idea,” she gushed.

I tucked my hair behind my ear. “Thank you.” And while ordinarily I would’ve stopped there, I found myself saying, “It was actually my idea. So, I’m delighted you think it’s a benefit.”

“That’s wonderful! And absolutely.” She smiled. “These men...” She sounded exasperated, but all the while she was smiling. “They act so tough, but they aren’t invincible. Despite what they want us to believe.”

I nodded, knowing how true that was. I’d seen it with my grandfather, and I’d seen it with Connor.

“If you’re ever in the market for a new job, I have a friend who works at a boutique publishing house. She’s always

looking for forward-thinkers like you.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

She took a sip of her drink, then asked, “So how long have you and Connor been together?”

“Oh, we’re not...” I glanced over to where Connor was standing with Maverick and some of the other guys by the pool, suddenly feeling warm. “Together. Not like that.”

“Really?” Violet arched an eyebrow. “You could’ve fooled me.”

The problem was, she wasn’t the only one fooled. Whether I liked it or not, admitted it or not, I was falling for Connor. And that was a problem.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Connor

I'd been dreading coming here all day. It wasn't that I didn't want to see my friends and coworkers. I did. But it was the idea of reality encroaching on the bubble that Olivia and I were living in that had me wishing we could've turned down the invitation.

I followed Maverick over to the pool, where a few of the guys were already assembled. Violet had rebuked him for working, but we all knew it was impossible for him not to. Maverick took personal responsibility for everything that happened. It was a quality I both admired and understood. Any mistakes, any casualties, and I was always trying to determine what I'd done wrong.

"Did you tell them, Reagan?" Maverick asked.

Reagan shook her head, Clay's arm wrapped around her waist. "I was waiting for you." She turned to me. "The ambassador decided to drop the lawsuit."

I breathed out a sigh of relief. "Thank fuck."

Clay had told me we'd fight the ambassador on it, but I hadn't realized how much it had been weighing on me until this moment. Until it was no longer a threat.

"Reagan's the one who provided the intel that persuaded him," Clay said with pride, kissing Reagan's temple.

"What kind of intel?" I asked.

She leaned in, a coy smile playing at her lips. "Let's just say, it was in his best interest to drop it."

I wondered what kind of information she'd acquired. Even in the time I'd been assigned to protect him and his family, I'd suspected he was into some shady stuff. And while the ambassador and his family might have diplomatic immunity, there were other methods of coercion. I was just grateful Reagan had gotten the information we needed to change his mind.

"What about the daughter-in-law?" I asked, concerned about what had happened to her. "And the granddaughter?"

"They're at a safe house. I'm working with some friends to obtain new identities for them," Reagan said, filling in the rest of the details.

I closed my eyes, sending up a silent prayer. It could've been so much worse. And it was a lot worse than it should've been, thanks to my choices.

"Thank you, Reagan. Sincerely," I said. Her blue eyes flashed with emotion.

I turned to Maverick. "I'm sorry—for everything."

I'd endangered his men's lives. I'd fucked up the mission. Zeke had gotten injured. And my actions had resulted in a lawsuit, even if it had since been withdrawn.

Maverick clapped a hand on my shoulder. "We all understand why you did what you did. Next time, ask for help or take a step back."

I nodded. "I will."

I didn't ask about George, and no one mentioned him. I hoped he'd rot in hell for all he'd done.

"Clay believes you're ready to return to the field. How do you feel?" Maverick asked.

"I'm ready," I said without hesitation. "Absolutely."

"Good. Because Abby wants you on her team," Clay said.

I'd worked with the famous pop singer in the past, and we'd built a good rapport. This was everything I'd wanted, everything I'd worked so hard for. And yet...I furrowed my

brow. As excited as I was about the opportunity, I wondered how Olivia would feel about it.

“You don’t look happy.”

“I am,” I said, trying to snap out of it. *Show some enthusiasm, for fuck’s sake.* “Thank you for trusting me with this.”

Maverick and Reagan joined nearby conversations, leaving me alone with Clay. His eyes were constantly tracking his wife, just as I was continuously keeping an eye on Olivia.

“So...Olivia?” Clay nudged me with his elbow, beer in one hand.

“What about her?” I took a sip of my water.

“Does your sudden lack of excitement about fieldwork have something to do with her?”

The man was too damn perceptive.

“What makes you think I’m not looking forward to my new assignment?” I asked.

“Call it a hunch. How did you two meet anyway?”

I knew there was no use denying it. “Spines for Soldiers.”

“Your change of attitude toward the program makes a lot more sense now. God, this is good.” He clutched his side, laughing hard enough I was tempted to slug him.

I rolled my eyes. “That’s not why I enjoyed the program. We have lively conversations about the books we read.”

“‘Lively conversations,’ huh?” His eyes danced with mirth. “Is that what the kids these days are calling it?”

“Calling what?” Wyatt asked as he joined us.

“Little Cujo’s got himself a girlfriend,” Clay teased.

“Who? The brunette?” Wyatt said, glancing toward where Violet and Olivia were talking.

I nodded. “Yeah, that’s Olivia. But she’s not my girlfriend.”

“You sure about that?” Clay asked.

“It’s temporary,” I said, more annoyed with the situation than these jokers. “She’s here, and my life is in New York.”

“Yet you look ready to upend everything to be with her.” Clay studied me.

“You’re one to talk,” Wyatt said, giving Clay a pointed look.

“True.” Clay nodded, his eyes going glassy as he glanced at Reagan. “I would do anything for that woman.”

“Even have another baby?” Wyatt smirked.

“She’s the one who keeps putting me off,” Clay said. “I’m ready for a third. Hell, I’d have a million more if she’d agree.”

Everyone seemed a bit nostalgic tonight, and I wondered whether it was the fact that it was a “big” birthday for Maverick or the alcohol flowing. Either way, the guys usually put up more of a front. But with their wives around, their friends assembled, they seemed...relaxed. Content. And I realized how much I wanted that too.

“Aww.” Wyatt pouted, draping his arm over Clay’s shoulder. “Has Pigeon lost his touch?”

I shook my head at their antics. These guys loved to pretend they were tough, but they were just giant teddy bears underneath. If anything, it only made me like and respect them even more. They were good men. They loved their families and friends with a fierce protectiveness that I understood because it was how I felt about Olivia.

“Oh shit,” Wyatt said. “I know that look.” He pointed at me, hand still clasped around his beer.

“What look?” I asked, glancing from side to side as if he were pointing at anyone but me.

“You’re in love with her.”

Fuck me, I couldn’t even try to deny it like I had with Zeke.

Of course I loved Olivia. I'd have to be an idiot not to. She was smart, beautiful, kind. I was pretty sure I'd fallen for her before I'd ever met her.

And spending the past week with her had only cemented those feelings. Feelings I shouldn't be having. Because as much as she seemed to trust me, I wasn't sure I trusted myself to be the man she deserved.

"Have you told her?" Clay asked.

"Doesn't matter," I said, kicking at the grass. "She doesn't want long-distance."

"Talk to her," Wyatt said. "Things have changed for you. Maybe they changed for her too."

"Pigeon!" Zeke called from across the backyard.

"See you Monday," Clay said, reminding me that I was headed back to New York tomorrow.

I nodded. "I'll be there."

He gave me a thumbs-up before walking off in Zeke's direction.

I stood there, watching Olivia for a long time. The way she smiled. The way she gestured with her hands, clearly passionate about whatever topic they were discussing. She was mesmerizing.

"Hey." I slid my arm around her waist, pressing my lips to her forehead. She smelled like sugar and vanilla, and I wanted to soak in everything about her while I still could.

"Hey." She turned, smiling up at me. "Everything okay?"

I nodded, my body relaxing now that she was in my arms. "It is now."

And in that moment, I knew it was true. Everything was so much better with her in my arms, in my life. And I didn't want this to end just because I was leaving.

I thought about what Wyatt had said, about the possibility of change. My conversation with Olivia a few days ago didn't inspire much confidence in her desire to try a long-distance

relationship, but maybe he was right. This past week had shown me how good we were together. How nice it was to have a home, a partner. Maybe things had changed for Olivia too.

A plan started taking shape in my mind, and I only hoped Olivia would agree.

“You ready to head out?” I asked, craving some alone time with her. We needed to talk.

She nodded, and we said our goodbyes. Olivia was quiet on the drive home from Maverick’s, and so was I. I followed her into the bedroom, trying to ignore my duffel bag. Trying to ignore the fact that I’d be heading home in less than twelve hours. These past eight days had flown by.

“I can see why you like those guys.” She stepped out of her shoes, removing the tie from her hair and shaking it out. “They’re a lot of fun.”

I nodded, stepping closer to place my hands on her hips. “This whole week has been fun. But I want to make one thing clear. You’re not just a fling or a hookup. At least not to me.” God, she was so much more. Somehow—over the past few months, through countless emails, texts, and phone calls—Olivia had become my everything.

“You’re right,” she said. “I’m sorry I said that. You’ve never made me feel that way.”

I stared into her eyes, searching for answers. I was usually pretty good at reading people, but in this moment, I had no idea what she was thinking.

“Did you say it because that’s how you feel about us?” I asked, hating how weak my voice sounded. Almost needy. But that’s what she did to me. Made me *need* her with a fierceness I’d never felt before.

Prior to Olivia, I’d never needed anyone. Never *let* myself need anyone. It was a lesson I’d learned early on, thanks to my father’s abuse. And then my mother’s death.

Being part of the SEALs was the first time I’d learned to rely on anyone, and that was only because my life had

depended on it. Even so, death was a constant companion, both in training and later. It was difficult to allow myself to get attached to anyone when there was a good chance any number of us wouldn't come home.

But Olivia was the light to my darkness. The joy. And now that I'd found her, I couldn't imagine my life without her.

So I took a deep breath and told myself to be brave. Because somehow, putting my heart out there was more terrifying than anything I'd ever faced.

"I don't want things to go back to the way they were," I finally said. "I can't. Not after this week."

"I know," she said, resting her head against my chest. "But what choice do we have? You know how I feel about long-distance relationships."

*So that hadn't changed.* I'd figured as much, but it was still disappointing to hear.

"What if it was temporary?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" She peered up at me.

"We'll give ourselves a deadline. Until that point, we'll give this—us—a chance. And if we want to continue after that"—which I had complete faith that we would—"we'll figure out a way to be together. All the time."

She contemplated it a moment, and I actually thought she might be considering it. "How long?"

"How long what?"

"How long would we have to do long-distance?"

Hope swelled in my chest. "What sounds reasonable to you? What do you think you could handle?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. Our relationship has always moved on a different timeline, but it feels strange to put a deadline on it. On us."

"It wouldn't be like that," I said.

Her expression soured. “I know you say that, but I don’t like the idea of giving our relationship an expiration date.”

“Neither do I. But I’m trying to come up with a solution that doesn’t involve this being the end.” This couldn’t be the end. There was no way I was willing to accept that.

“I know.”

Now would be the perfect time to tell her I loved her. But...I couldn’t. I didn’t want to put even more pressure on Olivia to agree to a long-distance relationship when she’d already made her wishes clear. Even so, I was bursting to tell her. To say the words.

“It sounds great in theory,” she said. “But what happens when we go weeks without seeing each other? Or when you get pulled back into the field or are somewhere else entirely?”

“I don’t know.” I sighed, dragging my hand over my head. I honestly hadn’t thought that far down the road. “I don’t. But I want to be with you.”

She smiled softly, her green eyes filled with emotion. “I want to be with you too. I mean—” She rubbed her hands up and down my biceps. “This past week has been amazing.”

I dropped a kiss on her forehead, wanting to stay in that moment. Wanting to pretend there wasn’t a huge “but” poised on the tip of her tongue.

“It has been.” I held her close, not wanting to let her go. Not now. Not ever.

“I mean, is this even real life?” Her tone held a hint of wonder.

I furrowed my brow. “What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean. You came here on vacation. I took off from work. We had the week to have fun without responsibilities. Without...obligations or stresses.”

“What about the panel?” I asked. “Or Maverick’s party?”

“That’s different, and you know it.”

“I get what you’re saying, but it feels like you’re looking for excuses.”

Her eyes flashed with pain. “I’m being realistic. It’s easy to make a relationship work when everything is easy and fun. But it won’t be easy or fun when you’re back in New York and I’m here.” She took a breath. “The chances of a relationship surviving long-distance are slim.” *And there it is.* “In the end, it feels like we’re merely delaying the inevitable.”

I took her hands in mine, sensing that she was teetering on the edge. “Goody, we are not your parents.”

“No, but that’s just it. They probably thought they’d be the exception too. And they weren’t.” The words were said with finality, and the look in her eyes told me I was wrong. She wasn’t going to budge.

I hung my head. “Is there anything I can say to change your mind?”

She hesitated a moment then finally shook her head. “I’m sorry, but I can’t. I just...” She let out a shaky breath. “I know myself...”

I tucked her hair behind her ear, feeling as if she were slipping away. “But what if—”

She placed her finger to my lips, silencing me. Her green eyes blinked up at me, pleading. “Don’t.” She shook her head, her unspoken words hanging between us. *Don’t ruin what little time we have left together.* “Please don’t make this harder than it already is. I’d rather us walk away from this week as friends, while we still can.”

I was tempted to protest, but seeing the hurt in her eyes made me realize that maybe this was what she needed. And for once, I wasn’t going to push.

“What do you need?” I rasped, knowing that if I spoke, my voice would be clogged with emotion. But I’d give her anything. Anything she’d asked for. “Do you want me to go?”

I was fucking gutted. But what had I really expected? Olivia had always been very clear: no long-distance relationship.

She shook her head. “I want you. I want tonight. I want to remember this for what it was, not ruin it by trying to make it something it’s not.”

