



*Big Forbidden*

**BLACKSMITH**

CASSI HART

# Big Forbidden Blacksmith

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A Big Burly Romance

*Cassi Hart*

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*First Edition*

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# Chapter 1

*Lara*

Getting lost on a country back road was not in my plan for the day.

Here I am, standing on the side of the road, looking like a damsel in distress. One of my heels is broken, there's a split in the skirt of my dress from earlier when it caught in the car door, and I am trying to figure out where I am but I can't because there's no cell signal out here. Just my luck, but at least the sunset is stunning. The tears crowding my eyes only add a layer of glistening beauty to it.

*Take long, deep breaths, Lara.*

I'm honest enough to admit that I'm a little scared, but I'm also trying to keep things in perspective. It *could* be worse. I'm not sure how, but it could be, I just know it.

I stare down at the broken heel of my shoe—a favorite pair of black suede booties—and choke back a sob. Normally the sight of ruined shoes would not have me fighting the need to bawl like a child but this feels like the last straw. My whole right foot is sore from when I rolled my ankle, which is what made the heel break in the first place.

I've been walking along the gravel road for what feels like hours, so of course the heels were going to break off at some point. They're fine for driving, but they aren't for hiking on an uneven road like this. When I look over my shoulder, I can



still see my car in the distance. Fine, it hasn't been hours, but it still feels like it.

I wobble around for a few more minutes before letting an annoyed huff. I shouldn't have listened to my mentor when she told me I needed a change of environment to help deal with my creative block.

*“Go out and find your passion again,” she'd said. “You won't find inspiration locked up in your studio.”*

Well, in her defense, she probably meant going to an aquarium or a park, somewhere that didn't mean getting lost or facing the possibility of getting eaten by a wild animal. But no, I thought visiting my best friend's ranch was a better option. Against my better judgement, I took a six-hour flight and then rented a car to drive the additional four hours, all to surprise her at her family's ranch.

I figured I could manage the four-hour drive down an unfamiliar country road if I followed my phone's GPS directions, but I hadn't counted on getting lost. And because I got lost, the car ran out of gas in the middle of nowhere. The empty signal bars on my phone are just the cherry on top.

I'm not sure how long it's been since I officially got lost, but I'm starting to feel uneasy with no sign of civilization in sight. There's just this road, and there's no one else on it. It's like I'm completely alone out here. I had no idea it was possible to feel that way.

*Breathe Lara. Deep calming breaths ...*

I sigh loudly when I realize it's not working. Along this empty road, there's nothing but endless fields stretching out on both

sides. The grass is tall and golden, swaying gently in the breeze. In the distance, I can see the silhouette of a few trees, but they're too far away to be of any use to me.

The sky starts to turn a deep shade of orange and pink as the sun sinks lower and lower on the horizon. It's beautiful how the sunset casts long shadows across the fields. Under different circumstances, I'd be running to grab my canvas and paints, but ... well ... I'm not exactly in the best position to be documenting my impending doom.

"Don't be dramatic Lara," I say to myself with a shaky chuckle. "You're just stuck ... Alone in the middle of nowhere, with the sun setting ... Soon it'll be dark, it's fine."

Oh god ... No one even knows where I am. My parents who are vacationing in Italy and I haven't talked to them since they left, and my best friend isn't even expecting me. This was meant to be a surprise.

Oh, it'll be a surprise for sure. They'll find my dead body hugging my ruined shoes to my chest like they were my last hope. It'll be all over the news. The fragile little city girl who —

My ears perk up as they notice a sound, but when I whirl around, I don't see anything. Just as I'm beginning to think it was a figment of my imagination, it happens again. This time, I notice a car in the distance, driving up the road. I squint, attempting to make it out and make sure it's not some large wild animal I need to start running from, but thankfully, it really is a car. And it's headed in my direction.

I drop my shoes immediately and start waving my arms frantically at the moving vehicle. Even as I wobble on my feet,

the pain from rolling my ankle is a distant memory.

My heart pounds heavily in my chest as the truck draws closer and starts to slow down. I can't help smiling widely as the car slows to a stop nearby. The red pickup truck before me—or at least it was red at some point in history—is *huge*. Its engine rumbles deeply and its headlights shine brightly, casting long shadows in the dusk light.

Just as I manage to pry my eyes from the massive wheels and mud-spattered body, my heart stops. The smile on my lips falls when my gaze connects with eyes so dark there's almost something feral about them. It's like meeting predator's gaze as it watches you from the shadows, ready to pounce at any moment.

I take another step back as suddenly, the door to the truck opens and a *massive* man climbs out.

I don't think I have ever seen anyone quite as huge or wild looking. Full beard, ruffled hair, and dark, stormy gray eyes. It's those dark eyes that have me swallowing hard, rooted to the spot while feeling like I should run away.

I couldn't run away even if I wanted to.

My fingers start to itch with the need to draw him. I want to draw the lines of his face, sketch the scar on his cheek onto a sheet of paper, and watch those dark eyes come to life as I capture them. I can already picture how my brush would give color to the canvas, how it would form the lines of his shoulders and neck—

“Hi there, do you need help?” the man asks and my cheeks flush hot. His voice is low and rough but comforting all the

same. It's so distracting that it takes me a second to place the events of the day.

*City girl. Lost. Damsel in distress.*

"Hi," I murmur back shyly, clearing my throat to get rid of my nerves. "Yeah, my car ran out of gas. Can you help me find the nearest gas station or drop me off at the Blackwell Ranch? I don't know if you've heard of it ..."

"The Blackwell Ranch is in the opposite direction," he says with a click of his tongue, point behind him. My heart drops to my feet.

"It is?" I gasp in embarrassment. I'm so caught up in my head that I start to trudge off in the right direction. I'm stopped by my injured ankle, which sends a sharp pain shooting up my leg as soon as I put weight on it. My wince makes me feel weak, like I'm just some wimp from the big city that can't handle roughing it.

And as if this day couldn't get any worse, the big stranger notices my pain.

"You're hurt," he growls, closing the distance between us. I watch in shock as the man drops to his knee in front of me and wraps his fingers around my ankle. I scramble to grab his shoulder so I don't fall on my ass at his touch.

The stranger runs his massive, calloused hand over my skin, raising goosebumps all over my body. Even though the touch is innocent enough, I'm struck speechless. It's only when he looks up that I remember to respond.

"Rolled my ankle," I shrug. "Didn't exactly dress for a hike."

His brows draw together as an emotion I can't name crosses his eyes. He shifts his attention back to my foot. "You've also got some skin lacerations. We need to treat it so it doesn't get infected."

"It's really not that bad," I say to try and brush him off. Something about his touch makes me feel unsettled, and I'm worried that I like the way his fingers feel on my skin too much already. I barely know this man. "What do you mean I was heading in the opposite direction? Are you positive?"

"There's only one Blackwell Ranch in the entire state," he says to me gruffly, but not unkindly. "Soon to be inherited by the heiress Ashley Blackwell, I believe."

My heart twists at the mention of my best friend's name. Well this day can't possibly get any worse. Not only did I get lost, and run out of gas in the middle of nowhere, but I managed to get so lost that I wasn't even close to going the right direction to my destination.

I bite my lip. "Where's the nearest gas station?"

"A couple of hours away," the man says, still looking at the sorry, swollen state of my ankle. I almost shudder as his fingertips brush against my sensitive skin. "I doubt you'll be able with your foot like this. We need to take care of it."

I start to protest but my lips run dry and my mind turns into mush when I see the determined look in his eyes. Dazed, I whisper, "Okay."

"I'll call someone to take care of your car," he says, rubbing his warm palm against my calf subconsciously. "For now, let's get you into mine."

He slowly lowers my foot to the ground and stands. Suddenly, he's bending down and scooping me up into his arms as if I weigh nothing. I can't help the little squeal of surprise that escapes my lips. I quickly wrap my arms around his shoulders as he carries me bridal style to the passenger's side of his truck.

*This is dangerous*, I think to myself as he helps me settle into the seat. It's dangerous how easily I trust this stranger. Even more dangerous is my reaction to his touch. I find myself wanting more, craving the feeling of his rough palms on me. It distracts me to the point that it's like I'm not even here, so it's not until I notice the mirth shining in the stranger's eyes that I realize he must've said something.

"Did you say something?" I ask, blinking, willing my mind to start working properly.

"I asked if you need me to grab anything from your car," he says, his ruggedly handsome features bright with humor. "If the car needs more than just gas, it may need to be towed. We need to grab things you've left inside if that's the case."

"Yeah, I ..." I smooth my shaky hands over my lap, straightening my skirt. I hadn't really considered that. "All of my stuff is in the trunk. A suitcase with my clothes and a box with my ... other stuff."

He raises a brow at that but doesn't comment on my evasive answer. With a nod, he disappears down the road.

I peek out the back window and watch in fascination as he walks away. His back is just as impressive as his front. As he walks toward the sunset, he casts a perfect shadow. My fingers twitch as they process the burning need to draw him.

This stranger could be an actual axe murderer for all I know, but all I can think about is just how much I want to capture him in paint. I'm not sure what that says about me. This man could have plans to hurt me and all I want to do is make art of him. It's a little screwed up, but I can't make myself care. Whoever this man is, he's kindled a fire within me that I haven't felt in a long time, if ever.

This may be just what I need to find my passion for making art again.





## *Chapter 2*

*Knox*

I can feel her eyes on me.

The moment I walked away, I could feel them on me. With the way she's staring, she's not exactly helping calm the raging throb of my erection.

Anyone else would attach this sort of reaction to someone who hasn't touched a woman in years. After living in isolation for as long as I have, they may be right on that front, but that's only half of issue. It's true that I haven't touched a woman in years, but no one's captured my attention like this before.

Before I moved here and took over my father's craft, I was in the military. Even then, women had never really been my focus. At some point, I gave up thinking I'd find someone. I figured that I'd the rest of my life alone. I just couldn't imagine that any woman would look at the rough appearance and hulking, enormous frame and desire me. Never did I think that I would manage to feel the same way either.

The pretty lass seated in the passenger seat of my truck is proof of how untrue that is. My cock is so hard it's like it's threatening to rip my pants. The moment our eyes met, I was a goner.

It's a wonder she hasn't noticed how much I want her. Every second I passed touching her skin was a moment I spent fighting the instinct to claim her as mine. To haul her into the

bed of my truck, lift her little dress up, and claim her as my own ...

She's an angel. She's so ethereal I'm half convinced she might be a real angel. A gift from the heavens for an undeserving man such as myself.

The contrast of her long dark hair against her porcelain skin is unreal. Her soft, delicate features make her seem almost like a doll. It was strange, though ... When she looked at my scarred face with her curious, pale blue didn't seem filled with fear or disgust. In fact, she made me feel desirable for the first time in the longest time.

