



432 HOURS

Jessica Gadziala

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432 Hours  
Investigators #4

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Jessica Gadziala

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## *Prologue*

I was being strapped to a gurney against my will.

Everything within me told me I needed to fight, I needed to throw a fit, I needed to stop this.

But the fact of the matter was that there was no stopping this.

They were going to strap me to the gurney. They were going to roll that gurney into the back of an ambulance. They were going to roll me back out of that ambulance and into a mental health facility.

Where they were going to hold me against my will.

For something I didn't do.

And there wasn't a damn thing that I could do about it...

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## CHAPTER ONE

---

*- Eight hours before -*

*Miranda*

“Randi, hold up!” Cam, my assistant, called as he ran down the aisles of desks in the office, his new leather shoes creaking a bit with each step.

Cam and I had a horrendous shoe-shopping habit. We were good for each other in most ways, but not that. If we were on the way back from a meeting or a lunch, and I just needed to “pop in” to the store, we both knew we were going to be trying on damn near every pair of shoes the place had to offer. And buying way more than was reasonable.

I’d been with him when he’d bought those woven leather, flat heel, round moc toe, notched vamp, penny loafers with the strap in the color cognac that he had on.

*Magnanni.*

*Eight-hundred-fifty dollars.*

The Cam who'd walked into my office three years before dreamed of shoes like that, but was forced to wear ones he'd thrifted and tried his best to repair and keep in good condition.

He could afford them now because, quite frankly, I couldn't function without Cam in my life. I wasn't sure how I'd managed to keep everything from falling apart before him.

I mean, there had been other assistants. Almost a dozen of them, to be exact. Each of them wholly... fine. None of them, though, capable of anticipating my needs, of handling situations in the exact manner I would handle them, so I didn't need to micromanage or breathe down his neck.

And, sure, it helped that he was happy to spend a huge chunk of his time with me, pulling late nights and obnoxiously early mornings, though I didn't exactly require it of him.

That said, he got paid an ostentatious salary for a personal assistant *because* he was happy to be there even without me demanding it of him.

I could afford it.

I wouldn't miss the extra hundred thousand more he made than the average personal assistant.

That was why I needed him so badly.

When you ran your own multi-billion-dollar company, you didn't quibble over money you needed to spend to make it operate as efficiently as possible.

"What's up?" I asked as we both stepped into the elevator and I slipped my foot out of my heel and flexed it a few times in the air.

"Did I not tell you that the scalloped sides look sexy as fuck but would make you crunch your toes all day to hold them on?" he asked, clucking his tongue at me. "Those are sit-down-shoes. And you are always on the move."

He wasn't wrong.

"I'd mistakenly thought today was going to be a behind-the-desk sort of day," I told him, trying to hold back a grumble as I slipped my foot back into my shoe as the elevator chimed.



“When do you ever spend the whole day behind a desk?” he asked as he checked his little clipboard that had a compartment for storing papers. I’d never seen one before in the office, which meant when he’d shown up with one on his first day as my assistant, he’d brought it with him, knowing he would need it.

That was the kind of attention to detail that made me immediately know he was a keeper.

“Okay, so, I handled that little shitstorm the girls on the second floor created,” he said, meaning that one of them had been trash-talking another one on the employee chat and it had accidentally gotten out and created absolute chaos. “Let’s just say that we will not have to worry about bullshit like that again.”

Cam emanated Golden Retriever Energy most of the time. He was upbeat, energetic, outgoing, and friendly. But, man, if you pissed him off, the man could slice your flesh off your bones with just a glare.

It was hard to believe if you looked at him with his golden-brown hair and his big blue eyes, his handsome face that wasn’t *too* handsome, his tall and lean body clad in meticulously thought-out outfits.

But if he said that he’d scared the bejesus into the girls on the second floor, then I believed him.

“Thank you. You’re amazing,” I said. “But—“

“But we still need to bring in Gabby to do a lecture about company morale and appropriate topics of discussion in the workplace,” Cam finished for me.