I knew how hard this was for her. And as much as her words pained me, I was proud of her. Because somehow, she’d found the strength to say what needed to be said, even if it felt like a mistake.

Deep down, though, she was right. As much as I cared for Olivia, she deserved more. More than a cross-country relationship. More than phone calls and texts and the occasional weekend together. More than anything I could offer her.

“I understand,” I finally said, my tone solemn. “*Tonight.*”

She nodded. All we had left was this night, these memories. I wanted to tell her that I loved her. But that wasn’t what she needed. She needed me to let her go.

So I pressed my lips to hers, trying to communicate without words. I caressed her curves, hoping my touch would convey just how much she meant to me. I undressed her with care, knowing this would be the last time. And as I made love to her, I savored her every sigh, every moan, every delicious second.

We both knew this was goodbye, even if neither of us was willing to speak the word. But it was evident in the way our lips met, her lingering touch, our shared release. When she finally slept, it was in my arms, her head resting on my chest. I lay there until the sun started its ascent, reveling in those final moments when I could pretend she was mine.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

# Olivia

I rolled over, stretching beneath the covers as I reached out for Connor. It was still early, the sun barely peeking over the horizon. He wouldn't have left yet. Not without saying goodbye. But the quiet of the house and the emptiness of the bed gave me pause.

Maybe he had left.

I wouldn't have blamed him after our conversation last night. It had been gut-wrenching, but I knew I couldn't do long-distance. I'd rather keep Connor as a friend than risk losing him completely. He'd become too important to me.

But maybe I should've considered his "expiration date" proposal. Maybe...

I shook my head. No. I'd meant what I said—it would merely be delaying the inevitable. And it would only hurt even more when it ended.

I sighed, my heart heavy as I sat up in bed. But then I startled when I saw a man sitting in the chair in the corner of my room.

I scrambled backward, even though there was no place to go, clutching the covers as if they would shield me. My heart was racing, blood whooshing in my ears.

My eyes darted to the nightstand for my phone, but it was nowhere in sight. I opened my mouth to scream, but nothing came out.

“Good morning,” he sneered. And it was then I noticed the gun in his hand.

I gripped the sheets, my pulse spiking at this intruder and his weapon. I’d never felt more vulnerable, more afraid. I was alone, in my bedroom, with a stranger holding a gun. And I was naked except for a pair of panties and a sheet.

“Wh-who are you?” I asked, hating the way my voice trembled. And where was Connor? Was he gone? Hurt?

The man shook his head. “All in good time.”

“Wh-what do you want?” Whatever it was, I’d give it to him. “Jewelry, money...”

His dark chuckle was far from reassuring. “There’s only one thing I want.” He leaned closer, resting his elbow on his knee. “Revenge.” The word slithered through the room like a snake, infecting everything with its poison.

Revenge? Was he high? It would make sense—his clothes were rumpled, hair greasy, eyes bloodshot. Besides, I’d never seen the man before. How could I possibly have wronged him? All I knew was that I needed to stay calm, keep him talking. Because there must be some mistake.

“Look, I don’t know who you are or what I did,” I said, taking a shuddering breath. “But whatever it was, I’m sorry.”

I just needed to get him out of my room. Maybe I could lock the door behind him, call the cops. But...his gun made any plan I had seem impossible.

“Get dressed.” He threw me a gray T-shirt, and I nearly cried when I realized it was one of Connor’s.

I’d worn it to bed, at least until Connor had stripped me naked and made love to me again in the middle of the night. That seemed like a lifetime ago now.

“Can I have some privacy?” I asked, hoping he’d leave me alone.

“You have a sheet, don’t you?”

I juggled the sheets and the shirt, doing my best to stay covered as I got dressed, when all I wanted to do was hide under the covers and pretend this wasn't happening. And while I should've been encouraged by the fact that he wasn't climbing on the bed or trying to force himself on me, I didn't see much else to be grateful for at the moment.

I lifted the neck of Connor's shirt to my nose, inhaling his familiar clean scent. A sense of calm washed over me. At least if I was going to die, it was after experiencing the most amazing week of my life. Really, I was going out on a high.

But why did I have to go out at all? It still didn't make sense. Nothing about this made any sense.

"Now," he said, once I was covered. "What's the passcode to your phone?"

I noticed then that he was holding it. I held out my hand palm up, naively hoping he'd give it to me.

He leaned back in the chair as if he had all the time in the world. "Don't insult my intelligence. Passcode."

Why did he want access to my phone? Was he trying to somehow blackmail me? Or maybe he was going to have me call my dad and ask for a ransom? So far, those were the only options that made any sense.

"Why are you doing this?" My eyes stung. I held back the tears, forcing myself to at least give the appearance of strength. "What did I do?"

"Not you." He tapped his gun against his thigh, and I sensed his impatience, the rage coursing through him. "Your little boyfriend and his friends."

"Connor?" I gasped, relieved that he wasn't injured.

"And now it's time to call him. Passcode." When I hesitated, he said, "Don't make me ask again."

I relayed the passcode, my eyes darting around the room as if searching for an escape. But there was none. This man— whoever he was—had a gun. He had a vendetta. And I was completely at his mercy.

As he navigated through my phone, I racked my brain for solutions. I thought through all the books I'd read, all the scenarios. And came up empty-handed. Perhaps I should've spent more time learning self-defense and less time with my head in a book. Perhaps I should've let Connor make all the security upgrades he'd suggested.

Was this why he'd been insisting on them? Because he'd been afraid of something like this? I pushed away that thought. I needed to focus.

"He won't answer," I said, wanting to protect Connor. Maybe he was already on the plane. I had no concept of time. Though, his duffel bag remained on the floor next to the bed. Where the hell was he?

My captor barked out a laugh. "And miss the chance to protect the woman he loves?"

The weight of his words settled on my chest, a wave of sadness threatening to overtake me. Connor loved me, even if he'd never said the words. And I loved him. And I'd pushed him away because I was afraid.

I didn't know where Connor was, but I was determined to keep him safe. "We broke up. He won't be coming back." And maybe if this deranged idiot believed it, he'd leave me alone too.

"I wouldn't be too sure about that. Connor can't resist playing the hero. He gets off on protecting weak women."

I frowned, trying to make sense of his words. Trying to figure out the tie between Connor and this man. He was far too young to be Connor's dad. Besides, Connor's dad was ill.

Before I could draw any other conclusions, the sound of the phone ringing through the speaker echoed off the walls of my bedroom. The room that had long been my refuge was now the scene of my worst nightmare.

"When he answers, tell him you want him to come back."

I shook my head, my eyes wide. "I can't."

“You will.” He stepped closer, pointing the gun at my head and holding the phone just out of reach. “And don’t even think about telling him I’m here or you’re dead.”

I tried to steady my breathing, while hoping Connor wouldn’t see my call. But just before it went to voice mail, Connor answered. “Goody?”

“Hey,” I said, doing my best to sound calm. If I wasn’t careful, I’d be leading Connor straight into a trap.

“You okay? You sound... off.”

I gulped, trying to push away my fear. But it threatened to overwhelm me. My throat closed up, my body shaking.

*Think, Olivia. Think!*

I needed to stall. Find a way to warn him.

“I, um, just woke up. I thought we were going to have breakfast together before you left.”

“Miss me already?” he teased, though I sensed his regret. Or maybe that was just wishful thinking on my part. “I didn’t want to wake you. I’m just getting us some breakfast bowls at the food truck on the beach.”

Okay, so he was close. *Now, how to... how to...* A thought suddenly occurred to me.

“Can you get me one with cashews?” I asked, hoping he’d recognize my request for the distress signal it was.

“Cashews?” he asked, and then there was a pregnant pause. I prayed he understood.

“Yes, cashews,” I said, repeating the word again. More slowly this time.

My captor waved the gun, urging me to speed up. But I shook my head, my lips firmly sealed. I couldn’t. Wouldn’t.

But I didn’t have to. Connor spoke in a calm tone that betrayed nothing. “Yep. Got it. I’ll be back soon.”

My captor disconnected the call with a vicious grin. His eyes glittered with malice as he slid my phone into his pocket.

I could only hope Connor realized something was wrong if I was asking for cashews—a nut I was deathly allergic to.

“Get up,” the man said, urging me to my feet.

This was good—a change of location could be good. It might give me the opportunity to grab a weapon, catch him off guard.

But when he pressed the gun to the small of my back, the cold, hard metal digging into my skin, a chill ran through me. Catch him off guard? The guy might not be much taller than me, but he had a good forty pounds on me. And he was out of his mind.

We made it to the kitchen. Luna was nowhere to be seen, and for that, I was grateful. *Stay hidden, Lunakins.*

My captor took a seat at the table as if he owned it. “Coffee. Black.”

Some of my fear was replaced by anger. Screw him and his dictatorial attitude. Screw him for putting me in this position. The longer he sat there glancing around *my* house with disdain, the angrier I was.

Even so, I made the coffee in silence. All the while, I tried to work out a plan. I needed to get myself out of this situation before Connor arrived because I knew he’d do anything to protect me. And I couldn’t fathom the thought of him getting hurt again, or worse.

I took a shaky breath, determination coursing through me.

Maybe I could grab a knife? But then what? I would certainly lose against a gun.

I made the coffee, carrying it over to him with shaky hands. I was about to set it on the table, when I decided to “accidentally” knock it over instead. It wasn’t the most original move, but it was all I had at the moment.

Scalding hot coffee splashed on his lap.

“Fucking bitch.” He leaped up, the dark liquid staining his pants.

He shook out his hands, and the gun glinted at me from the table. My heart was pounding so hard, I was surprised he couldn't hear it. I lunged for the gun, but he quickly overpowered me. He grabbed it and twisted my arms behind my back. I sucked in a sharp breath, tears stinging my eyes both from pain and defeat.

"I was being nice. But that ends now. Sit." He yanked me down onto a barstool.

He pulled several zip ties from his pocket, binding my wrists behind my back. He reeked of alcohol, and my skin crawled from his touch. Perhaps sensing my disgust, he lifted the gun, dragging it along my neck.

My throat closed up, and tears threatened to fall once more. But I refused to show an ounce of weakness.

"You're a bit larger than the women I usually prefer, but I might be willing to make an exception." His deranged smile and bloodshot eyes were haunting.

I flinched at his threat, closing my eyes and turning my head to the side. I just wanted this to be over. I wanted this to be a bad dream. I wanted to open my eyes and be in the kitchen eating breakfast with Connor, Luna weaving through our legs.

"Nice of you to join us."

I snapped my eyes open—at least part of my wish had come true. I hadn't even heard Connor come in. He was stoic, detached. Eerily calm.

He gave me one glance, a quick, assessing look. The plastic of the zip ties dug into my wrists, and I tried to wriggle my hand through the tight opening while remaining as still as possible.

"Let her go, George. Your issue is with me." Connor's deep voice was commanding.

The man—George—shook his head, placing his hand on my shoulder. "No way. Not after what you did," he spat. "I told you I'd make you pay."

My eyes snapped to Connor, and if I hadn't been watching, I wouldn't have seen him flinch. What the hell was George talking about?

"Besides—" George positioned himself behind me, pressing the gun to my temple "—you're in no position to make demands."

Connor straightened. His feet were planted on the floor, and he projected confidence and control. It gave me hope. This was what he trained for.

"If you harm her in any way..." Connor said, unable to check the emotion from his voice. "I will fucking kill you."

I believed him. And his anger and conviction gave me the reassurance I needed. I drew strength from it.

"Nah. We were just about to have some fun." George turned to me. "Weren't we, sweetheart? Let's see..." He dragged the barrel of the gun along my jawline, even as his eyes and mine remained on Connor. I tried not to shake, afraid that any movement would set off George or the gun. "How long..." He lingered on my lips, a metallic tang infiltrating my nose. "You can keep your cool this time."

He was taunting Connor, testing him. When George slid the gun down my neck, over my collarbone and down to my breast, I closed my eyes briefly and inhaled a slow, deep breath. When I reopened them, Connor's eyes were narrowed on George.

"Let her go," Connor demanded, fists clenched. Rage poured out of him like a volcano ready to explode. "This is your last warning."

George cackled, turning to face Connor. "Why would I do that? You took what was mine. It's only right that I return the favor."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Connor

This was my worst nightmare. Olivia's hands were bound behind her, a lone tear streaming down her cheek. Her legs were bare and shaking, and I wanted to fold her into my arms and promise everything would be okay.

But at the moment, I wasn't sure I could guarantee that. Not when George was pointing a gun at her head, a maniacal grin lighting his face. There was nothing more dangerous than a man who had nothing to lose. And George was now that man, thanks to me.

I edged closer ever so slowly, even when all I wanted to do was charge the bastard. But I wouldn't. I had to wait. Keep my cool even when every instinct in my body screamed at me to do the opposite.

"You come any closer, and I will shoot." He pressed the gun to Olivia's temple, and another tear streaked down her cheek.

I wanted to look at her, try to reassure her again. But I couldn't take my eyes off him. Off his gun. I wanted to kill the fucking bastard.

But since I couldn't do that, I tried to get him to calm down. To back off. I just needed to wait for backup. From the moment Olivia had mentioned adding cashews to her breakfast bowl, I'd known something was wrong.

*My clever girl.*

I'd sprinted back to the house, my heart feeling as if it might burst from my chest. And when I'd spied George in the

kitchen with Olivia, it had taken everything in me to stop from immediately crashing through the door. Instead, I'd sent an SOS text to Clay and the guys before stepping foot inside.

"Okay." I held up my hands. "I'm not going anywhere."

"That's good. Because we—" George glanced down at Olivia "—are about to put on one hell of a show." He dragged his thumb over her mouth, and she shuddered. I was going to fucking explode, especially if he kept touching her like that.

"Mm. Nice lips," he rasped. "I bet they'd look good wrapped around my cock. This will be even more fun than I thought." He unbuttoned his pants with one hand, and I saw red.