Her gaze, open and unashamed, makes me want to secret her away and protect her from the world.

Protect her from a beast like me.

It's fucking with my head just how much I want her. I want her body underneath mine even though a girl like her would never want a man like me. I want her to keep looking at me like I'm her knight in shining armor, come to save her.

But I'm not a knight. I'm closer to the beast lurking in the woods that she needs saving from. A starved man like myself is no good for her. She shouldn't trust me so easily.

I don't even know her name.

I shake my head, prying open the trunk of her car to find a suitcase and a large box labeled "fragile" with red tape. I consider grabbing her bag and leaving the box, but I'm afraid that whatever's in this box might get ruined when the car gets towed. Against my better judgment, I tuck it under my arm and carry it back to my truck along with her suitcase.

When I open the door to the back seat of my truck, curious blue eyes are staring at me, wide with fascination as I lay her belongings down at the foot of the back seat.

“I’m sorry I made you carry them all,” she says, her cheeks flushing prettily when I meet her stare.

“You don’t need to be sorry,” I say. After I have everything secured, I walk back around and climb into the driver’s seat.

The girl’s scent has filled the truck already in the few moments I’ve been gone. It makes my erection throb hard against the fly of my pants. I ignore the ache and turn the key in the ignition. A part of me thinks that if I ignore it, it’ll go away, but I know that’s wishful thinking. I can only hope my little angel doesn’t let her eyes stray southward to see it, to see just how much she affects me. I doubt she’ll want to be anywhere near me if she sees the evidence of my want.

“My name is Larissa, but no one really calls me that. Just call me Lara,” she says, breaking into my thoughts.

“Knox,” I say as I start to drive off down the gravel road.

“Knox,” she hums. “It suits you.”

I can’t help raising a brow at that. “What do you mean?”

“Well, Knox sounds like such a strong name. I don’t know, I picture a guy with a name like that deep in the forest chopping wood or something.”

“I do like to chop wood in the forest, so there’s that.”

“The name also strikes me as one for a sweet and honest guy.”

“You can ask me anything you like,” I say as my lips twitch, fighting a laugh. Lara is more talkative than I expected, her

face open and kind. I like that. Her expression tells me everything without her needing to, but every time she smiles or bites her lip, my entire body pulses with need. “I promise to be honest with my answers,” I add.

“Are you a serial killer?”

“That might have been a question to ask *before* you got in the truck, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, well, it was either get in a vehicle with you or brave the cold night on an unfamiliar road where a wild animal could stop by and maul me to bits.”

“I’m flattered.”

“Good, you should be,” she laughs. “You haven’t answered my question yet.”

“No, Lara, I am not a serial killer,” I chuckle deeply.

“Axe murderer?”

“Are they not the same thing?”

She gives me an adorably incredulous look. “No, they aren’t!”

Another chuckle breaks free, the sound strange and foreign even to my own ears. I can’t help it.

“You’re safe with me, Lara,” I say in my calmest voice, trying to keep a straight face. “My axe is only for trees. Human bones dent the blade too much and sharpening it after that’s a total pain.”

Her face goes from pink to red as her eyes pin me to my seat, wide and serious. I burst out laughing at her expression. Her little hand slaps me on the arm. Goosebumps erupt on my skin at the touch.

“You jerk!” she cries, grinning from ear to ear and making my heart melt. “I almost believed you!”

After a few moments, we settle down, just in time for me to turn off the main gravel road onto the long gravel lane that leads to my home. “There’s no cell service out here, but I have a landline you can use.”

My words seem to calm Lara down a bit and as much as I want—no, *crave*—her trust, I don’t want my angel to offer it so carelessly. She could have run into the wrong person out here. She could have hurt herself even more badly. She could have—

I shake my head to get rid of the dark thoughts plaguing me, just as I pull my car up in front of my house.

It’s me she ran into. That counts for something, right? What if this was meant to be?

“Wow is that your house?” she says eagerly, her head peeking out the car window as I put the truck in park.

The house my father left me stands strong, invitingly nestled among the trees. The fading sunlight filters through the branches, casting a warm glow on the property. A short distance away lies my workshop, the place where I spend most of my time.

I can’t help picturing Lara in it as she takes the place in with her mesmerizing eyes. I’ve never let myself imagine sharing my space with anyone before, but now my brain is running away with the idea of her staying. I can’t help imagining miniature versions of her running around the space every morning. What a sight that would be ...

I refuse to allow myself to linger on the fact that Lara is only here for a short while. I need to enjoy her company while I can.

I hop out of the car and rush to the passenger side to help my little angel down. Lara doesn't protest as I lift her in my arms and carry her into the house. In fact, her hands find my shoulders and take fistfuls of my shirt. I let us into the house with ease, but I don't notice the gray furball blending in with the carpet until I've almost stepped on him. The little menace lets out a plaintive meow as I miss stomping on his tail by a hair.

"Is that ... is that a cat?" Lara whispers excitedly, tightening her arms around me. Her breasts press into my chest as she leans over my shoulder. I'm not sure if I'm in heaven or in hell because of it.

I can feel my length twitching, no doubt leaking with need to show that it's ready to claim her. So much contact with this little slip of a woman after years without the touch of another ... it's a wonder I'm still sane.

"What's his name?" Lara asks. I have to shake my head to snap my focus back to the present moment.

"Bear."

Silence. "But he's so tiny!"

"I'm not the one who named him," I grumble as I carry her into the living room. Whoever named the cat was probably hoping he'd grow into a big tom cat but he hasn't grown hardly at all in the past few months. I didn't even love the

name to begin with, but the little devil already had the name when I adopted him and wouldn't respond to anything else.

"I'm not judging you," Lara says with a teasing grin. "Bear is a good name for such a cute little guy."

There's something unguarded about her that I find addictive. She's even more relaxed in my arms now that she's seen a big man like me can take care of something as small as Bear.

I help her onto the couch before going to get my first aid kit and a wet towel to clean her feet. I get back to find her stretched out on the couch, already half asleep. I can't say I'm surprised, I'm sure she's had a long, stressful day.

"This might sting a bit," I warn before kneeling down in front of her to clean her wounds. Luckily, it doesn't look like she got any more injuries walking around barefoot like she was. It's just the swollen ankle and the scrapes from falling.

I clean her feet, treat her injuries, and carefully elevate her ankle before rising to fetch some ice for it. When I return, Lara is truly gone, fast asleep on the couch. I stop mid-step as I look at her, breath stolen by her beauty.

She looks almost like a princess from a fairy tale, waiting for the kiss of her true love to wake her and break the curse. I savor the moment, watching her as she sleeps but I don't dare touch her.

I want her with an intensity unlike anything I have ever felt before, but I will not let myself make a move. She's too precious for a guy like me to come along and touch.

Carefully, I lay a blanket over her sleeping form, letting it fall over her body, touching her where I can't. As if to stoke the

fire of my jealousy, Bear climbs up onto the couch and curls into a ball on her lap.

“What a showoff,” I mutter, moving away from the couch and heading to the kitchen. I need to finally make some calls and get someone out here to tow her car.

After making the necessary arrangements, I walk back into the room where Lara is sleeping. For a moment, I let myself take her in, watching as her eyelids flutter and her chest rises and falls, before looking away.

It’s unwise to allow myself to fall deep for this stranger. I still can’t believe she’s real, but she’s here, right in front of me. Her presence brings me peace and I want her to stay, but I know it’s not possible.

I’ll just have to make the best of every moment she’s here.





## *Chapter 3*

*Lara*

When I was fourteen, my parents sent me off to Italy to train under a somewhat famous painter who also happened to be a family friend.

He was a short, stern-faced man who desired perfection when I had long been taught that there was no such thing as perfection in the world of art. But I was there to learn, so I listened. It was never enough for him. Everything I did was wrong in Pierre's eyes, and eventually the voice of criticism in my head started to sound exactly like him. I've had many mentors over the years but his is the voice that stayed.

Every time I made a wrong stroke of brush I couldn't erase, I would hear his voice in my head, whispering how much of a disappointment I was. How unskilled and untalented I was. How he hated spoiled rich brats like me for whom painting was just a little hobby. It didn't matter to him that this was the only thing I ever wanted to do, ever felt passionate about. I never told my parents about how mean or disparaging he was, but it got to me so much that it affected my painting for a while.

For the first time in years, I wake up to inner silence. Sure, there are noises happening around the house, but my mind hasn't been this quiet in forever. It's peaceful without the nagging criticism of Pierre.

Well, not exactly as there are noises coming from around the house but my head is silent and peaceful and the annoying

voice at the back of my head criticizing me for losing my passion is not there. It was bad enough that he'd sucked the joy for painting out of me so many years ago, but his voice lingering with me to suck up the rest of my motivation has been terrible.

I don't hear his voice today. Honestly, I can't even remember what it sounds like.

When I open my eyes, the curtains are drawn, but morning light is streaming from in between the gaps. There's a little weight next to me when I shift, and a blanket that wasn't there when I suddenly fell asleep on the couch last night. Lots of blankets, actually, and a mattress much more comfortable than the couch cushions.

"Hello, Bear," I whisper sleepily, running my hand over the ball of fluff curled up beside me.

I should probably be alarmed at finding myself in a strange bed, but I'm not. It's comforting. I'm still in my own clothes, but the blankets smell like pine and smoke. It's as if Knox is there, even though it looks like I was the only one who slept in this bed last night.

"I must've been tired more than I thought I was," I whisper to the little cat before pushing myself out of the big bed.

I manage to limp the bathroom where I clean myself up a little. I change into an enormous shirt that was left at the foot of the bed, though I'm not sure if it was actually left for me. I can't really make myself care, because it's nice to be enveloped in both warm flannel and the pine and smoke scent of Knox.

I carefully make my way down to the kitchen, but Knox isn't there. Just the breakfast he left for me. I grab a piece of toast and head out to look for him, figuring he might be in the small outbuilding I saw last night. As I approach the small structure, the clanging sound of metal hitting metal fills the air. I hesitate.

I don't remember if Knox told me what the small house was for, nor what he did for a living. Curiosity gets better of me and I push open the door, stopping at the sight that greets me.

My eyes are immediately drawn to Knox's powerful form, muscles rippling with each powerful swing of the hammer. The sparks dance around him, illuminating his rugged features. Suddenly, the itch in my fingers is back.

I don't even do portraits. I've never liked them and avoided working on the ones my mentors tasked me with. But there's something about Knox that has me craving painting him. The urge to capture this raw energy on my canvas is irresistible. Everything about this moment, from the interplay of light and shadow to the intensity of his eyes when he turns to look at me —

“Lara?”