“I think, when I was born, they took a chunk of my brain out and put it in your head,” I told him, shaking my head. It was almost eerie how in tune we were at times.

“Girl, I wish. Maybe I’d be a kajillionaire too. Keeping my own personal hoard of sugar babies on my fancy yacht as they filled endless champagne coupes full of the finest bubbly.”

“You get seasick,” I reminded him. “And carbonation makes you burpy,” I added.

“Don’t ruin my fantasy.”

“And you love your boyfriend,” I reminded him.

“I do,” he said, his face softening at the mention of the man I kept him away from far too often. “Anyway, I was able to move around your appointments for the morning, so you could squeeze in that check-up you have been putting off for *seven* months now,” he said, giving me a disapproving raised-brow look.

“I hate the doctor,” I grumbled, sounding petulant but unable to help it.

“Believe me, I know. I’ve rescheduled this four times already. I’ve never met someone who will happily go to their dental appointments without so much as a whine, but put off their annual check-up like this.”

“Cam, I love you. But there is one way in which you have a privilege that I don’t,” I told him, shrugging.

To that, his brows lowered as he looked at me. “I’ve never known you to be anything but absolutely fucking in love with yourself. Including your body,” he said, shaking his head.

He wasn’t wrong.

It had taken me a long time—my whole damn life, really—to accept that I was never going to be one of the skinny girls, that I wasn’t built that way, that no matter how disordered my eating was, my body chose to hold onto some extra padding.

But I did accept that.

And I did love my body.

That being said, not everyone did.

“I do. But I can’t even begin to explain how quickly a doctor telling me about my BMI being unhealthy undoes years of self-love.”

“BMI is complete and utter bullshit. It was created by a mathematician, not a physician,” he ranted, clearly agitated. “And it was only ever used for male bodies. It doesn’t take into account the tits and ass and hips women have.”

“You know that, and I know that, but the entire medical field seems to be completely oblivious to that. And I just don’t want to hear that shit again, so I’d rather just skip the visit.”

To that, Cam let out a deep sigh.

“Okay. Listen. I will cancel it one last time. And I will do some heavy research to find you a doctor who isn’t going to say stupid crap like that. Then will you go?”

“I guess if you can find that unicorn doctor, yes.”

“Okay. Good. Then I am keeping you from your bathtub and Chinese for no good reason.”

“And I’m keeping you from that yummy boyfriend of yours. Get home. I’ll see you in the morning,” I told him, not knowing then that I wouldn’t, that by morning I would be in a hospital room, hooked up to machines, being given harsh looks from everyone who passed me by, with absolutely no idea what the hell had happened to me.

All I remembered was getting in my town car, then going to my apartment.

I had vague flashes of running my bathtub, of letting a bottle of red breathe on the kitchen counter, then of hearing the doorbell.

Chinese, probably.

I was a creature of habit that way.

Mondays through Wednesdays, it was always something healthy. Sushi, salads, the trendy new vegan place a few blocks away.

Then on Thursdays, it was Chinese, my guilty pleasure. Because nothing could help me push through one more day of the workweek like a massive serving of lo mein, a hot bath, and a glass or two of good red wine.

In my mind, I could see myself walking to the door.

After that, though, it was all just... gone.

I had nothing else.

Nothing but a nearly fatal dose of drugs in my system and a gash across my wrist under several layers of gauze.

I was not suicidal.

I didn't care what the hell the doctors were saying.

I had a beautiful life.

Charmed, even.

I lived a *charmed* life.

And I got it. There was a precedent for rich, successful people who had everything the world had to offer who were hiding behind a happy veneer and ended up taking their own lives.

It happened.

Maybe it even happened often enough for them not to take me at my word when things looked so definitive.

But I would never, ever take my own life.

It didn't matter what happened, what you told me, how you might have ruined my life.

See, they couldn't know this, wouldn't even care if I told them, but my best friend in high school had taken her own life in her college dorm during our freshmen year.

I'd never known grief like that before or after.