*Motherfucker.*

This had gone on long enough. And there was no way in hell I was going to let anything happen to Olivia, Clay's orders be damned. I didn't care if I lost my job, so long as I didn't lose her.

So when George cackled, reaching into his pants, and said, "It's time you learn how a real man treats a woman," I lost it.

I leaped for him, roaring. My training kicked in as I fought him for control of the gun. When the weapon fired, I didn't flinch. I disarmed him with single-minded focus.

"Son of a bitch! You're one sick bastard." I shoved him into the floor, only to notice that Olivia was there as well, limbs sprawled out. Unmoving.

He wouldn't get away with this. I wouldn't let him hurt anyone else, and certainly not Olivia. I was tempted to beat him to a bloody pulp, but one glance at Olivia had my priorities shifting. The threat was neutralized—for now. I was more worried about her. She was too still.

Wyatt entered the kitchen, tactical gear on and gun in hand. "All clear."

Clay was behind him, and I wondered how many more were outside.

“Can you deal with him?” I asked Clay, my eyes on Olivia. “I waited as long as I could.”

“On it.” Clay grabbed a zip tie from George’s back pocket, binding George’s wrists behind his back.

Wyatt crouched beside Olivia, and I joined him, carefully cutting the ties that had bound her wrists. Outrage and despair lanced through me at the sight of the lines from where the plastic had dug into her skin.

I clenched my fists at my sides. This was all my fault. Pain twisted with anger and regret. If I hadn’t visited, George never would’ve targeted her.

“Pulse is good, but she’s not waking up,” Wyatt said, confirming my fears.

An eerie silence followed.

“Olivia.” I gasped for air, wishing I could hold her to me, but knowing better than to move her. All the while, it felt as if my chest were collapsing.

“Goody,” I pleaded, begging her to open her eyes. Wake up. Something.

I’d never experienced suffering like this. Not when I’d been shot. Not even when I’d gone through SERE training as a SEAL. Absolutely nothing could’ve prepared me for this blazing agony.

And yet, she didn’t move. Her eyes were closed as if she were sleeping, but I knew better.

I didn’t want to move her, but an ambulance would take too long. So I scooped her into my arms, knowing we needed to get her to a hospital. “Goody. Please wake up.”

She was... Oh god. Why hadn’t I told her I loved her? Because I did. So, so much.

Now, I might never... I squeezed my eyes shut briefly. This was all my fault.

I searched her for any sign of injury, but I found none. At least not apart from the red marks around her wrists. Why

wouldn't she wake up?

“Likely a concussion. No other obvious signs of injury.” Wyatt’s voice sounded calm, clinical; I was anything but.

George moaned to my right. “What about me?”

I clenched my jaw. The bullet had barely grazed his shoulder, and he acted like he was dying. Considering the way he’d treated his wife and daughter, he was fucking lucky we hadn’t done more. And after what he’d done to Olivia... I shook my head, my vision clouding with rage once again.

I took a deep breath, attempting to calm myself using some of the strategies Tatum had given me. I would *not* let George get to me again. Not like last time. I had to get myself in check. If not for myself, then for Olivia.

Her eyes fluttered open, those green orbs peering up at me. She could’ve been out for five seconds or five days, but it felt like the longest stretch of time in my life. I breathed a sigh of relief, peering down at her with a smile.

Thank fuck she was alive. She was awake. But that thought was quickly replaced by guilt. This asshole had tried to hurt her. Because of me. And maybe if I hadn’t been so impulsive, so reckless, she wouldn’t have been knocked over when I’d charged him.

“Connor?” she croaked. Her eyes searched mine as if looking for reassurance.

“Yeah, Goody.” I smoothed her hair away from her face, tamping down my emotions. “I’m here. You’re safe.”

Her green eyes pleaded with me, even as they filled with tears. I used my thumb to wipe one away. And then I held her gently to my chest, wishing I could shelter her from the world.

“Let’s get her to the hospital,” Wyatt said. “You should probably get checked out too.”

“I’m fine.” The warm tears that wet my shirt made something in my chest crack.

“Your hand is bleeding.”

I glanced down, only then realizing it was. But I didn't care about that. I cared about Olivia. I would've rather taken another bullet than see her cry.

"I'll drive them," Clay said to Wyatt. "Get this cleaned up."

I stood, cradling her in my arms as I carried her toward the door. Her arms were wrapped around my neck, her head against my chest. I'd nearly lost her.

I inhaled her vanilla scent, wanting to kiss her so damn bad. But I wouldn't let myself. I didn't deserve it. Didn't deserve her. This morning's incident certainly proved that.

After helping her into a pair of my sweatpants, I placed her in the back of the SUV, holding her in my lap all the way to the hospital. If only I'd insisted on making those security updates. If only...

George's words from all those months ago echoed in my mind. *You'll pay for this.*

I should've known the entitled prick wouldn't be able to leave well enough alone. He'd always acted as if he was above the law. Which he was in a way, thanks to diplomatic immunity. I shouldn't have underestimated him, but I never could've anticipated he'd do something like this.

We didn't talk as Clay raced across the city. Mostly because I didn't know what to say. I'm sorry seemed inadequate. And I love you seemed inappropriate, even as I stroked Olivia's hair and peered into her eyes, hoping she'd see the love there.

When we finally arrived at the hospital, I carried Olivia in, despite her protests. We were escorted to a room, where a doctor ran a series of tests. They left with the promise to return for a CT scan, and she patted the spot beside her. I took a seat, and she held my hand in hers. My body finally relaxed a little at the connection.

"Connor." Olivia squeezed my uninjured hand, bringing my attention to her. "Are you okay?"

I scoffed. “Am I okay?” I shook my head. “Goody, you nearly died.”

She rolled her eyes, but beneath her bravado, I saw fear. “Stop being dramatic. I passed out for like a second.”

I shook my head, drawing in a deep breath through my nose. I needed to stay calm—for her.

“I’m okay. You’re okay. That’s all that matters.” How was she so composed after everything that had happened?

“The fuck it is,” I ground out. I was the one who was trained for these types of situations, and I was totally losing my shit. “He could’ve...” I squeezed my eyes shut as a multitude of scenarios played out in my mind.

I kept replaying the phone call in my head, the tone of her voice indicating that something was wrong. And I remembered her face when I’d peered through the window. She’d been terrified. And it was all my fault. A sickening feeling settled in my gut.

“Stop,” she said. “Whatever you’re thinking, just stop.”

“I can’t,” I whispered. “I almost lost you.” I cupped her cheeks.

“But you didn’t,” she said. She brought my hand to her mouth and kissed my skin. “And I’m okay.”

*Thank fuck.*

“Oh my god. Luna.” She looked panic-stricken. “Do you know if Luna’s okay? I hope she didn’t get out with everyone coming and going.”

“I already texted Wyatt about Luna. He told me he spotted her. And he made sure her food bowl was full.”

Her shoulders relaxed, the fight going out of her. “Thank you. And please tell the rest of the team thank you. They were all so brave, especially you.”

“You’re the brave one. And clever—telling me to add cashews to your breakfast,” I said, full of admiration for her quick thinking and resourcefulness.

She sagged. “I’m just glad you understood my warning.”

“I wish you’d never had to warn me.” I picked at the coarse fibers of the hospital blanket, hating myself. She deserved an explanation, even if I knew she’d never look at me the same again.

Before I could open my mouth, there was a knock at the door, and a nurse collected Olivia for the CT scan. I released her even though it pained me to do so and backed away.

She left, but not before saying, “You’ll be here when I get back, right?”

I nodded. “Promise.”

I returned to the hall and found Clay waiting for me. He leaned against the opposite wall, arms crossed over his chest.

“How is she?” he asked, pushing off the wall and coming to join me.

I shook my head. “She’s too calm. I think she’s in shock.”

“And you?” he asked.

I grunted. “I’m fine.” I flashed him my hand. It was bandaged, but it hadn’t needed stitches.

He scoffed. “Let’s try that again, shall we? The woman you love was held at gunpoint.”

Guilt twisted my gut, burning up my insides. “Because of me.”

I pounded the wall with my fist. It fucking hurt, but I deserved it. If I could take away all of Olivia’s pain, I would.

“Do you know why we call you Cujo?” he asked, surprising me with the sudden change of topic.

“Because I’m dangerous. Savage, like a wild dog.”

He shook his head. “Because you are relentless in protecting the people you care about. You couldn’t have predicted that George would target Olivia—none of us could’ve. But you protected her, and she *will* be okay.”

“She will,” I said, gratitude coursing through me. *As long as I stay far, far away from her.*

Why had I ever thought this could work? Olivia belonged with someone different, someone better. Someone without the baggage of my past. She was beauty and light and goodness, and I...I didn't deserve her.

“You did good today,” he said.

“What are you talking about? I rushed at him. I was reckless *again.*”

“Any one of us would've done the same thing in your shoes. And the fact that you called for backup and waited as long as you did for us to arrive speaks volumes.”

I swiped a hand over my face, exhausted from the conversation and the day. “What happens now?” All I wanted was to hold Olivia. To know she was safe in my arms.

“You know we'll take care of George. As to what happens with Olivia, that's up to you. But I didn't think you were the type of guy to let fear control you.”

“I'm not afraid.” But the words were thick in my throat.

“Deep down...when it comes to love, we're all a little afraid. And you know what—that's a good thing. It isn't easy to risk your heart. But hey, no risk, no reward, right?”

I was still considering Clay's words and how accurate they might be when his eyes widened. “Holy shit.”

I turned my head to see what he was gawking at—or, rather, whom. It wasn't unusual to be assigned with a celebrity or diplomat in our line of work. So I was even more curious who would provoke such a starstruck reaction in Clay.

I followed the line of his gaze. “Do you know who that is?” Clay whispered, his voice filled with awe.

A man in dress pants and a button-down shirt stood at the end of the hall, his profile familiar as he spoke to a nurse. *Shit.*

“Olivia's dad.”

“What?” Clay’s attention whipped to me. “Harrison Hayes is Olivia’s father?”

“Yep,” I said. “And I’m sure he’s going to *love* me when he realizes I’m the reason his only daughter is in the hospital.”

“That’s— Wow...” Clay shook his head. “The man is a legend. *Legend*. And you didn’t think to mention this before now?”

I lifted a shoulder. “I’m dating Olivia, not her father. At least—” I hung my head. “I was.”

“He’s one of the greatest football players of all time. He...” I tuned Clay out after that, taking a deep breath and squaring my shoulders before heading over to Olivia’s dad.

“Mr. Hayes,” I said.

Concern etched his features, but his eyes were kind when he spoke. “I’m sorry. I can’t sign any autographs right now. I’m looking for my daughter.”

“I, um—” I rubbed the back of my neck. “I know.”

His attention whipped to me, his eyes assessing. “What do you mean...you know?” His voice was lethal, and his gaze was shrewd as he assessed me. “Are you with the police?”

I debated what to say. I didn’t know if Olivia had ever told her dad about us. About me. The idea that she might not have stung more than it should’ve.

So I settled on, “I work for Hudson Security, and we specialize in executive protection. One of our former clients attacked Olivia, and—” I swayed, remembering just how close I’d come to losing her. “And...”

“Dad!” Olivia called down the hall, a smile overtaking her face as the nurse wheeled her closer.

“Livie. Are you okay?” He bent down and gave her a gentle hug before checking her over.

She waved away his concern. “I’ll be fine. What are you doing here?”

“I dropped by your house to see if you wanted to get brunch, but the police were there, as well as some guys from Hudson Security. This man—” He turned to me. “I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name.”

“Connor,” I said, holding out my hand. “My name is Connor James, sir.” We shook hands.

“Right.” He released my hand, keeping one eye on his daughter. “He was telling me about an attack? What happened?”

The nurse cleared her throat. “Let’s get you back to your room,” she said to Olivia. “You need to rest.”

“I, um, I think it’s best if Connor tells you what happened.” Olivia held out her hand for me. I took her hand in mine and gave it a squeeze, my heart clenching along with the movement. “Please?”

Harrison’s attention whipped between us, and I could feel the questions building. But he said nothing as he held open the door for the nurse to wheel Olivia in.

“Are you sure?” I asked Olivia, not wanting to upset her by discussing what had happened.

“Yes,” she sighed. “I have a few questions.”

I nodded, her hand slipping through mine as she was wheeled away. Harrison turned to me with an expression that was stern and fucking intimidating. “So do I.”

*Fuck.*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

# Olivia

“Here,” Dad said, holding back the covers. “Let’s get you settled in.” I climbed into the hospital bed, and he folded the covers over me. “Good?” he asked, fussing over me like a mother hen. I was grateful he was here, even if he was going to drive me insane.

I nodded, pressing the remote to lift the back of the bed so I was sitting upright. “I’m good. Thanks, Dad.”

“Now, then. Connor can tell us what happened, if you feel up to it, Livie.”

“I’m fine,” I said. Maybe if I said it enough, I’d actually believe it.

Dad stood at my side, placing his hand on mine. Connor’s gaze flashed to me, and I knew he was debating what to say. Wondering how much my dad knew about us.

“I, um—” I toyed with the edge of the blanket. “Before you start,” I said to Connor. “I want you to know, Dad, that Connor saved my life.”

My dad’s opinion was important to me. I didn’t want this situation to give my dad a bad impression of the man I loved. Even if I had no idea what the future held for Connor and me.

“Is this true?” Dad asked, glancing at Connor.

Connor shook his head. “Olivia shouldn’t have been in that situation in the first place. That’s on me. And for that, I’m truly sorry.” His eyes met mine, full of remorse.

“Connor.” My heart ached at the pain I saw reflected back at me. “I don’t blame you for what happened.”

“That’s because you don’t understand,” he rasped.