I gasp and step back. I was not expecting to feel this way upon hearing his voice. His brawny figure is already too much for me, but his deep, sultry voice on top of that makes me feel strangely warm and nervous. I can't even make myself meet his eyes, but I know they're on me. Instead, I try looking at his massive chest.

That's a mistake.

He's wearing an impossibly tight t-shirt under an apron that doesn't do anything to hide the way his torso tapers into his waist. Something in me wants to run my fingers up and down the lines of his muscles, just to make sure he's real.

"Lara are you okay?" he calls out to me again.

No, no I am *not* okay.

"Yeah, I didn't mean to interrupt your work, I'm sorry—"

"It's alright," the man says. He drops the massive hammer in his hands. It falls to the ground with a loud thud as he starts walking towards me.

I'm used to seeing men in suits or shirtless guys at the gym, but none of them have half the power that this man has as he stalks across his workspace.

"Does your foot still hurt?"

"My what?" I reply in confusion.

"Your foot, you were hurt yesterday, remember?" he says to me, his voice low and breathtaking.

Right. I was limping around yesterday, lost, and confused.

How could I forget that?

I must stay silent for too long because he steps into my space, closing the distance between the two of us. I gasp when he runs the knuckle of his index finger over my cheek. The little gesture sends a tremor running through my body. His dark eyes have me hypnotized to the spot. "Are you sure you're okay, baby?"

Oh my ... "M-me? Yeah, I'm fine."

“I didn’t want you to wake up alone so I let Bear into the bedroom and left breakfast for you in the kitchen.”

“I saw it, thank you,” I say breathlessly, trying to think of something else to say. I can barely grasp a thought long enough to say it. With him this close, I can clearly see the bulging outlines of his muscled frame, and his intoxicating scent stirs a storm of strange sensations I’ve never felt before. Heat prickles underneath my skin, messing with my mind.

“You’re wearing my shirt,” he says, his voice thick with something unfamiliar. “I left your suitcase next to the bed. Did you not see it?”

Oh. Was I not supposed to put this shirt on then?

I must seem like a total weirdo to him. I should explain myself so he doesn’t think I’m just wearing his clothes for no reason, as if I’m overstepping some boundary between us. I need to explain that I’m not used to being around big, attractive men like him, at having the chance to get closer with someone like this, but I can’t find my voice long enough to say the words.

Knox is driving me crazy, looking at me the way he is. His gaze is all heat, dark and hypnotizing.

“Lara,” he growls deeply, taking a step closer to close the remaining distance between us. I gasp when he wraps his hand around my waist and draws me flush against him. I gasp when his body heat penetrates the thin material of his shirt, making me yearn and ache for him.

This is new to me.

Knox is every bit a piece of art, just like any other piece I have seen in museums all over the world. It’s not the first time I’ve

fallen in love with a piece of art, it's the first time I've ached like this for one.

"I hope you don't mind that I borrowed your shirt." My voice comes out breathy and I brace my hand on his chest. My eyes widen when I feel the hardness of his muscles. "It was there at the foot of the bed, so ..."

My voice trails off when his eyes drop to my lips. Liquid heat gathers between my thighs when he leans in, his lips barely touching mine when he rasps, "Tell me what you want."

"I ..."

What was I about to say? Why can't I get a hold of my thoughts?

Knox threads a hand through my hair, gripping it tightly and forcing my head to tip back. My breathing grows labored when his eyes drop to the line of my throat before moving slowly down to regard my breasts under the fabric of his shirt. A rumbling sound grows deep in his chest as his eyes run a soft, caressing gaze over my body.

"Say it," he growls, his dark eyes connecting with mine as he runs his tongue over his lips, eyes hungry and wild. "Tell me what you want, Angel."

Him. All I want is him. The things my body is feeling—it's want. It's all want. He's washed away every other thought, and has put himself in their places.

"I-I ... I want ..."

It has to be him, right? His touch, his scent. His unmatched strength. Why can't I get the words out?

“Let me help you figure it out,” he breathes hotly.

Whatever parts of my brain that were still capable of functioning suddenly stutter to a halt as his lips drop to mine. His mouth is hot and demanding, the scruff of his beard tickling my chin as he nips at my lips.

It’s my first kiss. I can already tell that it’s a high point, and that kissing anyone else will pale in comparison. It hits me suddenly that I don’t want to kiss anyone else ever. Not if I can help it. The very thought makes my hands fly up to his shoulders, hoping to pull him closer.

Knox tightens his hand in my hair, forcing a gasp out of me. My lips part against his and he licks into my mouth with a low groan.

He tastes like something I shouldn’t want as much as I do.

He tastes forbidden because that’s what he is to me. My parents would lose their minds if they found out what I was doing in the middle of nowhere with a man I met less than twenty-four hours ago. Someone like Knox, all rough edges, and hard lines, would horrify them.

My gentle giant would scare them, even though he has never ever scared me.

I lean into the kiss, rising onto the tips of my toes to lean into his massive frame as he takes my mouth with his. He licks into my mouth as if I belong to him. The hand twisting in my hair tugs gently and I whimper into the kiss.

I claw his chest, tugging at the apron to feel more of his skin as he kisses me, his harsh breath mixing with mine in a fever of need. Our lips break apart, but only for a second. Being



apart from him is too hard for me, I need to feel his mouth against mine more, just to make sure this is real.

I whimper when he pulls my lower lip between his teeth to nip at me, and the noise breaks the breathless, silent spell between us.

“I want to fuck you. Right here, right now,” he pants, grinding his hips against me. Something hard has appeared there, pressing against me eagerly. “Are you wet, Angel? I bet your pussy would take me so easily if I fucked into it.”

“Oh!” I gasp as he dips his hot mouth to my neck, running open-mouthed kisses over my skin and sending a rush of heat to my already throbbing center.

“It’s been so long, baby,” he growls, tracing his hips over the shell of my ear. “It’s been so long since I’ve wanted to touch anyone. I want you, Lara. Tell me I can fuck your tight pussy. That I don’t have to imagine thrusting my bare cock into your aching little cunt any longer.”

Lust crawls into my belly, his words sending tremors through my body. His words are unhinged, his voice ragged with desperation, but I feel exactly the same. I want the same relief from this tension and I want it from him and him alone.

I must take too long to respond because Knox’s hands drop to my aching breasts. I keen and arch my back when his knuckles brush over my nipples through the rough material of his shirt.

“I... oh, god!” I moan as he cups my breasts with hands, his thumbs driving me into madness.

“Please Angel,” he says breathlessly. “I need to be inside of you. Let me kiss and worship your body, make you feel good.”

“Please,” I plead, my nerves fried with need.

Knox drags his hand up under the shirt, panting as he slips a finger past the elastic edging of my panties.

“Fuck, little girl,” he curses when he feels how wet I’ve become. I flush at being found out. There’s no hiding how much I want him any longer. “You’re dripping all over my fingers.”

When he tries to slip a finger inside me, I whimper, the intrusion unfamiliar and maybe even a little uncomfortable. Knox quickly draws his hand away, his eyes shooting to mine in shock.

“You’re a virgin?” he gapes at me.

His eyes lock with mine. I’d thought that my inexperience would be disappointing, but that doesn’t seem to be the case. In fact, he looks even more eager than before.

“I’ve—um—I’ve never ... yeah.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” he says, his voice thick with want. “I could have hurt you.”

“I know but ... I want *you*. I want to give myself to you. I didn’t want to disappoint you.”

“You could never disappoint me,” he says as he gently rubs his finger through the folds of my center, watching my reaction to the touch. “I can give you anything you want. What do you need?”

It’s unreal. I’ve stayed a virgin this long because I always wanted to share my first time with a man I was in love with. With Knox, the attraction was immediate, but it’s already more

than that. I'm obsessed with him, with his touch, with the way he looks when light hits him at different angles. I want to keep this memory with me, not just in my heart, but on canvas too.

"I want to paint you."



## *Chapter 4*

*Knox*

I am well and truly fucked.

There is no way in hell my cock is going to behave with Lara staring intently like that. But I made her a promise that I would do anything she wanted, and she's holding me to it.

So now I'm posed in my workshop, naked as the day I was born, letting her paint me as I sit surrounded by different my works in progress.

She's perched on the small stool I got her, gaze shifting from me to the canvas in front of her as her fingers move across it expertly. I can't take my eyes off her, too engrossed by watching her work.

Every time I look at her, I see something new. I've thought of nothing else but her since my day began. Hell, maybe even longer than that. The moment she passed out last night, I was preoccupied with making sure he got the best rest possibly. I probably didn't need to worry so much, because she didn't even stir when I carried her up to my bed. She spent the entire night sleeping soundly, Bear cuddled up next to her as I watched from a chair in the corner, making sure she wanted for nothing as she rested. At some point I drifted off, and when I woke up, she was still there. It wasn't a dream like I thought it might be.

Leaving her in bed was the hardest thing I had ever done, but I had to make myself do something else before I did something

stupid.

And then she came out to my workshop, that beautiful body of hers wrapped up in an old shirt of mine I'd forgotten to put away. Maybe it was stupid making a move on her, but it was worth it if it led to getting to watch her in her element.

“Do you live here alone?” Lara suddenly asks, making me snap back to attention. She bites into her lower lip when she looks up to meet my gaze. It's all I can do not to throw myself across the room to take her into my arms.

“I do,” I say. “It's just me and Bear. My dad left this property to me when he died. I was his only kid.”

“I'm an only child too,” she says, shifting her attention back to her canvas. “My parents call me their miracle baby because they had me in their forties.”

She's a miracle for me too.

A miracle that I can't wait to have back in my arms, laid bare on my bed so that I can pleasure her until my name is the only one she remembers. I don't deserve something as precious as her, but the thought that she wants me like I want her has my cock beginning to stir once more. I was already half-hard—hard not to be when her thighs are so visible from beneath my shirt—so letting my thoughts run away from me isn't helping anything.

*Control yourself. Focus, Knox.*

I'm not some literal beast living in the wild, not like I sometimes feel. I might keep myself far from civilization but that doesn't mean I can't act civilized when I need to.

“Knox?”

My eyes shoot up to meet Lara's. She's stopped painting. Her brush and palette have been set aside and she's staring at me intently. Her eyes grow a little glassy as I meet them and her cheeks flush a pretty shade of pink.

"What is it, Baby? Are you done?"

"Not even close," she says with a dry chuckle and I watch with bated breath when she rises up from the stool and starts to walk toward me. I don't dare reach out to her when she stops in front of me. "I just don't know how others do it," she sighs.

"Do what?"