To this very day, I caught myself wanting to call her and tell her something, to laugh over ice cream or go take a rain walk to "soothe our souls."

I never wanted anyone else to feel that loss like I had to. Not if I could help it anyway.

I simply... wouldn't do it.

I wouldn't attempt it.

Nothing.

I had no freaking idea what had actually happened, but I had to find out.

In seventy-two hours, apparently.

I couldn't even begin to explain how utterly impossible it was for me to disappear for three days.

And if it ever got out that I'd been committed against my will?

"Shit," I hissed, running a hand over my face.

I needed help.

But my purse and phone were nowhere to be found.

And pretty soon, I knew what was going to happen.

I was going to be stripped and have no access to anyone but the psych ward staff for three days.

Casting a glance around, I noticed that one of the ladies who was assigned to watch us "crazy people" was occupied with something on her phone.

I reached my hand under the sheet, finding my smartwatch still on my wrist.

I had one contact linked to it.

Cam.

Taking a deep breath, I did my best to shoot out the message without looking too much.

*Help. 5150. Didn't do it.*

That was the best I could manage before the woman looked in my direction again.

If there was anyone in the world who could help me, it was Cam.

He would knock on the door of every lawyer, every judge, every single person who could try to get me out of this situation.

I just had to give him a little time.

Until then, I was going to need to do my best to come off as, well, sane.

Because that was exactly what I was. Even if the situation was crazy. Even if I felt like I was losing a bit of my grip on

reality since there were blanks in my memory, since I knew I didn't drug myself or slice my wrist.

So what happened?

Was that not the Chinese at the door?

If not, who was it?

What did they have against me?

Was I supposed to actually... die?

Who would that help?

"Miss Coulter?" the doctor asked, coming in.

*And so it begins...*

Whether I liked it or not, whether I needed it or not, it looked like I was going to the mental institution.

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## CHAPTER TWO

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*Brock*

“Who are you hiding from now?” Tig asked as I rushed into his office, pressing back against the door. “Pretty widow?”

“I wish,” I said, grimacing. “I’m hiding from Terry,” I admitted.

“Terry. The delivery woman?” Tig asked, swiveling in his chair to face me.

“Yeah.”

“Explain that one to me. The only women you hide from are the ones you’ve hooked up with.”

“Yep.”

“Terry’s gay.”

“One hundred percent,” I agreed. “Her girlfriend, however...”

“For chrissakes, Brock,” Tig sighed, dropping his pen on his desk so he could properly rub his fingers between his

brows.

“In my defense, I didn’t know she was Terry’s girl until the sweat was dry and I saw the picture on the nightstand. So, really, this is more on her than it is on me. Crap,” I hissed as the door started to push open.

“Get the fuck out of the way, Brock,” Sawyer said, making me step back so he could move inside.

“So you’ve heard,” Tig said.

“That he got horizontal with Terry’s girl? Yeah.”

“Not just horizontal. She’s a former gymnast, did you know that?” I asked, looking between the two of them.

“Probably one of the reasons *Terry* picked her,” Tig said.

“You know you’re going to have to handle this, right?” Sawyer asked, walking over to Tig’s desk to drop a folder. “Terry is here almost daily. You won’t be able to hide forever. Just take your ass-kicking like a man and get it over with.”

“Easy for you to say. I’ve seen Terry at the gym. She out-benches me.”

“Man, you were in black ops type shit for over a decade, and you’re scared of one person?” Sawyer scoffed.

Admittedly, we’d been *through* some shit. We’d *done* some gnarly shit.

But that was back then.

I’d done my best to put that shit behind me, to focus on the lighter, more enjoyable parts of life.

Like touring the bedsheets of all the gorgeous women who’d have me.

Sure, I did some dark shit for work still. But that was work, not my personal life.

I didn’t enjoy confrontation anymore.

And I sure as fuck didn’t want to be on the receiving end of yet another pissed-off mate—or former mate—of someone



I'd taken to bed. My wrist still ached in the rain from the last fucker who'd tracked me down and caught me off-guard.