“So, help us understand,” Dad said. “Earlier, you told me that your former client attacked my daughter. Why?”

“Revenge,” Connor said, the one word sending a shiver through me.

“I see. And he thought he’d achieve that by hurting someone you...” Dad hesitated then settled on, “...care about.”

My cheeks heated at the implication. But Connor nodded, his expression solemn.

“And how did you two meet?” Dad asked, so I explained how we were paired through the Spines for Soldiers program and our relationship had developed over time. I only wished I’d told Dad about Connor sooner, but how could I have known that I’d fall so hard for him once we’d met?

“So, you don’t live in LA,” Dad said to Connor once I’d finished.

My gut sank at the reminder. At the fact that Connor would already be on a plane headed for New York by now if it weren’t for the attack this morning. That we might have gone back to being “friends” if this hadn’t happened.

“No, sir.” Connor met his gaze, unflinching. “I live in New York.”

“Mm.” Dad rubbed a hand over his mouth, and I wondered what he was thinking. “Okay. Back to this morning. What happened?”

“You sure you’re okay, Goody?” Connor asked me first.

I nodded.

Connor took a deep breath and straightened. “I was getting breakfast for us when Olivia called.” Dad arched an eyebrow, and I cringed. God, talk about awkward. If Dad hadn’t guessed

that Connor and I were sleeping together before, there was no doubt about it now.

“She sounded off,” Connor continued. “And when she asked me to add cashews to her order, I knew something was wrong.”

Dad looked impressed, but he quickly schooled his expression into something more neutral. “Then what happened?”

“I ran back to the house, and when I spotted her—” Connor paused and took a shaky breath. “When I spotted her and the assailant, I immediately called for backup. I entered the house and neutralized the threat. Olivia hit her head in the process and briefly lost consciousness. My team arrived and handled the rest of the situation while we came to the hospital.”

“How long was she out?” Dad asked in a clinical voice, and I was grateful that Connor had relayed the important information without making me relive the incident in detail. I hoped it would help allay my dad’s fears as well, even if Connor had vastly downplayed his role in the incident.

“A few minutes.”

“Any other injuries?”

“Mostly minor, thank god,” Connor said under his breath. “But she’ll need to make a statement to law enforcement once she’s up to it.”

I nodded. “I will.”

Dad patted my hand. “Only when you’re ready.” He turned back to Connor. “So back to this disgruntled former client.”

Connor stared at the floor as if the tiles were fascinating. “It’s confidential.”

“The hell it is,” Dad roared, showing emotion for the first time. “When it concerns my daughter, when it lands her in the hospital, I think I have a right to know what you’re really involved with.” I’d rarely ever seen him so angry. He was usually so calm, so Zen.

Connor dragged a hand over his head, regret filling his eyes which focused solely on me. “During one of my previous assignments, I was part of a team that was responsible for protecting an ambassador and his family, including his son, George.”

I shuddered at his name.

“I take it George was your assailant?” Dad asked. I merely nodded.

“Was this the assignment where you injured your knee?” I asked.

Connor nodded. “Yes. And Zeke sprained his wrist.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Because I attacked George.”

“Why would you attack your client’s son?” Dad asked.

I furrowed my brow. What was Connor not telling us? Surely there was more to the story. I didn’t believe for one second that Connor would attack someone without a good reason, especially not the family of a man he’d been working for. He was too honorable. Too noble.

Connor closed his eyes, and I could see that the memory pained him. My heart clenched even as my mind raced with possibilities, none of which I wanted to entertain.

“I attacked him because he was verbally abusive to his wife and daughter, and I suspected he was physically abusive as well. And one night, I just...I snapped.” He shook his head and blew out a breath. “The look of terror in that little girl’s eyes as her father loomed over her, fists clenched, will haunt me for the rest of my life.”

Suddenly George’s words about Connor “defending weak women” made sense. He was talking about his wife and daughter. What a piece of shit.

“You did the right thing,” I said.

Connor shook his head. “No. All I did was make a bad situation worse. The ambassador fired Hudson, cutting off our ability to monitor the situation and potentially help the wife and child. Then he filed a lawsuit.”

My jaw dropped open. “What? You’re kidding.”

He shook his head.

“But it was his daughter-in-law. His granddaughter,” I said, aghast. Surely he...

“He was more concerned with his reputation.”

“That’s...” I shook my head, my stomach curdling with nausea. “Despicable.”

Was this what Connor had been trying to tell me about the world not being the safe, happy, beautiful place I wanted it to be? Dad gave my shoulder a squeeze. Even if my mom and I didn’t always have the best relationship, I could never imagine my dad being anything but my protector.

“The ambassador was a high-maintenance client, so I shouldn’t have been surprised. But I also shouldn’t have reacted the way I did. Not only did I threaten Hudson’s business and undermine everything we stand for. But I put my friends’ lives in danger.”

“You did the right thing,” I said again, wishing he’d come closer. Let me comfort him. Connor had tried to defend them. Save them.

“I got suspended for it. That’s why I was so angry about the Spines for Soldiers program at first. If I wanted the chance to go back in the field, my participation was mandatory, along with attending physical therapy and meeting with the company therapist twice a week.”

All this time, and I’d had no idea.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I asked, wishing he hadn’t felt the need to keep this all to himself.

He dropped his head. “Because I was ashamed of my actions. I had no proof of the abuse, and for a while, no one else believed me. I’d let my past cloud my judgment. And my mistakes nearly cost me everything in the end,” he said, giving me a meaningful glance.

“Connor,” I chided, my tone gentle. I could understand why he believed that, but he was a hero. To that family, to me,

to so many other people.

He shook his head, his gaze trained on the floor. And I knew he wasn't in the right frame of mind to hear my words. So instead, I took a deep breath then asked, "What about the wife and daughter? Where are they now?"

"We were finally able to extract them." I breathed a sigh of relief at Connor's words. "But who knows what he did to them in the meantime."

My heart was racing as I considered the precarious situation they'd been in. If this morning with George was any indication... I swallowed back my fear. "I hope they'll be okay."

"And George?" Dad asked in a hard tone. I'd almost forgotten he was there. "Where is he now?"

"That's probably a better question for my supervisor," Connor said. "Clay is out in the hall, sir. I'm sure he'd be happy to give you a sit rep."

*Situation report. Right.*

Dad's eyes held mine, questions and concern swirling in their depths. "Are you okay if I leave you for a little bit?"

I nodded. "As long as Connor's here, I'll be okay."

"I'll give you two a minute." Dad gave my shoulder another squeeze then excused himself.

Once the door closed behind Dad, I patted the bed. "Come here."

Connor shook his head.

"Connor." I stood, and he was immediately at my side, ushering me back to the bed, his hands gentle on my waist.

He was strong, powerful. A protector. And if today had shown me anything, it was that he'd always put me first.

I stepped into his arms, wanting to stay there. He held me, giving me a feeling of safety and security that only he could. I tried to memorize the look and feel of him, knowing he'd be leaving soon.

“Goody, you need to rest.”

I cupped his cheek, bringing his attention to me. “You can’t blame yourself for their situation. Especially not when you were trying to help.”

“No, but I should’ve stuck to SOP. I should’ve listened, not reacted emotionally.”

“SOP?” I asked, then remembered what the acronym stood for. “Standard Operating Procedure.”

“Right.”

“You’re human. And considering your past, it’s completely understandable.”

“My past...” He shook his head. “My past is...whether I like it or not, it still affects me. It’s why I’m not safe to be around.”

I sat on the bed, and he scooted the chair over next to it. “That’s not true.”

“You don’t understand what I’m capable of.” His voice was clogged with emotion. “You don’t know what kind of man I really am. A monster, just like my call sign. Just like my father.” His voice broke, the words cutting off as he leaned forward to cover his face with his hands.

I placed my hand on his back, rubbing circles. I was desperate to comfort him. To make him realize it wasn’t his fault. None of it was his fault. Not his mother’s death or the situation with the ambassador’s family. Or even what had happened this morning.

“You’re *nothing* like your father.” I hoped he could hear the conviction in my voice. The strength of my belief underlying my tone.

“I beat the shit out of a man.”

“To protect someone who couldn’t protect themselves,” I said, wishing he’d listen to me. Believe me.

“I should’ve told you all this before,” he said at last, lifting his head to look at me. “Given you a chance to back out before

we ever met. But I'm a selfish bastard when it comes to you."

"Is that why you insisted on all the additional security measures?" I asked. "Because you were afraid something like this might happen?"

"No. Definitely not. I just wanted you to be safe. If I'd ever—" He shook his head, his shoulder muscles jumping beneath the skin. "If I'd ever suspected George would do something like this, I never would've come. I would *never* put you in danger, Goody. Please tell me you believe me."

"I do." I smoothed my finger over his eyebrows, tracing the lines of his face. His eyes were stormy and conflicted, full of emotion as he waged an internal struggle. "Of course I believe you. And even if you had told me all this before, it wouldn't have changed how I feel about you."

I loved Connor. I'd loved him for a while now; I'd just been too afraid to admit it. This morning had been a wake-up call, a reminder that life was short and you never knew what might happen.

I was still anxious about trying a long-distance relationship, but the prospect of losing Connor for good was worse still. I knew we'd face obstacles—any couple would. But I had faith that if we wanted to be together, we could figure them out.

"I've felt nothing but safe since I met you. Safe to be myself. Safe to express my opinions, even when you don't agree with me. Safe and protected physically." I cupped his cheeks, forcing him to meet my gaze. "You're a good man, Connor James. The best."

"That's because you see the good in everyone."

I pressed my lips to his. "It's not difficult to see the good in you."

"Goody," he rasped.

He slid his hand onto my nape, his touch tender as he held me to his chest. For such a large man, he could be incredibly gentle.

“I want to be together,” I said, meeting his eyes. “Even if that means we’re long-distance for the time being.”

He shook his head. “You don’t want that. You’ve *never* wanted that.”

“You’re right. I don’t want a long-distance relationship, but I do want to be with you. I want to try.” Having someone hold a gun to your head really had a way of focusing your priorities.

And I’d been foolish to think we could go back to being friends. I saw that now.

He let out a heavy sigh. For a moment, I thought he might agree. But then he took a few steps back and shoved his hands into his pockets. “This morning has been a lot—for everyone. I think you should take some time to see how you really feel once the dust settles.”

“How I really feel?” I asked, my heart splintering at his words. His cold, emotionless tone. “How I really feel is that I love you.”

Not the most eloquent delivery, but once I’d uttered the words, I realized I didn’t regret them. I loved Connor. I loved him for who he was and what he saw in me. And I needed him.

So I’d settle for whatever I could have for now, even if that meant putting an “expiration date” on our relationship. Even if it meant we might not make it. There was no guarantee that any relationship would survive—long-distance or not. But I wouldn’t know unless I tried.

When he still said nothing, I was tempted to give up. This morning had been hard enough, and I didn’t have much fight left in me. But Connor had always encouraged me to be honest. To advocate for myself.

So I gathered my courage and said, “When George held that gun—”

“Goody.” His voice cracked, tension filling the silence. His eyes were watery and pleading. Neither of us wanted to relive that moment.

I continued on, undeterred. “In that moment, I didn’t know if I was going to live or die, but all I could think of was you. All I could think was that I regretted not telling you that I love you. That I want to be together, even if it means we’re living in separate states for now.”

He shook his head, his nostrils flaring. “It was wrong of me to ask you to do something you’ve expressly stated you don’t want. And it would be even worse for me to agree now when you’re still in shock.”

I closed my eyes to ward off the onslaught of emotion. I’d pushed him away last night when he’d suggested we try long-distance, but surely... I couldn’t stomach the thought of his rejection. It had been a big day, and I didn’t know how much more my heart could handle.

“Please,” I whispered. “Please, Connor. Are you trying to break me?” I finally choked out.

More silence, and then he took me in his arms. My heart was pounding so loud, I wouldn’t have been surprised if he could hear it. “The last thing I would want is to hurt you. You’re everything to me. Everything good and right in the world. And this morning...” His breath was measured as he inhaled and then exhaled slowly. “This morning, seeing you like that, it nearly gutted me.”

“It was awful,” I admitted. “But I had faith in you. In us.”

“Olivia...” He swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing as emotion swam in his eyes. “I love you.” He tucked my hair behind my ear. “I think I loved you before I even met you. And I’m sorry it took something like this for me to tell you.”

I leaned into his touch, reveling in his words. “So then, why did you push me away just now?”

He hung his head. “To protect you.”

I couldn’t help it; I laughed even as tears streamed down my face. “Stop trying to protect me from myself. Trust me to know what I want, just as I trust you to do the same.”

“I do.” He took my hand in his, lifting it to cover his heart. And when he smiled down at me, his eyes were full of

warmth. “I do trust you. And I know that I can be overbearing and overprotective at times, but this is all new to me. You are my heart, and I love you.”

I closed my eyes and whispered, “I love you,” basking in the moment as he pressed his lips to mine. It was a kiss that spoke of passion and love, but above all, of promise. A promise of a future together, despite any obstacles we might face.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Connor

“The bath is almost ready,” I called from the oversized bathroom of our luxury suite at the Huxley Grand.

After Olivia had been discharged from the hospital, we’d swung by her house to grab Luna and some essentials before checking in to the hotel. I’d turned down the lights, and gentle music streamed softly from my phone. After everything that had happened with George, I wanted her to feel safe. Relaxed. I didn’t want her mind to be on the attack.

“Coming,” she said, joining me in the bathroom a moment later. She stilled, glancing around with a gasp. “This is beautiful. And so romantic.”

“You like?” I asked.

She smiled. “Yes. So long as you’re joining me.”

“I think that can be arranged. I’m going to order room service first, and then I’ll come. What do you want?”

She chewed on her bottom lip. “I’m not really hungry.”