"Nude paintings," she whispers, stepping into my space. My hands tighten into fists. If I touch her now, I won't be able to hold back. She has to know that, right? "I've sat there for half an hour, but that's nothing. I didn't get much down. I couldn't."

"Why not?" I ask, barely able to grit out the words. My whole body is pulled tight as I fight the instinctual need to claim her.

"I could feel the heat radiating from you. Knox, I can't focus when my body is practically begging for your touch."

Fuck. She's saying everything I want to hear. That I *need* to hear. Her blue eyes look up at me pleadingly, as if she's ready for me to take her in a way that no other man has.

"Lara ..." I start.

I'm tempted to warn her that if I touch her, I'll be hard pressed to ever let her go, but I don't want to scare her. Her stay is supposed to be temporary, I know that, but I'll struggle more than I care to admit without her here, I just know it.

Something tells me that once I feel her tight little cunt around my cock, I won't ever be able to have another. I know I won't ever have enough of her, that I won't stop until her stomach is swollen with my child. Until I have a wedding band around her finger.

Does she want me in the same way? Would feelings like that scare her?

"I'll finish the painting later," she whispers, leaning in closer, blanketing me in her sweet flowery scent. "Maybe it won't be a nude, I'm not sure if I'd be able to share something like that with other people."

Her cheeks flush as she looks up at me through her lashes, looking almost guilty.

"My turn now?" I say hoarsely.

She wets her lips, her eyes flashing with desire at my words. "Yes, your turn."

I draw her between my thighs, locking her in place. My lips are on hers in an instant. Lara throws her arms around my neck, leaning into the kiss with a hunger that may very well match mine.

I groan into her mouth as I drop my hands to her ample ass, lifting her into my arms just as I rise from the stool I'd been posed on. She wraps her legs tightly around me as I carry her to the wall and pin her against it. Kissing her is like breathing, I need it to survive. Without it, I'm fucked.

There is no coming back from this. She's going to ruin me for anyone else.



“Knox, oh, God!” Lara moans when I draw back from the kiss and drop my face to her neck, kissing a path down her throat. I maneuver us around so that her ass is perched on the workbench before reaching out blindly and sweeping everything off the surface. Loud noise fills the room as heavy items drop to the floor with a loud clang, but I hardly hear it. I can’t focus on anything but her.

“I’m going to fuck you, sweetheart,” I whisper, my breath heavy as I lick a path down her neck, parting the shirt to kiss her skin. “Going to take this pussy, make it mine.”

She deserves soft sheets and tender words. She deserves the best of everything, not this savage animal taking her in his workshop, but that would mean stopping. And it sure as hell doesn’t seem like my angel wants me to stop any time soon. Not with the way her fingers are weaving into my hair or gripping my shoulders.

The very thought that we may part ways after this makes me throb even harder for her.

“I know,” she whispers, a slight tremor in her voice. “I want that.”

“Good, because my cock is aching to be inside your wet hole.”

She whimpers at my words, leaning closer and rubbing her pussy against my hard cock. I almost come on the spot. Maybe I was wrong to think tender talk would be what she wants.

“You like that, don’t you?” I say hoarsely, fighting the need to rip her panties off and fuck her where she stands. “You like me talking dirty to you?”

“Yeah,” she pants, writhing needily against me, making me ache for her. “No one’s ever talked to me like that.”

“Then I won’t stop,” I say reaching beneath the shirt to drag her panties down her thighs before tossing them away. All the while, I pepper kisses around her nipples. “Do you want to hear about how I am going to lick your pussy, Lap up your juices and run my tongue over your cunt until you’re opened up enough to take my cock?”

She cries out, arching into my mouth when I close my hungry lips over her right nipple and suck at it wetly. She runs her fingers through my hair, tugging me close, her cries growing louder when I shift my attention to her other nipple.

Her body is trembling with need as I tear the shirt open to reveal the rest of her. I kiss a path down her stomach. My mouth salivates as I drop on my knees between her perfect thighs. The need to taste her juices is unlike anything I have ever felt before.

“Let me see you, baby,” I growl, prying her thighs wider to reveal her glistening pink pussy. My eyes are on hers as I run a thumb over her folds to part her folds. “Look at this pretty cunt.”

I don’t give her much of an opportunity to respond as I lean in and kiss the wet valley of her flesh, lapping up her sweet juices on my tongue. She cries out, her thighs shaking so hard I have to close my hands over them to hold her still as I lick at her, dragging the surface of my tongue over her wetness before twisting my tongue against her clit.

She bucks in my arms, her whimpers only feeding my desire. I find myself soaking in every sound she makes. I grab her

thighs and drape them over my shoulders, licking into her with the intensity of a starved man.

Her cries grow as my movements become fevered, rubbing my tongue roughly over her clit even as I guide the tip of my finger into her entrance. I have to fight the urge to come all over her thighs as her cunt clamps down tightly around the digit. Instead, I maintain my composure and keep it there, lapping at her juicy pussy until she relaxes around it.

She whimpers, combing her fingers into my hair and drawing me hard against her as she rides my face and finger.

“Knox!” she cries out, pushing harder against me as I hungrily lick at her, carefully adding another finger to stretch her while drowning any discomfort she might feel by eating her out. I pump my fingers into her, and she bucks when I touch her g-spot.

I’m torn between wanting to fuck her and staying buried between her legs for the rest of eternity, but the latter is not an option. I feel it the second she begins to orgasm. She stills in my arms for a second before a scream tears from her lips. Her thighs tremble and her walls tighten around my fingers as she coats my jaw with her release. I keep a firm hold of her thighs as I grind my tongue over her sex, lapping up at her juices until she collapses back onto the work bench, spent.

My cock is so hard it hurts as I get up and gather her into my arms, my gaze dropping to her pert breasts. I push the shirt aside for a better view of her body. My eyes are wild as I step in between her thighs, eyes on her round breasts as I guide the head of my cock to her entrance.

“I can’t wait any longer,” I groan, drawing her into my arms as I rub the crown against her wet folds. “I could spend days with my head between your thighs, but I need to be inside of you.”

“Knox, I-I’m not on the pill.”

My head swims at the revelation.

I wrap my hands around her waist and draw her closer, carefully pushing my cock into her. The need to fuck her raw and put a baby in her womb is intense. I didn’t think I could want her more than I already did, but fuck. I want her more than ever. To bind her to me with my seed.

“Knox, it’s ... It’s so *big*,” she whimpers when I push another inch into her.

“I’ve got you, baby.” I take her ass in my hands and draw her closer, pushing my swollen cock further into her unclaimed hole. My control hangs from a thin thread, threatening to snap at any given moment. “Wrap your legs around me,” I order.

Lara does as I instruct. The move pushes my cock another inch into her and she whimpers, her gaze lifting to mine. Our eyes lock together. I grab her thigh and thrust my hips, which seats me fully into her tight hole. She cries out at the intrusion and I have to bite back a moan, fighting the urge to come right then and there.

“Fuck!” I hiss, pressing my fingers into her flesh as I fight for control. She’s tighter than I could have ever imagined. “Are you alright, Lara?”

Lara wraps her arms arounds my shoulder, drawing me closer to her. I groan at the sensation of her tits rubbing against my chest hair. She works her hips a little, testing different angles. I

thought she'd look uncomfortable or pained, but all I see is pleasure hooding her eyes.

“Yes,” she whispers, crawling her nails over my shoulder when I start moving.

She cries out and her eyes grow dazed when I finally start to grind into her, the friction making us both see stars.

“You like that?” I say through gritted teeth, drawing my cock from her slickness before thrusting back inside.

“God, yes,” she pants, her back arching and I drink up the beautiful sight. “Again, Knox, please!”

I couldn't stop even if I wanted to. I'm far too gone, lost in ecstasy as I begin to fuck her. She rolls her hips furiously against me.

“Mine,” I growl as I take the hand from her thigh and wrap it around her throat, stroking my cock deeper and harder into her, drinking in the sight of my angel spread out on my workbench. “This pussy is mine. Only I get to have this body like this. You're fucking mine, little girl.”

“Knox, I—oh!”

She doesn't need to say the words for me to know what she wants. My eyes stay locked on her as I fuck her ruthlessly on the table, reveling in her cries as I take her, claim her for myself.

Suddenly, her pussy clamps down on my pulsing cock and with a roar, I spill my seed into her. Her tight little cunt milks me of everything I have as she comes around me. I'm left feeling drained and sated, panting as I come down from the best sex I have ever experienced.

“Are you alright, sweetheart?” I whisper, cupping her cheek and brushing my lips over her forehead. “I didn’t hurt you?”

“No, never,” she whispers back to me, but before I can question her strange tone, she drops her forehead against my shoulder, looking as tired as I feel. I wrap my arms around her body and draw her flush against me with the unspoken promise to never let her go.

Whatever happens after this, we’ve tied ourselves together. Nothing can come between us now.



## Chapter 5

*Lara*

Something is bothering me about what I just did.

Don't get me wrong, I was fully prepared for whatever Knox and I have to get to this point, especially after I stopped painting and approached my gentle giant of a man.

In fact, I'd hoped for it. As soon as I realized I was feeling desire for him, I wanted him to have me. But now, I'm wondering if I'm in too deep. We hardly know each other, and yet he's calling me *his*. I should have a problem with it. This behavior isn't normal.

My heart hammers in my chest. It's a wonder he can't hear it, close as we are right now.

I sigh at myself inwardly. I'm probably overthinking this. When he called me his and said no one else was allowed to touch me, we were both lost in the moment. I'm sure people say all sorts of things they aren't serious when they get intimate ...

But then ... why does a small but very loud part of me want it to be true?

Do I even want to leave this place? The thought of leaving Knox makes my heart ache. I mean, I guess could stay a little longer and paint him some more. I have clothes with me, and the time away is blocked out on my calendar. It's not like I'm supposed to be anywhere else.



I can stay a little longer, if he'll have me, but can I stay isolated from civilization for so long? I'm a city girl through and through. I like being connected to other people, living life in the same rhythms as everyone else. At some point, I will want to go back but...

Will he let me go? Will *I* let me go?

"I'm sorry I was a little rough with you," Knox whispers as he presses gentle kisses on my naked skin. "Got a little carried away."

"It's okay," I whisper. "I liked it."

He hums before brushing his lips over the shell of my ear and nipping at my lobe. "*Mine.*"

I suck a sharp breath, arousal pooling between my thighs already. There he goes again, getting lost in the moment and calling me his. And I'm right there with him getting lost too.

"Knox," I whisper, running my fingers through his hair and he leans in, nuzzling my neck like he's touch-starved. "Should we head back inside?"