She’d barely eaten all day. I’d hoped that maybe if I enticed her with her favorite foods, I’d have more luck. But so far, nothing. I wasn’t going to push—for now. Instead, I unwrapped one of her bath bombs and dropped it in the tub.

“Did you—” She peered over the side of the tub, watching as it fizzled and hissed. “Is that one of my bath bombs?”

“Yep.” I grinned. “Thought I’d see what all the fuss was about.”

I sat on the edge of the tub. She removed her shirt before tossing it aside and stepping closer. I removed the sweatpants, then her underwear, scanning her body for any injuries. I hated myself for what had happened this morning, but when I'd told Olivia the truth about George, she'd looked at me with nothing but love and compassion. Her response gave me even more motivation to become the man she thought I was. A man worthy of her.

Unable to resist, I pressed my ear to her stomach and just held her.

She massaged my scalp. "Hey," she said in a gentle tone.

"Hi." My voice was muffled, and her stomach shook as she laughed. I smiled.

"I'm naked."

"And that's a problem, why?" I teased.

"It's only a problem because you're still wearing clothes." She grinned and tugged on the back of my shirt. "You know, you could hold me in the bathtub," she said, placing her hands on my shoulders as I peered up at her. "And I'd still be naked."

"Gladly."

She nodded then stepped into the tub. I reached behind my neck, pulling my shirt over my head. As I removed my clothes, I shed my remaining insecurities, baring myself to her. Maybe I couldn't protect her from everything, but I'd do anything in my power to try.

"Wow, this tub is incredible," Olivia said, sinking deeper into the water. "You could fit like four more guys in here."

I tossed my pants aside. "Not amused."

"I wasn't suggesting it." She smirked. "Merely commenting on the large size."

"I'll give you something large to comment on," I teased.

She laughed, but her eyes heated when they came to rest on my dick. "Mm. Really?"

“No,” I said, willing it to calm down. “And stop looking at me like that. You’re supposed to be relaxing.”

She leaned her elbows on the side of the tub and peered up at me. “What if *that* would help me relax?”

“You heard the doctor,” I said. “No vigorous movements.”

The CT scan had come back with nothing out of the ordinary. But the doctor had diagnosed her with a mild concussion and cautioned her to avoid screens for the next day or so, as well as limit mental concentration. She was supposed to rest, and I intended to make sure she did just that.

“What about gentle movements?” She batted her eyes, her skin damp from the steam of the bath.

“Cuddling,” I said, my tone firm even as I fought my growing arousal. “We can cuddle.”

“That’s it?” She chewed her lower lip in the way she knew I found irresistible.

I narrowed my eyes. “I’m only joining you if you can agree to these terms.”

“But you’re leaving soon.” She pouted.

Clay and Wyatt were already headed back to New York, but I was going to stay in LA for a few more days. I was grateful for more time with Olivia. I only wished it hadn’t come at such a high price.

“I know,” I sighed. I didn’t want to leave her, especially not so soon after the attack. “But I’ll see you again in two weeks. I can wait until you’re healed to have sex.”

“What if I can’t?” she asked, the little minx.

“Um. Who was calling whom insatiable?” I teased, gesturing between us.

But I had a feeling her desire for sex had more to do with connection. It was a feeling I understood well. The need for touch, release after a life-threatening experience.

“Will you please just get in the tub?” she huffed while I finished ordering our dinner on my phone. “The water’s going

to be cold by the time you're done arguing with me."

I bit back a laugh and slid in behind her. I wrapped my arms around her. She reclined against me, her body almost completely submerged.

"You're right," I said, stroking her arm. "This is a big tub."

"Right? You should see the one at my dad's house."

I stilled at the mention of Harrison. "I'm pretty sure your dad hates me after today."

"He doesn't hate you," she sighed. "He just doesn't know you yet, and he's protective. Only daughter, remember?"

"Oh, I remember," I said. "I just wish I could have a redo of our first meeting. Because it's going to be even more difficult to win him over after what happened today."

"Connor," she said. "It wouldn't matter who I was dating, no one will ever be good enough in his eyes."

"He might be right."

She wrapped her arm around my neck, twisting back to look up at me. "Connor." She kissed my jaw. "You are good. You—" she kissed my neck "—are enough. You don't have to prove anything—to my dad or anyone else."

*Huh.* Was that what I'd been trying to do? Prove myself. Prove my worth.

Tatum had hinted at that as well, but I'd always brushed him off.

"Still," I said as she turned back to face forward, resting her head against my chest. "I want your dad to like me. It's important."

"Why?" she asked.

"Because he's important to you." I tucked her hair behind her ear.

"He will," she said, patting my arm. "I like you, and just think about our first interaction." She laughed, her body shaking against mine.

“Like me?” I teased. “Is that all, Goody?”

“No.” I could hear the smile in her voice, but then she curled in on herself. “God, I’m going to miss this. Miss you.”

“Let’s not think about that now,” I said. “Not when we only have four more days together.”

“I know,” she sighed. “And I don’t want to. But I can’t help it.”

“Okay.” I rubbed her shoulders. “Tell me what would help, then.”

“I think we should agree to some ground rules.”

“Such as?” I asked, caressing her arms, wanting her to relax.

“Such as...we promise to check in daily.”

“That should be easy.” I kissed her shoulder. “We already do that. What else?”

“We agree that we won’t go longer than a certain amount of time without seeing each other in person.”

“How long?” I asked, knowing nothing would ever be often enough. At least not for me.

“Do you think two weeks is doable?”

Did I want to go two weeks without seeing her? No. But I knew how busy I would be now that my suspension was over. And Olivia worked full time as well.

“It sounds like a good goal. Do you want to alternate or would you rather me just come to you?”

“That would be exhausting for you,” she said. “Of course I’ll come to New York.”

“Would you be willing to travel to other cities?” I asked, knowing that part of Abby’s tour would be spread across the US.

“Like where?”

“I’ll have to check the principal’s tour schedule.”

She stilled. “Tour schedule?” She turned to face me. “Stage work. Oh my god. Who’s the principal?”

I probably shouldn’t tell her, but she was going to find out anyway if she came to visit me on-site during one of the concerts. “Abby Taylor.”

Her eyes widened. “No way.”

“Yes way,” I said when she still hadn’t moved.

“I love her music.”

“I know,” I said. I planned to see if Abby would let me bring Olivia backstage for one of the shows. But I wasn’t going to tell Olivia that yet.

“How long is her tour?” she asked, reaching for my phone.

“Six months.” I removed the device from her hand and guided her gently back to resting against my chest. “No screens, remember?”

“Ugh. I can’t have sex. Can’t watch TV. And now you’re telling me I can’t read my e-book?”

“I’ll read it to you,” I said, pressing a soft kiss to her hair.

“Have I told you that I love you?” she asked, turning to smile up at me.

“And I love you.” I kissed the top of her head. And I would spend every day trying to prove it. Not because I wasn’t good enough. But because she deserved nothing less.



“ARE YOU SURE YOU HAVE TO GO?” OLIVIA ASKED WHEN WE stood outside airport security several days later, her hands resting on my chest.

She’d followed all the instructions to care for her concussion—I’d made sure of it. We’d spent the first two days

in bed reading and eating room service. And then on day three, she'd insisted on taking care of me. She'd woken me up with my cock in her mouth, and my feeble attempts to protest were useless.

“Connor?” she asked, pressing her lips to my throat, reminding me of last night. Her body on top of mine. Her lips on my skin, marking me.

I groaned. “I don't want to, but I put it off as long as I could.”

Was this what it was going to be like every time we said goodbye? It was fucking excruciating. Every fiber of my being wanted to stay. And tearing myself away from her—putting so much distance between us, in every sense of the word—was breaking me. Especially so soon after the attack.

My only solace was that Olivia had agreed to stay with her dad for the time being. She didn't want to return to her house any more than I wanted her to. And while she might choose to live there again someday, I was relieved that she wouldn't be alone.

Harrison had already had a team pack up her essential stuff and move it to his place. The three of us had even eaten a meal together. And while I didn't think Harrison was my biggest fan, I could tell he was trying—for Olivia's sake, if nothing else.

I'd suggested that he hire Hudson Security, but he'd politely declined. I was half tempted to ask one of the LA guys to shadow Olivia, but I knew she'd hate the idea. Instead, I was going to try to convince Olivia to take self-defense lessons. She knew I'd always protect her, but I wanted her to feel confident to defend herself. Especially since I wasn't going to be around all the time.

“I'll see you in two weeks.” I grinned. I was already counting down the days until we'd be together again.

“I can't wait to visit you and meet your friends.” She smiled.

“Who says we’ll be leaving the apartment?” I teased, placing my hand on the back of her neck.

Her eyes were hooded, lips parting. “Mm. Good point. But what about Lucy?”

“Right.” I shook my head as if to clear it. “Lucy. We’re going to have dinner with Lucy.” And see a Broadway show together, but I didn’t tell Olivia that. It was a surprise.

“Two weeks,” she said, as if confirming it.

I nodded. “Two weeks.” Just as we’d agreed. “We can do it.”

We’d promised to try not to go more than two weeks without seeing each other in person, if possible. And in six months—at the end of my new assignment and Abby Taylor’s tour—Olivia and I would decide what to do about our living situation. Though six months sounded like a decade from now.

“You better go before you miss your flight,” she said, clinging to me.

I held her close, memorizing the feel of her in my arms. “I love you, Goody.” I pressed a kiss to her brow.

“I love you too.” She sniffled. “Now, go.” She gave me a playful shove, quickly swiping away a tear.

When I reached security, I turned back to look at her one last time. She stood there with her heart on her sleeve and love in her eyes. I could’ve never expected this—her, any of it.

If you’d told me six months ago that I’d meet a girl online and fall for her sight unseen, I would’ve laughed. But here I was, leaving my heart behind.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

# Olivia

“Come in. Take a seat,” Seth said without glancing up from his computer.

A week had passed since the attack, and my life had gone back to normal. Well, almost normal. Luna and I had moved in with my dad—temporarily and at his insistence.

It hadn't taken much convincing from him or Connor. Every time I tried to picture returning to my house—sleeping there alone—I couldn't do it. I wondered if I'd ever look at my bed or the barstool the same again. If I'd ever be able to make coffee without memories of George plaguing me. Even just thinking his name made me shudder.

He might have been sent back to his homeland, but I had a feeling that morning would haunt me for a long time. Fortunately, I'd been finding ways to distract myself. Connor and I had continued our daily conversations—a mix of texting, emailing, and talking on the phone. And we'd had phone sex several more times.

I'd also returned to work full time, just in time for my performance appraisal. I sat across from Seth, crossing my legs at the ankle while I waited for him to finish whatever he was working on. My phone buzzed in my lap, and I discreetly glanced down at the screen.

Connor: You've got this, Goody. I love you.

I SMILED TO MYSELF. ONLY SIX MORE DAYS UNTIL I GOT TO see him. I couldn't wait.

Seth finally stopped typing. He turned to me, fingers steepled. "Let's talk about this past year."

"Sure." I opened my notebook. I tucked my hair behind my ear as I scanned my notes. "I'd say that Spines for Soldiers was my biggest contribution."

He nodded, his expression giving nothing away. So, I continued talking. "I'm sure you've already glanced over the figures, but they don't show the full extent of the program's success. In addition to increased book sales from that demographic, we have garnered ourselves immense goodwill among the military community and the community at large. We've received a ton of positive press about the program. And participants have reported a high satisfaction with their experience."

"Excellent," he said. "It was a great idea. But it was only *one* idea. In the same time, Nicole has produced and executed three."

I gripped the edge of my notebook. "I think if you look at the complexity of those programs in relation to Spines for Soldiers, you'll see that Spines for Soldiers was a massive undertaking."

"It was a large program, true." Seth shuffled some papers on his desk. "Unfortunately, there's the matter of the biography you failed to secure."

I checked the urge to roll my eyes. *Seriously?*

I'd already come this far. It was time to speak up for myself. It seemed minuscule in comparison to being held at gunpoint. And regardless of what happened today, I knew I'd be okay.

"I'm not sure what that has to do with my ability to perform my job," I said. "And frankly, I think it's inappropriate that you asked me to contact my father about it."

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk. “Since you’re an employee of Igloo, it’s in your best interest to do everything to help this company. You failed to secure the biography—”

“Acquisitions have never been part of my job description. And even if they were, it wouldn’t be my fault if an author declined an offer.”

“Perhaps it wasn’t part of your role in the past. But your job description includes a section about ‘any other duties assigned to the employee by their supervisor.’” He slid a paper across the desk to me, and there it was in black and white. “It was assigned to you by your supervisor, therefore it was your responsibility.”

I shook my head, seething. “I’ve always done everything you’ve asked of me and more. I’ve always gone above and beyond, putting my heart and soul into this job.”

“Does going above and beyond include violating company procedure?”

*Violating company procedure? What the heck is he talking about?*

“The Spines for Soldiers program,” he continued, understanding dawning on me, along with a sick feeling. “You weren’t supposed to communicate outside the designated email, let alone meet your pen pal at a non-sanctioned event.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but I knew it was pointless. Seth’s smug grin told me he was confident he had me. I wondered how he’d found out. I wondered if someone in the office had told him.

Either way, it didn’t really matter. Yes, I’d broken the rules. And I’d do it all again just to be with Connor. Spines for Soldiers opened my eyes to my potential and what I had to offer. Spines for Soldiers, but more importantly, Connor. And I didn’t need this job.

“You know what?” I stood, smoothing down my skirt. “I quit.” I made my way over to the door.

“Fine,” he said. “But don’t expect me to give you a recommendation.”

I scoffed but didn’t turn back, striding through the door with my head held high. Though Spines for Soldiers was my baby, I’d find another way to give back to the community. Heck, maybe I’d find a job with a nonprofit. Or start my own.

Alyssa caught my eye from above the cubicles, and she raced to join me. “What’s going on?”

“I just quit my job.” I marched toward my cubicle with her on my heels.

“Wait—what? Really?” She lifted her hand for a high five. “I’m so proud of you.”

“Thanks.” I laughed, feeling proud of myself. “It does feel pretty good. Apart from the fact that I’m now unemployed.”

“Who the eff cares? You’re going to have people begging you to work for them.”

I was confident I’d find another job, a better job. Because I knew my worth, and I was no longer afraid to advocate for myself or my ideas.



TIME WAS STRANGE. THE PERIODS BETWEEN MY VISITS WITH Connor seemed to drag. Yet when I was with him, it passed in the blink of an eye.

I visited Connor in New York, and I was able to stay for a week because I was between jobs. I loved meeting his aunt Lucy. He’d surprised us with a Broadway show. Even so, I didn’t get to see him as often as I would’ve liked since he was gearing up for his new assignment.

I also spent some time with my mom while I was there, and it had gone better than I could’ve hoped. We went

shopping together, and she didn't critique my appearance—as much. I told her about Connor, and she acted like she was happy for me.

After I returned to LA, I started a new job working with Violet's friend at an up-and-coming boutique publishing house, Harlow & Phillips. Sold my house.

Connor came to visit for the weekend, and we were both exhausted. We fell into bed at the Huxley Grand, wrapped in each other's arms. And we'd spent most of the weekend resting and reading together, at least when we weren't having sex.

Through it all, Connor and I continued to talk every day. But as wonderful as our conversations were, talking alone wasn't enough. We continued to alternate our visits, sometimes meeting in other cities if it was more convenient with Abby's tour schedule. He'd given me backstage passes to her concert, and I'd loved meeting her.

As amazing as all those experiences were, our lives were still fractured. Every two weeks punctuated by a visit. And even then, it was difficult to mesh our schedules. Weeks passed, then months, and every two weeks we saw each other.

We'd stuck to our goal, but we were both exhausted. It wasn't just the hectic schedule that was wearing me down, but the fact that my heart was on the other side of the country.

My new job was demanding but wonderful. I'd been given a bigger role than I'd had at Igloo, and I relished the challenge. That said, I felt like the travel and jet lag were affecting my concentration at work.

I worried about Connor constantly. How could I not? He'd taken on more responsibility at Hudson. And his job was dangerous. I worried that his lack of sleep from our visits would endanger him or his team.

Some days, it all felt like too much. I loved Connor, but our situation was tearing me apart. We were supposed to reevaluate the situation when Abby's tour ended in three months, but that felt like eons away. Especially when Connor

had had to postpone his latest visit. Two weeks stretched to three. Then four, with no end in sight.

I dropped my bag on the kitchen counter, glancing around my dad's large, empty house with a heavy sigh. Dad was out of town for another photo shoot, and I was all alone.

I didn't plan to live here forever—though I knew my dad would love it if I moved in permanently. But until Connor and I made a decision about our future, I was stuck in limbo. Stuck waiting by the phone. Waiting for him.

This was exactly what I'd been afraid of. I sighed and kicked off my shoes, debating what to have for dinner, as Luna jumped on the counter.

“Hey, Lunakins.” I stroked her fur, grateful that she'd adjusted well to all the recent changes in our life. That made one of us.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying not to let our situation get the best of me. Connor was worth it. *We* were worth it. But that didn't make it any easier to be apart, especially not for this long.

I nuzzled Luna's side, giving her a kiss while I carried her over to the sofa. I was just about to sit down and get lost in Connor's and my latest read when something outside caught my eye. White balls bobbed in the pool, a large float gliding through the water. *What the...*

Dad hadn't mentioned having a party, though my birthday was coming up. Maybe he'd let one of his friends borrow the space for an event?

I stood and walked over to the door, releasing Luna when she moved to jump out of my arms. I stepped outside, wondering who was responsible—the backyard had been completely transformed. There was a movie projector, string lights, and...

I halted when I saw Connor standing beside the pool, leaning against the cabana. His sunglasses shielded his eyes, but I could feel him watching me.

Was this a figment of my imagination? So many nights I'd lain in bed alone, imagining him next to me. Aching for his touch. Wishing for the rasp of his words in my ear. His lips against my skin.

"Wh-wh—" I couldn't even get the words out, I was so shocked.

He stepped closer until only a few inches remained between us. "Happy birthday early, Goody."

I couldn't speak. Couldn't move for fear that it would shatter this perfect illusion.

"Goody." He tapped my shoulder, removing his sunglasses. "You okay there?"

It was as if the air came rushing back into my lungs at his touch. My heart finally pumping blood through my system again now that he stood before me. "Oh my god. You're really here."

He chuckled. "I am." He opened his arms. "Are you going to hug me or just continue to stare at me?"

"I don't know." I grinned, blatantly checking him out. "It is a pretty nice view."

"Come 'ere." He grabbed my wrist, tugging me toward him.

"Hi," I said, breathing in his scent. Listening to the cadence of his heart.

"Hi." I could hear the smile in his voice. I was content to let him hold me, his arms a band around me. Our hearts beating as one.

"I missed you so much," I said, trying my best not to cry. I was so happy to see him, and it was so unexpected. It had been too long.

"I missed you too." He pressed a kiss to my forehead.

"But how are you here?" I peered up at him. "How is this even possible?"

He caressed my cheek, his gray eyes warm with affection. “I pulled a few strings.”

“And how did you do this?” I asked, taking in all the details. I pressed my lips to his, his clean scent washing over me. “*This* is incredible. Thank you.”

“I’m glad you like it. I was out here all afternoon setting it up.” He smoothed his hands down my back, over my ass. Cupping me. I was tempted to wrap my legs around him and never let go.

Instead, I smiled. “Well, your dedication is appreciated.”

“Are you hungry?” he asked. “I ordered dinner from your favorite pizza place.”

“Gah! You’re the best.” I kissed him again. I couldn’t stop kissing him.

Eventually, he released me and went over to grab the large float. It was almost like a rectangular inflatable kids’ pool, but he’d filled it with pillows and blankets. Transforming it into a floating bed. How utterly...magical.

“Hop in.”

I looked down at the dress I’d worn to work and then back to him. “This looks risky. Shouldn’t I change into my swimsuit?”

He chuckled. “Just trust me, Goody.”

“I do. But did you check the weight limit on that? Can we both get in there plus the pizza and all the pillows and everything.”

He laughed. “Of course I did. And if it sinks, you know I’ll save you.”

“Oh, that’s reassuring,” I joked, stepping closer to the edge. I put one foot on the floating bed, and it wobbled. Oh boy. I was going down.

“You’ve got this,” he said, holding it steady while he encouraged me.

“I’ve got this.” I exhaled and went for it. The water sloshed beneath the bed, and it tipped a little. But once I was seated, it felt secure. Cozy.

“Okay. Now hold on to the side while I grab the pizza.”

He climbed in with a lot more grace than I had and then pushed us away from the wall. He used his phone to start the movie, and we floated around the pool.

“This is remarkable,” I said, still astounded that he was here. That he’d done all this.

“You’re remarkable,” he said. “I can’t imagine my life without you. And I’m sorry we had to go so long without seeing each other. I’m sorry I broke my promise.”

I snuggled into his side, pressing my lips to his chest. *This man*. Could he be more perfect?

“We were both busy,” I said. We were in this together. “It sucks, but it happens. I’m just happy to see you now.”

We floated until well after the sun had set, the stars growing brighter in the sky. Well, as bright as they got in LA. We talked, we ate, we cuddled. It was perfect, and I didn’t want the night to end.

It wasn’t until after the first movie had finished and the second one began that I finally addressed the elephant in the room. “I’m scared to ask, but what time is your flight on Sunday?” I was already dreading his answer.

“That depends...”

I arched my eyebrow and turned to look at him. “Depends on what?”

“I know we said we’d reevaluate our situation after six months, but I’m sick of the constant back-and-forth. And we both know it’s not going to get any better with how our jobs have been.”

For a brief moment, my heart stopped. His words sounded like the beginning of a breakup. But he wouldn’t have come all the way here and done all of this just to break up with me.

“What are you saying?” I asked, knowing that wasn’t it. Was he asking me to consider moving to New York?

“How do you feel about the idea of me transferring to California?”

I stared at him a moment. “You’re serious?”

He nodded, tucking my hair behind my ear. “I already put in for the transfer, and it was accepted. The position is mine, if that’s what we want.”

“Yes,” my mouth whispered before my brain could catch up. “Yes,” I squealed. “Of course that’s what I want.” The floating bed rocked from my enthusiasm, water sloshing in the process.

Connor chuckled. “Careful, Goody, or you’ll submerge us.”

The twinkle in his eye told me that wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world. Though, his phone was still in his pocket. And it would be a mess to clean up.

I arched my brow, challenging him. “You once told me that you can hold your breath for two minutes and forty-nine seconds. Want to see if you can beat your record?”

“Mm.” He traced the line of my hip. “I have better ideas of how to use my time—and my mouth.”

“Yes.” My voice was breathy with want. It had been too long since I’d felt his touch. Since he’d been inside me.

He claimed my mouth. Our kiss was a homecoming and a revelation. And just as hot as the first time.

But I still had questions, so I eventually placed my hand on his chest. “What about your life in New York? Your friends? Lucy? You’d give up everything for me?”

“I’d do anything for your chocolate crack cookies.” He coughed when I slugged him. “I mean—you. I’d do anything for you.”

He gathered me in his arms, his scruff tickling my skin as he covered me with kisses. I giggled, more from the insanity

of it than the tickling. The float rocked beneath us but didn't tip.

“And I'm not giving anything up,” he said. “So long as I have you.”

I melted both at his words and the way he was touching me. Kissing me. “God, I love you.”

“I love you too, Goody.” He palmed my breast through my shirt, and I moaned.

I wanted to give in. Let go. But my mind was still whirling. “It sounds like your transfer would go into effect immediately. But what does that really mean? Would anything really change, considering your current assignment?”

“I'll finish Abby's tour, but fortunately we'll be back in the US for the rest of it. And I can go ahead and relocate so my home base is here instead of New York. Which means that every time I fly home, I'll be coming home to you.”

“So you really don't have to fly back to New York in a few days?” My insides felt like a bottle of champagne ready to pop.

He shook his head. “I'll still have to rejoin the team, but this means that when I'm home during the week, we can be together. And once the tour ends, I can ask for a more local assignment.”

“That's amazing,” I said, still trying to wrap my head around the fact that he wouldn't be leaving. No more cross-country travel and late-night phone calls. We'd get to be together—all the time. “And crazy.”

“Maybe.” He grinned, pulling me closer. His erection dug into my belly, and heat pooled deep within. “But so is falling in love with someone sight unseen.”

I laughed. “True.”

I was so overwhelmed, I could scarcely speak. Especially as he continued to kiss his way down my body, his lips skating over my skin. All thoughts turned to mush as we rocked on our

float, every sense heightened. All I could think was that I wanted him, and I didn't care about anything else.

"I still can't believe it." I smiled. I ran my hands over his shoulders, down the planes of his chest. I couldn't stop touching him. It had been impossible before, but especially now that I knew he was staying for good. And that even when he left, he'd come home—to me.

"You better believe it." He flashed me a mischievous grin. "You're stuck with me now."

"And you're stuck with me. And Luna," I tacked on.

"Oh, Luna? She's the real reason I requested the transfer."

"Really?" I asked as he slid his hand up my thigh, nearing my center. "I thought you were more interested in a different pussy."

His gaze darkened, his eyes flitting between my lips, my breasts, my hips. It was as if he couldn't decide which was his favorite. I understood the feeling—his chest was magnificent, as if it were chiseled from marble. Then there were his shoulders, those muscular arms and powerful legs. I loved everything about him.

I loved that he was gentle and passionate. I loved that he was caring and funny. And he always seemed to understand exactly what I needed.

A chuckle rumbled from his lips. "You're right. As much as I love Luna..." He pressed his lips to mine. A promise. "I love you even more."

"Want to go upstairs?" I asked.

"Fuck yes." He paddled us over to the edge of the pool then waited for me to climb out before disembarking himself.

He chased me up the stairs to my room, and we raced to undress each other. Our movements were frantic and passionate, desperate. I couldn't stop touching him, kissing him.

"Get on the bed," he rasped, nudging me toward it with a ravenous look in his eye.

I crawled back on my elbows, and he pumped his cock while he looked at me. Watched me. I crooked my finger, beckoning him closer. Enough looking. I wanted to touch. I'd seen him on FaceTime daily; I needed the feel of his skin beneath mine.

He braced himself over me, kissing me gently while he teased my clit with his fingers. "Hi."

I wrapped my legs around his waist, pulling him closer. Needing him inside me. *Now.*

We'd stopped using condoms months ago since I was on birth control. Maybe one day we'd have children—I knew Connor would be an amazing father, despite his concerns. But for now, we were content to enjoy each other.

"Hi," I exhaled as he slid inside me, filling me, stretching me. I sighed with contentment.

"Fuck, Goody. I can't believe I get to wake up to this every morning." He thrust his hips, ducking his head to suck a nipple into his mouth.

I held on tight, watching where our bodies connected. The air was filled with the sounds of our breaths—relief mingling with ecstasy. He was staying, and he was mine.

"Sex or me?" I teased, already feeling more relaxed.

"Both," he gasped, burying himself to the hilt and pulling out again. "But you do realize we're going to have to find somewhere else to live, right?"

"What?" I bit back a smile. "Why? You don't want to live with my dad?"

"He doesn't look at me like he wants to kill me anymore. I don't want to ruin that."

"But it would give you both a chance to get to know each other." I was totally messing with him.

"Pretty sure he doesn't want to hear me defiling his daughter every night."