He draws back to stare at me and just like that, I get lost in his intense, dark eyes. They're still heavy-lidded with want despite the fact that we just finished having sex less minutes ago. "I still want you. Fuck, I want to do it all over again and again, but I'm sure you want to make a few phone calls."

"I probably should," I say honestly, my cheeks flushing. "I don't really want to, though." Not yet at least. I want to enjoy my time with him while I can.

"I'll draw you a bath while you think about what you want to do, and then make us lunch," he says before standing and

looking for his pants.

“I’ll help make lunch,” I say, sliding off the work bench, wincing as I step down on my sore ankle.

I head over to tidy the canvas and my tools as Knox gets dressed, and then we walk back together to the main house. Knox leads me straight to the bathroom and sure enough, there’s a huge bathtub. He turns the faucet on and starts to test the temperature for me as I grab my toiletries from my suitcase. My body sighs with relief a few minutes later as I finally sink into the warm, soothing water.

Before Knox has the chance to leave, I try to capture his attention with a question. “What kind of stuff do you make in your workshop?”

“I craft tools from wrought iron and steel, sometimes work on furniture or whatever it is a customer needs,” he says as he carefully sits on the rim of the tub.

“Sounds difficult,” I murmur, trailing my gaze over his heavily muscled arms. “Have you done it for long?”

“Five years.”

My eyes shoot back to his in shock. “Really? What did you do before then?”

“I was in the Army. Had to quit and come back to run my father’s business when he passed away.”

“I’m so sorry, that must’ve been hard,” I whisper, running a soothing palm over the back of his hand.

Knox doesn’t say anything for a moment, making me wonder if I’ve overstepped some invisible line with him, but I don’t

sense any anger from him. “What about you? When did you start painting?”

“I think I was about four? My parents let me draw all over my bedroom walls and kept giving me drawing pencils until I was old enough to start attending art classes. I’ve never thought of doing anything else.”

I leave out the fact that while my parents were more than willing to pay for classes, they’ve never really supported or encouraged me otherwise. I know they’d rather I followed in their footsteps and went into business management or real estate or whatever it is they do. I just can’t bear the thought of doing anything else.

Just as I open my mouth to ask another question, a loud noise fills the house. I sit up abruptly, splashing the floor with some water.

“What is that?” I asked, alarmed.

“It’s just the landline. I’ll go answer it.”

My eyes widen. Maybe I just don’t remember it, but I don’t recall the sound of a phone ringing like that being so jarring. After Knox disappears, I climb out of the tub, being careful not to slip on the wet floor. I towel off before putting on the massive bathrobe hanging on the back of the bathroom door. Then, I set off to find Knox.

I find him in the living room, speaking to someone on the phone. I wait until he’s done before asking him to show me how to use it. He leaves me to make my call and heads to the kitchen to start making lunch.

“Hello?” Ashley’s guarded voice breaks through the speaker and I let out a sigh.

“Hey, Ashley. It’s me.”

“Lara!” she yells, nearly popping my eardrums. “Why are you calling me from a different number?”

“It’s a long story,” I say, my eyes flitting to the kitchen door.

“I love long stories. Start talking.”

I lower my voice as I start to explain to my best friend what happened yesterday, omitting the part where I tried doing a nude painting—painting I’d hardly even count as started—and instead, lost my virginity to the subject of that painting.

“And that’s what happened,” I finish up my story, hoping it seems convincing.

Ashley is silent for a long time and I wait for her to explode but her voice is calm when it breaks through.

“Let me get this straight. You were on the way to visit me, took a wrong turn, your car broke down and you were left stranded alone in the middle of nowhere and figured that wasn’t traumatizing enough so you let a stranger take you home?”

*And had mind-blowing, world-shattering sex with said stranger who calls me his and I really like it.*

“Perfectly summarized,” I say.

“Are you out of your fucking mind? Lara, you don’t know this guy! He could have hurt you,” she shouts before letting her voice soften. “Wait—he *didn’t* hurt you, did he?”

*No, but he holds my heart in his hands and could.*

“No, he’s been nothing but kind.”

“I’ll need to see that for myself. Where are you? I’ll come get you.”

I bite my lip. I have absolutely no clue where the hell I am, but that doesn’t matter. I’m not really ready to leave. That much is clear now that I’m being given the option. The thought of parting with Knox makes me ache more than I thought I could.

“I don’t know.”

“Go ask the guy, he’ll be able to run me through it.”

“He’s not here,” I murmur back. I hate myself for lying to my best friend when she’s only trying to look out for me, but something tells me Knox doesn’t like to have his privacy intruded upon. I know that he’d probably be fine with a friend stopping by to check up on me, but ... I like how secluded it feels out here. I like how safe I feel with Knox.

“Lara!”

I jump at my friend’s harsh tone.

“Ashley, I’m fine—”

“Do you have any idea how nuts that sounds? Look, I’m sure he’s great, but you don’t know him, you know? The fact that you have no clue where you are scares me.”

“You don’t need to worry about me,” I say, touched by her concern.

“If you don’t tell me where you are, I’m going to trace this number. It’s not yours so it’s his, right? Probably a landline because he’s so isolated?”

“Ashley ...”

“And while I do that, I need you to promise me that you’re safe or I am sending an army to look for you.”

My eyes shoot back to Knox where he is stirring something in a pot. He looks up and our eyes lock. Just like that, nothing else matters. He’s taken care of me since the moment we met. He cared for me and made me feel things I never have before. I’m not ready for this to be done yet.

“Lara!”

“I’m safe,” I hiss into the receiver. “I promise, Ash.”

I hear the sigh of relief Ashley lets out and hope that this conversation has bought me more time. I hum along as she talks a little more but I barely hear a word she says as I think about how Knox and I might spend the day.

“Alright, it’s settled then. I will take care of it today,” Ashley says and I grunt, unsure of what she’s talking about. “I’ll hang up now but take care, okay?”

“Okay. Thanks, Ash,” I manage before saying goodbye and hanging up.

I slide the receiver into place before walking towards the kitchen. I sit on a stool at his counter and watch him make something that smells so good it makes my stomach growl.

“I hope you like chicken soup,” he says, humor dancing in his eyes.

“I love it. Especially now that I haven’t had a proper meal for hours.”

“Then you’re in for a treat,” Knox says. We fall into a comfortable silence as he prepares our lunch. He declines my

help when I offer it and tells me to just relax and let him take care of me.

After we finally eat, I clear my throat. “Do you have anything you need to do today?” I’m curious, but I also hope his day is free. I’d love to go back out to his shop to work on the painting more.

“I have a few home deliveries to make. They won’t take long, perhaps an hour or two.”

“Oh,” I say, disappointed that I won’t get to work on the painting of him, but I quickly school my features. I can’t get in the way of him doing what he needs to do. It’s not a big deal to pass the time on my own. Maybe I’ll try sketching Bear or something.

“I won’t be gone for long,” he promises, leaning in and pressing his lips against my cheek. My eyes flutter closed at the little show of affection.

I am absolutely beginning to fall for this man, and I can’t stop it, not that I’d want to. I’m not sure I’ll be able to leave this man when the time comes. It’s dangerous to have these big feelings so soon, but it’s also exciting.

It’s so exciting that a few hours later, when I hear the crunch of gravel under car tires, I find myself sprinting out of the house to greet him.

But instead of his dirt-dusted truck ambling down the driveway, it’s a new-model SUV. Somehow, in my head, this makes sense. I expect him to step out of the car, but that’s not what happened. When the passenger door opens, out steps a familiar face.

Ashley Blackwell, heiress to an enormous financial empire and my best friend as well.

She said she would find me and she did.

I should be happy. I should be grateful that my best friend found me, right? Instead, my heart has fallen to my toes.

Looks like I have to make a decision about staying with Knox sooner than I anticipated.





## *Chapter 6*

*Knox*

“Such a nice boy, and such skillful work! Robb would be proud of you.”

I nod at Mrs. Gilbert as her husband examines the tools he ordered. The couple were loyal customers to my father and they didn't bat an eye when I took over his place. They trust that I can deliver just as well as my father did.

“The man sure would be proud,” Mr. Gilbert says, turning around to face me. “These are good son. Better than your old man used to make them.”

I nod politely at his words but all I can think about is getting home to Lara. I have been away from her long enough as it is.

“Here is your pay.” The older man hands me an envelope. I don't even bother to check that he's given me the correct amount. I trust him; he's never short-changed me in the time I have worked for him.

“I'll be off now, ma'am, sir,” I say, tipping my cap at them before starting for my car. Before I can take a further step, a hand grabbing my sleeve stops me.

“What's the rush? You should stay for dinner. Miriam made a roast and I have to tell you, she makes the best roast in the state.”

Of that, I have no doubt. Mrs. Gilbert's cooking is the stuff of legend, but I can't let that distract me. I flash the sweet elderly

couple a smile, which seems to surprise them. “I really appreciate the invite, but I need to head back.”

“You don’t have someone waiting for you, now do you?” Mrs. Gilbert teases. Her eyes widen when I don’t hurry to correct her. Suddenly, she looks at me slyly. “You do? Oh, honey, that’s wonderful, isn’t that wonderful, Dan?”

Mr. Gilbert’s mouth is hanging open with shock. To be honest, I’m still as shocked as he is. I never thought I’d be lucky enough to find *anyone* like the passionate little thing I have back at my house, let alone share what I have with her. She’s almost too good to be true. As I’ve made my deliveries, I’ve had to remind myself that she’s real and that this isn’t something I made up in a fit of loneliness.

Fuck, I need to get back to her. I need to hold her myself, just to make sure this isn’t some dream.

“I’d love to, but I need to go,” I say, a little more urgently. “Maybe next time, Mrs. Gilbert.”

The couple smile as they wave me off and I rush to my car. Times like this make me want what they have. A quiet life spent living together out here, where no one can interrupt us unless we want them to. A space where we can grow old together.

Does Lara want something like that?

Would she ... would she want something like that with me?

As I make my way back home, I resolve to tell her how I feel. We have a connection, that much is clear, but I want to make sure she knows I’m serious. Things elsewhere move faster

than they do here. People don't always say what they mean. She might not realize that I'm serious when I say she's mine.

I have to tell her that I'm hers if she'll have me. And something tells me that she feels the same way.

As I finally pull up my driveway, something about the house seems off. As I approach the front door to my house, I realize that it's because there are no lights on even though the sun's starting to set.

Fuck.

I burst through the house, ignoring Bear's plaintive meows for attention. Lara is nowhere to be seen. Her things are gone, the bed has been made, the kitchen is clean. When I run out to my workshop, I see that it's just as we left it earlier today, but for the fact that her painting tools and the canvas are gone.

It's almost like she was never here.