“It’s not *every* night,” I said, when he rolled us so I was on top and he was sitting against the headboard. “Only when you’re in town.”

“Not.” He smacked my ass. “Happening.” He gave it another smack. Hard enough to sting briefly, but it only made me groan.

“Fine,” I said, my eyes rolling back in my head as he stroked my clit. “We can look for a new place. As long as you’re sure.”

“Sure about us or about the move?”

“The move,” I said. I had no doubts about us.

“Why?” He tangled his fingers in my hair, resting his forehead against mine as he nuzzled me. “Are you having second thoughts, Goody?”

My breath caught. “Absolutely not. I just want to make sure you’re really thinking this through. That you aren’t being hasty.”

“Tell me something...” He kissed my cheek. “Were you being hasty when you quit your job?”

I shook my head, our breath mingling as he drove into me. Drove me wild. “No. I was acting on instinct. Even if it did seem impulsive.”

“Which is exactly what I’m doing.” He searched my eyes. “I love you. So fucking much.”

“Not as much as I love you.” I pulled him to me, pouring my emotions into our kiss. The longing. The happiness. The hope.

Our story was just beginning. And I couldn’t wait to see what the future held. Because I knew that, together, we could take on anything.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Connor

“How’s the house hunt going?” Harrison asked, entering the kitchen.

Olivia was out with Alyssa, which left me home alone with her dad. It was the type of situation I typically tried to avoid. Harrison was nice enough, sure. But he was as protective of Olivia as I was, and half the time, I was convinced he still viewed me as a threat to her happiness.

Hence my motivation to find a house—and soon.

Not to mention the fact that I felt like a mooch, living at Olivia’s dad’s house long after we should’ve moved out. But he’d insisted—suggesting we could use the time to save more money for a down payment. And I wasn’t going to argue, not when Olivia had been all too happy to agree. Still, that didn’t mean I was pleased about it.

Olivia and I needed our own space. Not that Harrison’s house wasn’t nice. I mean, fuck, his home was the type that most of my clients had. Expensive. Luxurious. In an exclusive community.

But it wasn’t *ours*. I wanted a place where Olivia and I could walk around naked. Where we could spend all day in bed if we wanted. Somewhere without her dad constantly hovering, watching my every move.

“It’s going,” I sighed.

I kept my gaze focused on my laptop, scanning the latest online listings. A few of them were promising, but it had taken longer to find something that met most of our requirements

than I'd hoped. The houses were either too small or too expensive or too old or... I dragged a hand over my head and leaned back in my chair.

*Fuck.*

“What about the one you toured last weekend?” Harrison asked, leaning his hip against the counter. “I thought Olivia loved it.”

Perhaps he was as ready to be rid of us as I was eager to move out. Or have *me* move out, at least.

I shook my head. “Not safe enough.”

I wondered if I'd ever be good enough for Olivia in Harrison's eyes. While she assured me that her dad liked me, I had my doubts. That said, I didn't think he'd ever love anyone she dated. Though I intended to do more than just date her. I wanted to marry her.

Harrison furrowed his brow. “Not safe enough?”

He wouldn't understand. Hell, his own home wasn't secure enough for my taste. “It has too many vulnerabilities.”

“I appreciate your concern for Olivia's safety, but it seems a bit extreme.”

“Extreme.” I scoffed. “Right.” He sounded like Olivia, but they didn't get it. Even in the wake of George's assault, they were too damn trusting.

This was my future wife we were talking about. At least, assuming Olivia agreed to marry me when the time came. I'd already been looking at rings, thinking about how I wanted to propose. I wanted it to be special.

Harrison crossed his arms over his chest. Was he trying to intimidate me? “Surely you, of all people, can find a way to make it safe.”

Was he goading me?

“I'm not willing to take that risk.”

“It's her dream home.”

That seemed like a bit of an exaggeration. Sure, Olivia had gushed over the kitchen and the bathtub. But to call it her dream home? He was laying it on a bit thick.

“We’ll find another house,” I said with confidence I didn’t feel. “One that’s even better.”

Though, even I was beginning to doubt that. We’d been hunting for months now with no end in sight. I was sick of scanning real estate listings. Sick of going to open houses. Sick of making offers and getting our hopes up, only to lose the house to another buyer.

“You know if it’s about the money—”

“It’s not about the money,” I gritted out.

Though, the homes we were looking at weren’t cheap. They were relatively modest in size, but real estate prices in LA were insane. Fortunately, my job paid well, and I’d been aggressive about my savings and investments. Olivia had saved up a nice amount too. We had good credit and stable jobs. We were very lucky.

“Sure,” he said, clearly unconvinced, his nonchalance grating on me. “But if it were...”

I gnashed my teeth. Was he insinuating that I couldn’t take care of Olivia?

“I’d be willing to help with the down payment,” he said.

Maybe he wasn’t as opposed to me as he seemed. Or maybe he just wanted to make Olivia’s dreams come true. Either way, I couldn’t accept it.

“That’s very generous,” I said. “But I can provide for Olivia, and she makes a good salary. This is something we need to do ourselves.”

It was true, but I also didn’t want to be beholden to Harrison, indebted to him—or anyone else, for that matter.

He nodded slowly, appraising me with those green eyes that were so like Olivia’s. “I can respect that.”

I thought that was the end of it, but then he said, “What about when you have kids?”

I held his gaze. “What about it?” Was he trying to scare me off? Because I was all in with Olivia. Surely he’d realized that by now.

“What if she wants to stay home with them?”

“Then she can stay home,” I said, resisting the urge to throw my hands in the air. It felt as if he was trying to provoke me. It was fucking annoying.

“So, you want children, then. You want a future with Olivia.”

I figured that was pretty clear from the fact that I’d upended my life to move here and be with her. But apparently not.

“One day, I’m going to marry her.”

He stared me down but said nothing. I didn’t flinch. Didn’t blink. Didn’t breathe.

Was he going to tell me no? Try to stop me? Object?

I wasn’t asking for his permission. Hell, I hadn’t even intended to tell him my plans, but he’d forced the words from me.

Finally, he turned to leave without responding. I wasn’t sure what to make of his reaction. But I knew Olivia would never be happy if her father didn’t fully support our relationship.

*Fuck.* I wished I’d held my tongue.

“Olivia deserves the best,” Harrison said, grabbing something from a drawer. Clearly, he didn’t think that was me. But then he added, “Buying her dream home would be a good place to start.”

I didn’t disagree. I just didn’t know where to find her dream home, considering what we’d seen thus far.

Harrison slid a business card across the table to me. It was black with the name “Black Realty” printed on it in gold foil

along with the contact details for Chrishell Owens. *Huh. Okay.*

“Call Chrishell. She works for the top residential real estate brokerage in town. She often knows about properties before they go on the market. And she’s a tough negotiator.”

I nodded, picking up the card and turning it over. “Thank you.”

Maybe Harrison wasn’t as opposed to me as I’d feared. I only hoped I could deliver on my promise to make Olivia’s dreams come true.



*FIVE MONTHS LATER*

“GOODY?”

“Yeah,” she called, clearly not paying me any attention. The timer for the cookies chimed a second later.

“Olivia,” I practically growled, struggling to keep the bite from my tone. I was getting impatient, even if I tried not to let it show. I’d been biding my time for weeks, waiting for the perfect moment. But I couldn’t take it anymore. If I didn’t ask her to be my wife, I was going to fucking burst.

“Just a sec. I’m taking the cookies out of the oven.”

I watched as she bent over, reaching into the oven to extract the pan. I wasn’t sure which I was salivating for more—her or the cookies. No, definitely her. Even after all this time together, I didn’t think I’d ever get my fill.

“What’s up?” She placed the oven mitts on the counter.

“I got your stack ready.” *There.* That was better. Calmer. More nonchalant.

She furrowed her brow. Always so fucking adorable. “What stack?”

She busied herself in the kitchen, washing the bowl. Drying it. She was killing me. *Killing* me.

*If she had any idea...*

“You know—the one for your latest bookstagram challenge. Come on.” I tugged on her hand, trying not to be obvious. “I’ll show you.”

I led her down the hall toward our bedroom. In our new house—our home.

We’d moved in a few weeks ago. It had taken a while to find the perfect property, but we finally had, thanks to Chrishell. And, by extension, Harrison for recommending the Realtor.

Our new house was relatively close to both our offices and her dad’s house. And though it was a little big for now, I had a feeling we’d grow into it with time.

For now, we were both focused on our jobs. Focused on spending time with each other and enjoying our family and friends. Reading books. Exploring new restaurants together.

Olivia was still loving her job at Harlow & Phillips, especially since she’d recently received a promotion. The position was a perfect fit, and she finally got the chance to show off her talents. I was so incredibly proud of her, even if it had her pulling all kinds of crazy hours. I respected her drive, and I vowed to support her in all things.

I’d convinced Zeke to move out to California. We’d joined an established team and worked with a steady stream of celebrities and high-wealth individuals. I missed Decker and some of the guys, but I’d found that same feeling of family that I’d had in New York.

I was also learning more about the residential side of security. I enjoyed being part of a movement team—the challenges and the camaraderie. But it meant too much time away from Olivia. And, at times, felt like too big a risk.

This was a different season of life, and I had someone else's needs to consider other than my own. For now, I was bouncing between movement and residential teams, and I'd never felt more fulfilled. Work wasn't my sole priority anymore. And even though I loved my job, it was no longer what gave my life meaning.

My relationships gave my life meaning and richness. With Lucy, my friends, and even Harrison. It had taken some time, but eventually, he seemed to have come around. I hadn't asked his permission to marry Olivia—it wasn't his decision to make. But I hoped he'd give us his blessing.

I'd continued my sessions with Tatum, and he'd helped me navigate my dad's illness and death. In the end, I'd decided not to visit my father. But I'd kept his letter, telling myself I'd open it if the timing ever felt right.

And then there was Olivia. The love of my life. My future wife. And I hoped—one day—the mother of my children.

“What's this?” Olivia asked, stepping closer to evaluate the stack of books on the bed.

She'd been so busy baking cookies, it had given me time to set up. On our bed was a stack of books—all the ones we'd read together as part of the Spines for Soldiers program.

“*Alone in Alaska, Insatiable.*” Her smile widened as she named the titles until she got to the one on the bottom. She removed it from the stack. “What's this one? I haven't heard of it.”

“A love story,” I said. “I think you'll really enjoy it. You have the only copy.”

“Awesome!” She grinned, flipping it over before finally opening it. She gasped when she saw our emails and pictures printed on the pages. It was all there, from our first meeting at The Last Bookshop to the vacation we'd taken to Sri Lanka last month. “Connor. This is us...”

She paged through it, smiling as she skimmed some of the emails. Until finally, she got to the back, a blank page. An unwritten story, a future with limitless potential.

I knelt to the floor before her. “Olivia—”

She held her hands to her mouth, green eyes wide and already misting with tears. I took one of her hands in mine, needing her touch to ground me. To center me, as always. She was my world, my universe, and I wanted nothing more than her happiness.

“You’ve always seen the good in me,” I said, struggling to get the words out. To get everything just right. I wanted this to be perfect for her. “You love me for who I am without trying to change me. And I hope you know how much I love you. If you’ll let me, I promise to protect you, love you, and cherish you for the rest of my life.”

“Yes,” she said.

I chuckled, relief and happiness blending into a potent cocktail. “You haven’t even seen the ring yet.”

She shook her head. “I don’t need to. It wouldn’t change my answer.”

I smiled, releasing her hand to pull a small velvet box out of my pocket so I could present the ring to her. I’d spent weeks searching for the perfect setting, and Alyssa had been more than willing to offer her opinion. From the way Olivia was looking at it, and me, we’d chosen well.

I smiled up at her, asking the question even though I already knew the answer. “Marry me, Goody.”

“Yes.” She smiled through her tears, and I found that a tear had snaked down my own cheek. “Yes, of course.”

I slid the ring onto her finger—a perfect fit. I stood and pulled her into my arms, crushing my lips to hers.

I still couldn’t believe she was going to be my wife. That I got to spend the rest of my life with such an incredible woman. I’d never imagined this for myself—marriage, a family. But now that I’d met Olivia, I couldn’t picture anything else.

Our love story was unconventional and unique. And I knew that no matter what the future held, she was my happily ever after.



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# UNPREDICTABLE SNEAK PEEK

Harrison

“I can’t believe you scored an appointment with Juliana Wright,” Olivia said as we walked down the sidewalk toward the wedding planner’s office. “I mean, she’s like *the* event planner for celebrity weddings.”

I scoffed. “What? Am I not a celebrity?”

She knew I was teasing. But I was grateful Olivia had accepted my apology and peace offering—a meeting with the exclusive event planner. I still wasn’t sold on the idea of marriage, but my relationship with my daughter was more important than my personal reservations. Besides, her relationship with Connor was different from Camille’s and mine. And Talia was right—just because my marriage hadn’t worked out didn’t mean Olivia’s was doomed to fail.

“Dad.” Olivia rolled her eyes, but her lips curved upward. “You know what I mean.”

“I don’t know, do I?” I sniffed.

“Oh please. How could I forget that my father is a football legend, one of the greatest players of all time, the man who led the Hollywood Heatwaves to victory four years in a...”

“You’re really laying it on thick,” I teased, relieved we were back on solid ground.

“Well, it is Juliana Wright.” If Olivia hadn’t been wearing a dress and heels, I swear she’d be skipping down the sidewalk. When I’d called her to tell her about the

appointment, she'd nearly busted my eardrum with her shrieks of excitement.

"So you said." I watched her, warmth filling my chest. Anything to make Olivia happy. "What's so special about Juliana Wright?" I affected a posh accent.

"What's *not* special?" Olivia asked. "She's made a name for herself offering eco-friendly events that cater to those with special diets."

I hmped. "You mean like the actresses who only eat potatoes on Tuesday."

Olivia rolled her eyes with a smile. "Probably. But I was referring to food allergies like mine. Juliana caters to clients with celiac disease, nut allergies, vegans, you name it."

"Is being a vegan a disease?" I teased, though I'd eaten a heavily plant-based diet for years when I was training for the Heatwaves and even after.

"You know what I mean, Dad," Olivia said.

"Yeah, and she probably charges through the nose for it."

"Probably." She shrugged. "But you know it's not cheap to eat high-quality, plant-based food. And she's organized a number of events raising awareness and funding for celiac disease and other causes."

"Really?" I asked. "How do you know all this?"

"There's this thing called the internet. You should try it." She stuck her tongue out at me.

I butted her shoulder with mine. "And who's still carrying around an iPhone 6?"

Despite the fact that I'd offered to buy her the latest model, she still wouldn't let go of the old one. The only reason she'd agreed to let me give her my old Land Rover was because I'd wanted to get a new car.

"Yeah. Yeah." She shielded her eyes from the sun, glancing up at the building. "This is it."

I held the door open for her. "Where's Connor again?"

She pressed the button for the elevator. “Virginia. He’ll be back on Friday.”

“And you’re sure you don’t want to wait to meet with the wedding planner until he can be there?” I asked as the doors opened and a few people filed out. Though, honestly, I had no idea how long that would be. I hadn’t connected with Juliana at the hotel like I’d hoped. And Olivia and I had been lucky to get this appointment after someone canceled.

Olivia barked out a laugh and stepped into the elevator, pressing the button for the eighth floor. “And miss the chance to meet with Juliana Wright?” She shook her head. “No way.”

“You know this isn’t a done deal, though, right?” I asked. I didn’t want to burst her bubble, but I felt the need to caution her. I’d hate to see her disappointed. “I don’t know if she’s even available for your date or if you’ll like her or...”

“Dad.” She placed her hand on my arm. “As a wise man often likes to remind me—it will all work out.”

Leave it to my daughter to throw my own advice back at me. But she was right. I considered myself a laid-back guy, but I struggled when it came to my daughter’s happiness. Still, I knew that whether it was this wedding planner or another, we would make her dream wedding happen.

“Thank you again for setting this up. It means a lot to me.”

“You’re welcome.” I draped my arm over her shoulder, and she wrapped hers around my waist. “I’m sorry for overreacting the other day. I know how important this is to you, and I’m honored to be included.”

“I’m glad to have you here with me. And I’m sorry too. I’m stressed about work, and you know how grumpy I get when I’m hungry.”

“I do.” I gave her shoulder a quick squeeze before releasing her. “All right. Let’s get this over with.”

“*Dad!*” she said, dragging out the word.

“Okay. But I just... Keep an open mind. She’s not the only wedding planner in LA.”

“Okay.” The elevator chimed, and the doors opened to our floor. “But—” she backed into the hallway and cupped her mouth “—it’s Juliana freaking Wright,” she whisper-yelled.

I smiled despite myself, more curious than ever to meet *the* Juliana Wright. Olivia rarely got excited about celebrities. She’d been surrounded by them thanks to my career, and she often interacted with famous authors in her line of work. So, for her to get this excited about a wedding planner... Well, I was certainly intrigued.

And I was kicking myself for not looking her up ahead of time. Considering the amount of research I put into football—both as a player and now as a color commentator—it was surprising. But I’d been so busy preparing for the wild-card game, then there’d been that night with the woman at the wedding expo, and a photo shoot, that there hadn’t been much time to research Olivia’s wedding planner. I’d just been grateful to get an appointment. And I’d never expected for Olivia to ask me to come with her.

I adjusted myself at the reminder of the night of the wedding expo. I’d gone there on a whim, hoping to catch Talia’s contact. I still didn’t know my mystery woman’s name, but if I closed my eyes, I could trace every slope and curve of her body. I could recall all the ways I’d made her come and envision all the ways I still wanted to. If only she hadn’t been so hung up on her ex...

Perhaps it was for the best that it would never happen again. I didn’t have any way to contact her. And much as I might want a repeat of that night, I couldn’t give her what she needed beyond a brief escape.

“Here we are,” Olivia said, bringing me back to the present.

She pushed open the frosted glass door with an interlocking J and W etched in a cursive font. I hesitated a moment, trying to get my brain to catch up with reality. This was happening. My baby was getting married.

“Welcome to Juliana Wright Events,” said a man at the front desk. He smiled at Olivia, but his eyes lingered on me,

scanning me from head to toe with an appreciative grin, a knowing grin. “Do you have an appointment?”

He looked familiar, and I frowned as I struggled to place him. I shook away the thought—he was probably just another fan or something.

I shoved my hands into my pockets. “Harrison Hayes. Talia Winters referred me.”

The office was clean and stylish. Everything was blush pink and gold and white—definitely feminine. But also... welcoming.

He glanced at his computer screen. “Yes. Harrison.” He smiled at me and rounded the desk to shake my hand. “Welcome. And...?”

“Olivia.” She held out her hand.

“Landon.” He shook her hand. “Right this way.” He led us to a conference room, though he kept glancing back at me. All the while, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I should know who he was.

Framed photographs lined the hall, happy couples smiling as they said their “I Dos,” a child blowing out her birthday candles, a glowing mom-to-be embraced by her girlfriends. The conference room had a wall of windows overlooking LA. A large pair of orchids rested in the middle of the glossy table, surrounded by a few leather-bound books.

“Can I get you something to drink?” Landon asked once we were seated. “Water, champagne?”

“I’d like a water, please,” Olivia said before turning to me. “Daddy?”

Landon coughed into his hand.

“You okay?” I asked, and he nodded. “I’ll take a water, thanks.”

I picked up one of the leather albums from the table and thumbed through it. More smiling couples. More weddings and parties. All elegant, extravagant, and...expensive, I was sure.

I didn't think much could faze me considering the life I'd led, but staring at some of the parties, I realized I was wrong. Cirque du Soleil at a five-year-old's birthday party? I shook my head and closed the book, afraid to see what else it might contain. I had no idea what Olivia had in mind for her wedding, but I didn't think a flock of albino peacocks was on her must-have list. At least, I hoped not.

"Oh my god," Olivia said from beside me. "That is stunning."

I furrowed my brows, glancing between the album and her. The wedding looked fit for royalty.

"And those flowers. I love peonies."

"Peonies?" I asked, to which she just laughed.

I had a feeling I was in for a long afternoon. When Landon returned with our waters, I began to second-guess my decision not to request alcohol.

"And here she is now." Landon turned toward the door and smiled as if amused by something.

A phone rang in the background, and I looked up when I heard the click-clack of a woman's shoes against the marble floor. A familiar blonde with legs for days entered the room, her eyes on her tablet. Olivia and I stood, both of us smiling, albeit for different reasons. *Well, well, well.* Talk about life being unpredictable.

She looked the same as that night at the bar—well-dressed, polished, fucking stunning. Her fuchsia dress and pumps were professional, but they only made me want to undress her. I wanted to pull her hair from the bun she wore and watch the waves tumble over her shoulders. I wanted to—

"Hi, I'm..." She glanced up, and when our eyes met, she faltered. She quickly composed herself, masking her surprise with a smile. "Juliana Wright."

And suddenly everything made sense as the pieces fell into place. Juliana was my mystery woman from the wedding expo. And Landon had been with her at the bar when we met. His

eyes were currently ping-ponging between Juliana, Olivia, and me.

Olivia extended her hand to Juliana. “Olivia. So nice to meet you. Thank you for squeezing us in.”

“Of course.” Juliana smiled, though her gaze was questioning when she focused on me.

I wrapped my hand around hers, encasing her delicate fingers with my callused hand. The sight of her skin against mine sparked a wave of fresh memories. Her hand around my cock, pumping. My palm sliding down her spine as she released a shaky exhale.

My lips curled into a smile, and without thinking, I stroked my thumb over her skin. Again, I felt that spark. That...pull. “Harrison.”

She frowned down at our hands, quickly pulling hers away. I didn’t understand her reaction. Was she embarrassed about the other night? I studied her expression for clues, but she quickly turned for the door, putting her back to me.

Maybe she was mad that I’d vanished? But she’d been sleeping so peacefully, I couldn’t bear to wake her. Besides, what had she really expected? We both knew it was nothing more than a one-time thing, even if I did want a repeat. And I hadn’t been a complete ass—I’d left a note.

After Landon excused himself, Juliana closed the door, her palm pressed against the surface for a moment longer than necessary. When she faced us again, she wore a mask of professionalism. She took a seat at the table, composed, calm.

“First of all, congratulations.” She smiled. “So—” She glanced down at her tablet. “I see we’re on a tight schedule.”

Olivia nodded. “Yes. My fiancé and I would like to get married this fall, preferably in September.”

“Okay.” She shifted, returning her attention to her tablet, where I presumed a calendar was displayed. “It looks like I have some availability—at least, the third, maybe the fourth, weekend.”

Out of the corner of my eye, Olivia nodded. But my attention remained focused on the blonde sitting across from me. I knew what she looked like when she came, and I couldn't get the image out of my head. And now I finally knew her name.

I missed the next part of the conversation. Something about dates and venues and pricing. All the while, Juliana kept her attention focused on Olivia, only glancing to me when absolutely necessary.

"If you don't mind my asking, why the rush?" Juliana asked.

"We've been together for almost a year. When you know, you know. Right?" Olivia laughed, but Juliana didn't.

"A—" She swallowed. "Year." Her face blanched.

I frowned, the tension in the room rising. "I'm sorry, but why is this information necessary?"

"I, um..." She stared at her tablet. "I like to know the backstory of a couple. It helps me get a better picture of their personalities and style." When she met my eyes again, hers blazed with anger. A challenge. "Though, really, how well can you ever know someone?"

I crossed my arms over my chest, enjoying the way her eyes darted to my biceps. "I don't know. I think you can know someone pretty well, even after just one night."

Juliana's breath caught, but Olivia was so busy looking through the notes on her phone, she missed it. Juliana's skin flushed with color, creeping up her neck and staining her cheeks. I smirked.

"One night can make *or break* a relationship," she ground out, and I wondered if she was referring to an ex. Clearly, he'd done a number on her.

Olivia's phone buzzed, and she glanced at the screen. "I'm sorry. I have to take this."

She held the phone to her ear, talking in a hushed voice as she darted toward the door. Juliana stood and tried to escape,

but I was faster. I placed my hand on the door, stopping her.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she asked, skin flushed. Her chest rose and fell, her breasts nearly brushing against me.

“Stopping you from running away.” I was so tempted to reach out and touch her, to place my hands on her hips. To physically restrain her from running away from me, even though she was completely and emotionally unavailable.

She swallowed, her eyes darting everywhere but at me. “I-I —” she stammered. “You shouldn’t be here.”

I furrowed my brow. This woman perplexed me. “Why? Because we slept together?”

“Yes,” she hissed, her eyes darting toward the door, toward Olivia.

I leaned in, getting a whiff of her floral scent. She looked polished, just as she had that night in the bar. And just like that night, I wanted to muss her up. I wanted to get her to let her hair down, live a little.

“Last time I checked, picking up a stranger in a bar isn’t a crime.”

“It is if one of the parties is engaged,” she shot back.

I frowned. “Engaged?”

So that’s who Ryan was—her fiancé? Fuck. I never would’ve slept with her if I’d known they were still together. I thought he was the bastard who’d broken her heart. I figured her night with me was a rebound or revenge. She hadn’t been wearing a ring then, and I glanced down to confirm she wasn’t wearing one now.

She moved past me and started pacing. “You shouldn’t be here. And there’s no way I can plan this wedding. I just—” She stopped, looked at me, then started again. “I can’t. You need to tell Olivia.”

“What?” I jerked my head back. “I’m not telling Olivia we slept together. That’s none of her business.”

Her mouth fell open. “She’s the bride. Of course it’s her business.” She shook her head. “I can’t believe I slept with such a...such a—”

I crossed my arms over my chest, trying to understand her reaction. “Such a what?”

“Such a—”

The door swung open, and Olivia breezed in. “Sorry about that.”

Juliana swallowed back her words and glared at me. What the hell was her problem? If she’d cheated on her fiancé, that was her decision, not mine. I wasn’t happy about it, but I didn’t see why we needed to involve my daughter.

“Where were we?” Olivia asked, completely oblivious to the tension that had settled like a thick fog over the room. “Right. Guest list.” She took a seat.

Juliana and I continued our stare off a moment longer before she took a seat. She tapped aggressively at the screen of her tablet, and I wondered if she was angrier with herself or me.

“We’re thinking around two hundred guests,” Olivia said.

My attention snapped to her. “Does that include all your coworkers and their spouses? And what about my former teammates?”

“I’d really like to keep it small.” She placed her hand over mine.

“You know what?” Juliana jumped out of her seat like her ass was on fire. “I, um—” She backed toward the door. “I just remembered something. Something I wanted to show you. I’ll, um—” She grabbed the doorknob, twisted, and stepped into the hall. “I’ll be right back.”

I stared at the door a moment, debating whether or not to go after her.

“So...?” Olivia asked. “What do you think?”

“About what?” I asked, dazed.

“Juliana, silly.”

How to answer that? Juliana was...beautiful, haunted, complicated. And even though everything told me I should let her walk away, I wasn't sure I could.



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# Acknowledgements

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# About the Author

Jenna Hartley is USA Today bestselling author who writes forbidden romance that feels good, much like her own real life love story. Her stories feature strong women and swoon-worthy men, as well as sexy, sweet, and laughable moments that reflect real love.

When she's not reading or writing romance, Jenna can be found tending to her growing indoor plant collection (pun intended), decluttering, and hiking. She lives in Texas with her family and loves nothing more than a good book and good chocolate, except maybe a dance party with her husband and daughter.

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