An impulsive thought crosses my mind as I stalk back into the house: was she ever here? Was she even real?

No, she was real. I remember the taste of her lips and skin, the smell of her hair, the weight of her in my arms. So then, was what we had real? That intense heat between us?

When I sit at the kitchen table, just to let myself think, I notice a piece of paper and a pen that wasn't there before. I lean over to read it. My eyes quickly scan the neat scrawl, left behind by Lara to inform me that her friend tracked her down and that she left with her. She regrets that she couldn't thank me in person but hopes that fate will help us meet again.

Every muscle in my body tenses as I read the note over and over.

Hell. How the fuck is a man like me going to run into her like that? Am I supposed to walk up to in her home city, pretend my heart isn't breaking right now? Like I'm not dead inside without her? Am I supposed to wait for her car to break down on a back road again and swing in to rescue her?

Bear softly pads into the kitchen and rubs against my legs, purring and chirping at me. The despair leaves me in a rush, leaving nothing but trembling rage instead.

The woman—*my* woman—left me. Or maybe she was taken from me, but that's not what it seems like. Either she doesn't have the feelings I thought she might have, or she doesn't think I've got strong enough feelings for her. I haven't shown her that I can take care of her, that my feelings are real, big, and only meant for her.

She's mine, but I belong to her same as she belongs to me.

There is no word to describe the rage that begins to build in my body. Within twenty-four hours, I've managed to find and then lose one of the most important things I have ever had stumble into my life.

I push up from my seat and whirl around, ramming my fist into the wall. The plaster breaks and crumbles, clattering to the floor, but the show of strength does nothing to quell the anger boiling inside me.

Fuck. I need to go beat something in my shop before I destroy something I can't fix.

I take long steps to my workshop, slamming the door behind me and picking up the hammer. But when I look around, there's nothing that looks like it needs to really be hammered

out, nothing that looks like it can take the full extent of my anger at the moment.

The space where we fucked earlier is still empty, the things that were on the table before that are still scattered on the ground. My chest goes tight as the memories come flooding back. I drop the hammer, letting it thud to the ground as I walk to the spot.

And that's when I notice the little flash of delicate fabric on the ground. I lean down to pick it up. Right. Her panties. I'd practically torn them off in my desperation earlier. I didn't realize she'd never put them back on.

I raise the garment to my nose and deeply inhale. The scent of her arousal, still fragrant and heady on the fabric, make my head swim. Immediately, I feel myself grow hard, my erection pulsing to life as if she's right here, stoking my arousal to life.

I can't help that every single cell in my body needs her, craves her like a starved man craves food. I'm an animal, made wild by the fact that she stumbled into my life and changed it instantly.

My hands drop to my fly before I can think better of it, drawing my cock from the tight confines of my jeans. With my nose buried in her scent, I start to run my hand along my shaft, wishing it was her wet, warm cunt instead. Need rocks up my spine as my hips buck into my fist.

My little girl would probably cringe in horror if she saw me doing this, my face buried in her panties as I fuck my cock into my hand. Maybe she'd stop me if she were here, bend over and let me fuck that pretty little pussy of hers while I spanked her for leaving me.

“Fuck, baby,” I groan as I pump my cock into my closed fist, imagining it was Lara instead. I pant into her underwear. Her scent, so close to real and yet not quite there, is a drug I didn’t know I could get addicted to.

Sweat starts to drip down my forehead, trailing down my neck, as I fuck my hand. My release sneaks up on me. I burst all over the workbench. As my heart rate begins to slow, the anger I felt before cools to a simmer.

It’s not fair that Lara’s gone and that she’s taken my whole heart with her. I need to find her, to show her that we’re made for each other. I need to get her back. Make her mine for real.

Fuck fate or whatever. If I have to uproot my life out here to make her happy, then so be it. I’ll do anything for her. I see that now.

After zipping my pants back up, I tuck her panties into my pocket and walk back to the house. The beeline I make to computer is a blur, as is locating and dialing the number I saved long ago just in case I needed it. I take a deep breath and make the call. It’s been over five years since I’ve had to resort to this.

“Ethan Gubar speaking,” says a voice after two rings.

“Ethan, it’s Knox.”

There is a long silence at the end of the line before the voice starts to cackle.

“Fucking hell, it really is you!” the voice exclaims. “We thought you died, man. Last I heard, you’d moved to the country to live off the land or whatever.”

“Blacksmithing,” I clarify for my former colleague. We’d served together for two years before I had to leave special services for my father’s funeral. I ended up never going back. I didn’t feel the need to even reach out until now.

“Wow, I can’t believe you’re still around. I was sorry to hear about your pops, but it’s great to hear from you.”

Guilt floods me. I should have been better at keeping touch, but that’s not the kind of relationship we all had with each other. They’ll understand that I’m reaching out for a favor. It’s the sort of thing we do for our brothers when we need it.

It’s not like I regret what I’ve done with my life, after all. I wouldn’t have met Lara if I hadn’t traded the military for my life in the middle of nowhere. And it’s this connection here that will get her back in my life.

“I need your help with something,” I say. “Do you still work in Intelligence?”

“Yeah, but you’re not calling to ask for secrets or some shit, are you?”

“No, I need your help tracking someone ASAP.”

There is a long pause before he speaks. “Is he dangerous?”

“No, and it’s a woman.”

Another pause before he bursts out laughing. “You *do* know that people use social media for that, right?”

“Ethan,” I growl lowly at him.

“I know you’re allergic to technology but you’re in your mid-thirties or whatever, right? In this day and age, you should at



least have *some* online presence. I couldn't fucking find you online when I went looking a few years back."

That's because I didn't want to be found, but he doesn't need to know that right now.

"You gonna keep busting my balls about this or are you going to help me?" I grit at him, my patience running thin.

"Fine, what's the girl's name? I'll look her up for you online."

"That won't work. I need to know her physical location. It's urgent."

"Why?"

"Seriously?"

"Look man, I know you were solid in the service but five years is a long time. How do I know you're not stalking this girl?"

"I'm not," I say. "I'd shoot my own toes off one by one before I'd lay a finger on her. She was staying with me, but she left with a friend, and she didn't bother telling me where that is. Her safety is my top priority which is why I called you to help me locate her and not some incompetent sheriff out here. Now will you help me or not?"

Ethan seems to contemplate my request for a while because he falls silent once more. I know it's an odd request to make, but this is the most effective way to find her. I can't leave things to chance, not when she's involved.

Finally, my former brother-at-arms speaks. "What was your girl's name again?"



## Chapter 7

*Lara*

I miss him.

Is that pathetic? To miss a man you've only knew for one day?

Perhaps I *should* have taken Ashley's offer to stay at her family's ranch, but I told her I'd had enough of the country after the ordeal I'd had. It's the truth, but that was only part of it. What I really wanted was space. I was convinced I was losing my mind, caring for Knox as deeply as I was. Instead, this has just confirmed that my feelings for him are real.

I've left him behind and it's like I've lost a part of myself.

What makes it worse is that I'm sure he felt the same, and now he must think I hate him. I've betrayed the only man that's ever made me feel like this. It's been days since I left but I can still feel his touch like it was yesterday.

Because the city hasn't worked, I thought it would help to go to my studio, but it hasn't. I've been staring at a blank canvas for nearly an hour and I've got nothing to show for it. Walking around the studio and thinking only helped move my mind to thoughts of him. Looking at my other works in progress has only made it worse.

Knox is the only work of art I want to look at right now.

"I've never felt as invisible as I do right now," someone say behind me. I whirl around to find my younger cousin leaning on my studio's door frame.

“Oh, Briar. I’m sorry,” I murmur, running my fingers through my hair as guilt washes over me.

I forgot she said she’d stop by now that I was back in town. Briar and I are practically sisters because we were raised around each other. Her parents are in big business just like mine, but like me, she hasn’t felt the urge to go into management or whatever. No, she’s too smart for that. Once she got to college, she found a passion for science and decided to major in chemical engineering. After I’d told her bits and pieces about my accidental adventure, she dropped all of her plans to come see me.

“Everything alright?” she asks, her voice soft and careful. She must sense I’m feeling out of it.

I give her a shrug. “You know I get when I feel blocked.”

“This feels a little bit more significant than your usual creative block.”

I close my eyes and let out a deep sigh. How can she just see right through me like this?

“Does this have anything to do with your trip?” Briar asks. Her steps on the linoleum floor echo off the walls. “Maybe a certain dashing and large knight in a flannel shirt?”

My eyes spring open at her words. “W-what?”

“I can tell when you’re lying. I’ve known you since we were tiny. The way your voice lit up when you talked about that man. More happened out there than you’re telling me, I just know it. You’ve got it *bad* for your big buff blacksmith.”

Well shit. She’s read me like a book. While Ashley didn’t seem to want to bother me about it, Briar’s always quick to get

to the heart of an issue.

“I miss him,” I admit to her, and to myself too. “I miss the place, I miss Bear, I miss the workshop, the clean country air. I miss everything about the place, but I especially miss *him*.”

“Wow,” she says, looking almost shocked. Even so, she doesn’t seem judgmental about it. “I knew you were in deep but it sounds like you might actually love him.”

Before I can respond, a buzzer rings. Someone must be at the building door. Probably the delivery guy with the supplies order I made after getting back to the city.

“I’ll go check who it is,” I say, walking to the monitor. My heart skips in my chest, threatening to chisel its way out. The figure on the little screen is huge, and he has a familiar shape.

“Who is it?” Briar asks, skipping over peeking over my shoulder to look at the tiny security screen. “Sweet baby Jesus, who is that and why is he built like a tank?”

“Knox,” I whisper, swallowing weakly to get rid of the lump stuck in my throat. It’s him. The man I’ve been pining for over the past few days. He’s right there, dressed in a plain shirt with a cap drawn low on his head. I’d know those shoulders anywhere.

“Wait, your mysterious rescuer?” Briar asks, but I don’t bother to answer her. With a trembling finger, I press the button to buss Knox in. I can barely hold still, I’m shaking so much I’m probably a workplace hazard.

“He found me.” I look at my cousin, dumbfounded. Sure, my studio isn’t a secret, but it’s a long way from his property to

here. For him to have found me, he had to specifically look for me. “He’s here!”

“It’s actually him?” Briar laughs, eyes bright with glee. “Is this my cue to leave, then?”

“I’m sorry you dropped all your plans for me,” I say, turning to face her.

“Don’t be,” she says with an easy smile. “I’m just glad that you’re smiling now. When I walked in, you looked more like a ghost.”

Before I can reply, there’s a knock. We turn to the door to see Knox, his tall, broad silhouette filling the doorway as he steps inside. He looks like he stepped right off the farm, with his worn-out jeans and muddy boots. He doesn’t look like he belongs here, but he’s mine anyways.

The look in his eyes is wild, but he’s holding back, I can see it. Anger, disappointment, and need are evident on his face.

“Lara,” he rasps, closing the distance between us. I breathe in sharply when he cups my cheek with his rough palm. His eyes bore into mine. “I thought I’d lost you.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, my eyes flooding with tears as my heart floods with guilt and longing.

I was wrong to think I wouldn’t miss this. Miss him. I was so, so fucking wrong.

“It’s alright,” Knox murmurs, running his fingers through my hair. Just as I’m about to lean forward and kiss him, a throat clears. My cheeks flare with heat. Right, Briar’s still in the room.

I turn around to find Briar watching me and Knox curiously. She already has her bag slung over her shoulder as she starts to back to the door.

“Call me later, won’t you?” she says, as she checks her phone.

“Sorry,” I smile at her. “Knox, this is my cousin, Briar. Briar, this is Knox.”

“I’ve heard so much about you, Knox, but I’m sure not all there is to hear,” she teases, just as she steps out the door. “I’ll let you get to it.”

“I’ll walk you out,” I start, but Briar just shakes her head at me.

“We can catch up later, I promise!”

I don’t let myself look back up at Knox until I’m sure my cousin has left the floor. I walk quickly to the door of my studio and unprop the door, letting it close so that I can lock it.

“Look at me, Lara,” Knox says firmly.

I turn to stand and take him in, almost afraid to look him in the eye. Shame fills me. Why on earth did I let myself think this was nothing but a fling? He hasn’t even touched me yet but just his presence has heat building up under my clothes. More than that, I miss how it felt to be with him, to watch him cook or work. Yeah, we’re filled with desire for each other, but it’s more than that.

It’s *so* much more than that.

It’s in that moment that I realize I love him.

Maybe it’s too fast or too soon, but it’s the truth.

“I’m sorry I left. I just ... I didn’t think you would’ve let me leave if I waited for you. And it scared me.”

“You’re right,” he says, surprising me with his confession. “I wouldn’t have let you leave. Even if I had, I would have followed you to the ends of the world.”

“I know. There’s a part of me that wanted you to, I just ... You don’t know me.”

“I don’t need to,” he rasps, brushing his calloused hand tenderly over my bare shoulder. “All I know is nothing is the same since I met you and I don’t want to lose you.”

“I’ve thought about you every day since I left,” I confess. The words turn to a gasp when his hand drops to my breast, brushing his knuckles over my nipple through my clothes.

“The big feelings were scary but what’s scarier is not having you in my life.

“I want you, Lara. Only you. I’ll do whatever it takes to make you happy?”

I can’t help the laugh that tumbles from my lips. It’s so obvious to me that saying it to him feels like pointing out the obvious, but I do it anyway. “*You* make me happy.”

His hand freezes as his body goes stiff. His dark eyes are wide with surprise. “Really?”

“Yes,” I reply. “Really.”

Suddenly, my feet are off the ground and I’m pressed against a wall. He moved so fast I can barely comprehend it, even as his mouth claims mine.



“If you ever leave me like that again, I’m going to spank your ass red,” he growls as he nips at my bottom lip.

My entire body throbs, my center clenching around nothing. That thought probably shouldn’t excite me like it does, and yet ... “What if I want you to?” I pant as his hands press into the flesh of my thighs, parting my legs.

Knox pulls back to look at me. His face is flushed, his shoulders heaving as he tries to control his breathing. “You just have to push my buttons, don’t you?”

He runs a hands up to my throat and I gasp when he closes his fingers loosely around it. As he presses his hips to mine, I can feel how hard he’s become.

“No more running, not for now,” he growls. “You’re mine. I’m going to fuck a baby into you, put a ring on that little finger of yours, show the whole world who you belong to.”

“Yours,” I whimper as I feel his other hand start to pull at my panties under my dress. “Show me I’m yours.”

His fingers slip under the fabric and he groans when he feels how wet I’ve become for him. His needful noise makes me ache. I’m desperate to have him inside me.

He chuckles when I start to rut my hips against his fingers. “Needy little pussy.”

Abruptly, my feet are on the floor again as Knox spins me around to face the wall. A hand on my back presses forward to make me bend and present my ass to him. Before I can ask what he’s doing, I feel his hands pushing at the skirt of my dress to get to my underwear. Then, a loud tearing sound. My panties fall away to who knows whereas he chuckles darkly.

“God, look at you.” He palms my ass before giving the cheek a little slap. My breath catches as he says, “I’m going to fuck this pussy. I won’t be gentle, but I don’t think you want gentle, do you, little girl?”

When I feel the head of his cock start to tease my entrance, I cry out, “No, I don’t! Knox, please—”

And suddenly, he snaps his hips forward, sheathing himself inside me. Words fail me as he starts to fuck me at a relentless pace, his groans mixing in with my whimpers, making the entire studio echo with the sounds of our ecstasy.

He slips a hand up to my breast and pinches my nipple, making me tighten around his cock as he pounds it into me. “Fuck, your pussy is so fucking tight!”

I drop my forehead to the wall with a moan as he thrusts into me, hitting spots I didn’t even know I had inside me.

How did I ever think I could live without this connection we have?

My body begins to tremble when his hand drops between my legs to start rubbing carefully at my clit as his hips snap into mine. My knees buckle as my climax hits me suddenly, but instead of falling to the floor, he holds me carefully to him as he ruts me through my orgasm. Tears run down my cheeks as I cry out his name, the only word my mouth can form at the moment.

“I’m going to fill this pussy with my seed, fill you so good you’ll bed for more,” he growls deeply, thrusting faster and harder into my eager sex.

“Knox—”

As he comes inside me with a shout, I feel his release spill within me. As if he has no strength left, he carefully drops to the floor with me in his arms, his spent cock still inside me. I tremble against his chest as we both breathe for a moment.

“I love you,” Knox says raggedly, holding me tight.

With a sigh of contentment, I lift my head and kiss his scarred cheek. “I love you, too.”



## Chapter 8

*Knox*

“How did you get the scar on your face?”

I look up and our eyes connect, her pale blue eyes watching me curiously.

“An accident at work, rookie mistake. I’ve learned to be careful since,” I say. Her body is practically swimming in my flannel shirt, and the sight makes my cock twitch with interest. I’ve lost count of the times we’ve fucked since I came to her studio, but something tells me I’ll never get enough of her.

“I like it,” she says to me shyly.

She turns back to her canvas, her focus sharp as her gaze flits between me and the painting. When she said she wanted to paint a new portrait of me, surrounded by art she’s worked on before, I gave in to her request. I just didn’t think she meant right this second.

I can’t complain. Getting to watch her work like this is something I never expected to enjoy this much. Then again, I never expected to want her as much as I do. I’m sure she’ll always find a way to blow my expectations out of the water.

There was no way I could have ever been prepared to be enchanted with a person like this.

As she works, I think about the past few days. My search for her had been fervent. The first location that Ethan managed to isolate for her was the Blackwell Ranch, which checked out with what she’d told me when I’d found her. But then he’d

called me back when I was halfway there, patching into the emergency satellite phone I keep in my truck, saying that he'd found some transactions on a card in her name. It looked like she was headed back to the city.

And now I'm here, in her studio. The city isn't something I've missed. Everything moves faster, looks brighter, seems bigger. I like open skies and fresh air, not the overwhelming buzz of traffic. It's all worth it now that she's mine. *She* was worth it all.

As much as I wish she'd never left, I think it helped show us both what we mean to each other. It was scary for both of us to feel so much so fast, but now that we've reunited, the world feels right again. Yeah, maybe I still catch myself thinking she deserves someone better, someone less rough around the edges than I am, but if I'm not good enough, no one else is.

And she chose me, in the end, just like I chose her. Who am I to argue with that?

"Do you need to take a break?" Lara asks after a little while.

"I'm good," I say, though I could probably use one. The very act of ignoring the way my dick wants to get hard under her gaze is exhausting. I'm a grown man, you'd think I'd know how to control myself. Something about her just makes me a little unhinged.

It could be the fact that I'm touch starved from all my time alone ... Or it could just be that I've craved her touch from the moment I first felt it.

"I want to go back with you," Lara suddenly says. I blink at her, unsure I heard her correctly.

“What?”

“Well ...” Her eyes are on the canvas but she’s stopped painting. A flush starts to creep across her face. “I was thinking ... I”

I rise from the stool she’s posed me on, ignoring my state of undress, and walk to her. I pull her into my arms, letting her scent and the smell of her paint wash over me.

“Tell me, Lara,” I murmur into her hair.

“I’m selfish.”

“How so?”

“I know I said I wouldn’t run anymore, but I don’t want to lose you, you know? And I can’t bear the thought of making you leave your dad’s home. I just ... I feel so invisible in the city sometimes. And If I feel like that, I can’t imagine how being here might make you feel..”

“Do you mean it? You want to come live with me?”

She lifts her head from my bare chest and looks up at me, eyes glistening. “I do. Maybe we eventually end up splitting our time between there and here, but right now, I want to be with you out there. Just us and Bear.”

“Oh, baby,” I whisper, brushing a stray tear from her cheek.

“We can absolutely do that. I’ve got savings we can dip into if we want to get a place here at some point. And who knows? You’re young. Your art career is just getting started. I’m sure there’ll be a lot of travelling for us to do to.”

Her pretty face splits into a bright smile, before it falls into a cute look of consternation as she looks at the half-finished

work on her easel. “Darn it, I need to finish this painting,” she says. When I try to turn her attention to me by dropping a hand to knead at her ass, she bats it away. “Knox, stop it. At this rate, I won’t complete any of the paintings of you I start.”

“I just wanted to help you relax,” I drawl, leaning down and brushing my lips softly against hers.

“I’m not sure if relaxing is the right word—”

She breaks off into a moan when I palm at her breast over my shirt. The way she feels under my fingers is unreal. Soon enough, I have her well and truly relaxed as she comes on my tongue, her cries reverberating prettily off the walls.

“I love you,” I whisper as her body trembles against me. “I always will.”



# *Epilogue*

*Five Years Later ...*

*Lara*

Some people paint the sky, others paint the sea. Me? I paint the things that inspire me to open my eyes every day.

The way my husband's eyes light up with need when he sees me. The sound of his laughter, the warmth of his embrace. These are the things that bring color to my world and make me feel alive. During the five years we've been married, I've worked hard to immortalize these things in pictures.

Knox is my muse, my inspiration, and my soulmate. He is the reason I create as well as the reason I live. There's no telling what would have happened that evening years ago if I hadn't taken the wrong turn and run into him. Thank god I did, or I might not be here right now.

"I'm so proud of you," a warm voice says as big, strong arms wrap around me.

"Be good," I scold him. "We're in public."

I can feel him smiling without even needing to look. He knows more than anyone how much work I put into this art show. I wouldn't have gotten to this point if he hadn't pushed me to.

The showroom is packed with people, most of whom I don't know. Somehow, they found their way here. When the gallery owner told me that we'd sold out the opening night and needed to start considering a second open house for people to meet me, I was floored. After the opening night, I'd planned on

taking a break to focus on my family, but Knox had none of it. He thought this was important for me to do, as did Ashley, who offered to babysit our daughter out at the ranch while my husband and I were in the city.

His reassurance has made this whole night that much better.

That doesn't mean he's not also making it a little difficult in the most irresistible way, though.

We should be focusing on mingling with the people who've turned out for this meet and greet, but I can't focus after I feel his hard cock press against my ass. It's only been a few hours since we fucked in our hotel room, but it feels like it's been ages. And now he's teasing me.

And the bastard knows it's working.

"Do you think they'll notice if we leave?" I whisper, rocking back gently into his crotch.

"You're the artist being featured. Of course they'll notice," he murmurs back after kissing the shell of my ear. "Not that I care. Aren't artists known for being eccentric? Disappearing for a moment is nothing. They can wait to talk until after I'm done with you."

I nod frantically and start to pull him to the gallery's entrance when someone steps in our way. The need to fuck my husband in some dark, secluded is so strong that I almost shove them out of the way, but instead I plaster on a smile. But then I see who it is, and the smile drops.

"Pierre?" I say, dumbfounded. "What are you doing here?"

"Lora!" he cries out, a sickeningly fake smile plastered to his face. He takes my arm and pulls me toward a cocktail table, as

if I have nothing better to do. I feel the warmth of Knox's body press into mine, supporting me.

"It's Lara. Or Larissa, if you're feeling formal," I correct him through gritted teeth.

"Of course, Lana." He waves his hand like it's nothing. "I heard there was a gallery show happening, someone new and exciting, and I was curious. I never would have expected to run into you here, and after all these years ..."

"Well, the pieces being shown are mostly mine—"

"You see, Lila, this is the kind of artistic greatness I hoped to find in you. I'd heard the artist sold out in record time for this gallery. How impressive is that? Of course, I shouldn't ask you that when you know so little about art."

I open my mouth to attempt tell my former mentor that the art is actually mine. Instead of words, a gasp comes out as I feel a hand start to trail up under my dress and up my thigh. "Oh—"

"Yes, *Oh*. Lona, there are so many things I'd hoped to teach you. You seemed to have such promise, but then you went back to America before I could."

"I ... *Oh*," I hiss, biting into my lip hard to hold in moan. Fingers are now making their way to my center from behind. It's a wonder Pierre hasn't noticed somethings off with me, but then again ...

"Look at *that* painting for instance," Pierre says, turning to look at the painting I did of Bear stretched out in a patch of sunlight. "I wouldn't call it artistic genius—it's just a painting of a cat—but you can really *feel* the emotions of the artist. You

can see the love she carries for the subject. The composition of the elements isn't too bad either."

"Of c-course," I stammer as Knox starts to press a finger against the soaked fabric of my underwear. Fuck. He can't do this to me, not in public where someone could see if they just paid closer attention.

"Are you paying attention, Lilo?" Pierre slurs at me, even though he's surveying the gallery.

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. He's not even *trying* to get my name right. At this point, I would have snapped at him about it were it not for Knox's devious little touches.

"Listen to the man, darling," Knox scolds me gently. He brushes a finger against my clit for emphasis, making me twitch against him. What a wicked man my husband is.

"I'm listening," I breathe, nodding blindly at my former mentor. "Is there anything else you wanted to tell me?"

Pierre seems to mistake the urgency to leave his presence for a show of interest. I swallow back a groan when he carries on.

"Yes, in fact. The way the artist captured the essence of the feline form is simply breathtaking. The use of light and shadow is masterful ..."

"Oh, yes!" I gasp when Knox hooks a finger around my underwear and runs the pad of his fingertip against my wet flesh, teasing the entrance. My entire body pulses with need.

"You're r-right, the use o-of shadow," I nod, trying to act normal as Pierre gives me an odd look.

He shrugs to himself and turns back to the painting. "As I was saying, Luna—the use of light and shadow is masterful. The

texture of the fur is so realistic that I feel like I could reach out and touch it.”

I know that we’re hidden from view, but the fact that anyone could see what Knox is doing to me is making it that much worse. Heat threatens to overwhelm me. The thought that we could be caught is heightening every touch and sensation. It’s a wonder I haven’t passed out with how aroused he’s making me feel.

I take an unsteady breath as I listen to my former mentor drone on and on about the painting he doesn’t realize is mine. Knox has slipped a finger inside me somehow and is dragging it against my walls, making me squirm against him. I’m about to start rutting myself against him just for some relief when Pierre turns to look at me.

“Are you alright?” Pierre frowns, his brows drawing together. “You don’t look so well.”

“T-truthfully, I’m feeling a little u-under the weather,” I say hurriedly, hoping that this is the out I need. Unfortunately, I was wrong to think Pierre would be worried about me for even for a second.

“You were always like this even when I was training you. Always looking for excuses not to learn your craft.”

“*Oh!*” I gasp as Knox adds another finger to my wetness and starts thrusting slowly, so painfully slowly. My pussy wraps tightly around his fingers, ready to be pushed over the edge. Why the hell would my husband torture me like this?!

“I apologize for my wife’s behavior,” Knox says. His deep voice only makes me want him more, even with his cruel

ministrations. “You see, she has a condition...”

“A condition?” Pierre asks, intrigued.

“Yes, we only discovered recently. It something that hits every so often, making her muscles react in a way that makes it hard for her to stand or sit still. Sometimes, it affects her behavior.”

My lips part with horror as my husband just lies about what he’s doing to me. It feels like it should be obvious, but Pierre is nothing if not the most oblivious and self-absorbed person I’ve ever met. He merely shrugs and sighs, as if it’s personal to him. “That explains why she couldn’t paint.”

I want to scream at the man that he had it wrong, that he just complimented *my* work, but Knox’s fingers are driving me insane. I can’t see straight, let alone speak. His fingers continue to stroke me as he discusses my “condition” with Pierre. Just as I feel the orgasm draw close, I push away from him so that I don’t scream in front of a room of people as I come around his fingers.

I don’t bother to excuse myself as I scramble away, pushing through the first door I see and letting out a whine when I find nothing but an emergency staircase behind it.

No. This can’t be happening, this isn’t nearly private enough to put out the fire Knox started.

The door slaps open behind me and my husband appears, looking smug. “That was rude of you to leave in the middle of a conversation.”

“Oh, *I’m* the rude one?” I hiss as I stalk towards him. My hands drop to his fly and I quickly draw his zipper as our mouths crashed together.

“How the hell did you put up with that prick?” he groans as he drops his mouth to my neck.

“Later. I need you to finish what you started,” I snap. My body is practically vibrating with the need to feel him inside of me. Knox graciously gives into my need, hitching my thigh up around his waist as he guides his cock into my eager cunt. I pulse around him, already so close that I know it won’t take long before I’m milking him for everything he’s got.

I bite back a moan and bury my face in his neck to stop myself from crying out as he starts pounding into me. His movements are frantic and hard—there’s nothing I can do but hold on for the ride.

“I love you,” I sob as he fucks me into the wall, fucking me over the edge and into oblivion. “I love you so fucking much, Knox.”

“I love you too, baby,” he rasps into my ear, just as I fall apart in his arms.

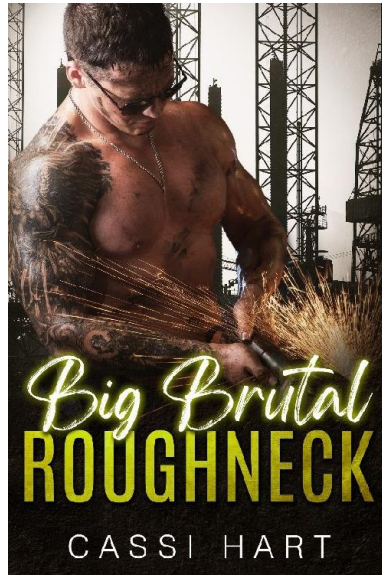
I thought our insatiable lust for each other would fade a little after we got married. I thought it would start to lose its luster after we had our baby. I’ve never been happier to be wrong. We’re just as needy as we were that first time, if not even more so.

Our fates were sealed the moment we met on that dusty country road.

I will never not want him.

*~The End*

## *Up Next...*



### **Briar**

I've always been a bit of a misfit, never really fitting in anywhere. I don't party with others my age or go on dates. All I really want to do is study and finish my degree, so I can start my career as a chemical engineer. The oil industry has always fascinated me, so when my so-called friends invite me out for a day of boating with the promise of an up-close view of a working oil rig, I jump at the chance, despite my reservations. Turns out, I should have trusted my gut and stayed on dry land. But if I'd done that, I wouldn't have been rescued by the handsome *roughneck* with a dangerous past.

### **Marshall**

Getting sent out to deal with a bunch of drunken college kids joy riding on their daddy's boat is the last thing I want to do after a long shift on the rig. But with a storm approaching, someone has to scare some sense into these kids, and I'm the best man for the job. But when I reach the boat and lock eyes with a beautiful blonde, everything I thought I wanted is flipped on its head. Before I know it, I'm whisking her away back to the rig with me. The storm that rages on the ocean is nothing compared to what I feel for this angel. But what do I have to offer a woman like Briar? Even so, when the Coast Guard arrives the next morning with allegations of kidnapping, saying goodbye is the last thing I want to do. *One night is all it takes for me to decide Briar is mine.*



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## Free Book

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## The Kingpin's Obsession

*Alice*

**I saw something I shouldn't have, and my life is in danger.**

The police won't listen, and I have no choice but to seek help at Benedetti's, a bar known for its criminal clientele. But I'm barely inside the door before a dark eyed devil drags me back out and demands to know why I'm there. I shouldn't trust him, but I don't have a choice when he's the only one willing to help me.

*Too late*, I learn who he really is, and now I'm left to wonder... when this is all over, will he save my life only to break my heart?

## *About the Author*

Cassi lives to write brazen OTT, insta-love, short stories, about possessive alphas and the women they love. Stories that will leave you satisfied, and maybe blushing a little. Cassi loves pedicures, being pampered in any way possible, her darling golden Princess, amazing coffee, and traveling to anywhere warm.



*Cassi H♥rt*