"I'm hoping that, after a couple of days to think it over, she will direct her anger in the right direction," I said, shrugging. "Her cheating girlfriend."

"And not the office slut," Sawyer said, smirking.

"Hey, just because I didn't find the love of my life and hand in my player card for her doesn't mean you get to judge me."

"Right. Like you would even know the love of your life if she were right in front of your face," Tig said, shaking his head.

"Oh shit," I hissed as the door burst open.

I braced myself for impact.

But it wasn't Terry who'd barged into Tig's office to find me.

No.

It was someone I'd never seen before.

A well-dressed guy in his twenties with golden-brown hair and blue eyes, but they were heavy-lidded with purple smudges.

I knew that look.

I'd seen it reflected at me for years when I'd been working a job that was eating away at me. I'd seen it in the faces of countless clients who'd been driven halfway crazy from whatever issue had been plaguing their personal or professional lives.

"Can we help you?" Sawyer asked.

"I'm sorry," Marg, our receptionist, said, rushing in behind him. "He just barged past me."

"It's okay," Sawyer said, giving her a nod. "The look on his face says we could use some coffee, though," he said.

“I’ll bring it right in,” Marg said, nodding, but giving the guy a hard look to make it clear she didn’t appreciate being overstepped, then made her way out.

“My name is Cam Michaels. I’m the personal assistant for Miranda Coulter,” Cam said, taking a step in. “Of Coulter, Incorporated,” he added to our collective blank looks.

Sawyer’s gaze slid in my direction, knowing I was the one who knew the most about the private sector since, well, I’d banged damn near all the wives, girlfriends, and exes of all the big billionaires around.

“Coulter. Social media, right?” I asked.

“Yeah. And you’re the CEO’s personal assistant,” Sawyer concluded.

“Yes.”

“There’s an issue that needs to be investigated?” Sawyer asked, waving toward one of Tig’s seats, then moving to stand behind the desk beside Tig.

I stayed toward the side, watching.

Everyone knew it was Tig and Sawyer who really ran shit. They pulled me in on jobs when they needed me. Normally, I’d have just excused myself, but with the threat of Terry still lurking, I decided to stay put.

“Approximately thirty hours ago my boss was put on a 5150. Wrongly.”

“A 5150,” Sawyer repeated, brows pinching.

“A forced psychiatric hold,” Cam said, voice raising, getting agitated.

“I know what a 5150 is,” Sawyer said. “I’m confused how she accidentally got put on one.”

“That’s what I’m trying to find out. I can’t get in touch with her.”

“Then how did you know about it?” Tig asked.

“She sent me an emergency text via her smartwatch before they took that away.”

“What did it say?” Sawyer asked, reaching for one of Tig’s notebooks and a pen.

*“Help. 5150. Didn’t do it.”*

“Well, that sounds conclusive,” Sawyer said. “What didn’t she do?”

“From what I can tell from what I’ve stitched together... tried to kill herself.”

“And you’re sure she didn’t? Try that,” Tig clarified.

“One hundred percent sure. Randi is happy and successful and fulfilled.”

“There are a lot of successful and fulfilled people who only put on the charade of happiness,” Sawyer reasoned.

“That’s not Randi. Randi is genuinely happy. I don’t know what happened, but I know she didn’t try to hurt herself. And she herself said it. In desperation before being locked away against her will,” Cam insisted. “I have done everything I could to try to get this overturned.”

“Good luck,” Sawyer said, shaking his head. “It’s almost impossible. And even if you get someone to push the paperwork through, it is usually after the seventy-two hours have already passed. If she’s thirty hours into this, she probably only has a day and a half to go.”

“Weekend,” I mumbled.

“What?” Sawyer asked, looking over, not used to me piping in.

“It’s the weekend in a few hours. They don’t always count that toward the seventy-two hours. She could be there until Tuesday if that hospital doesn’t count the weekends.”

Sawyer’s brows pinched at that, but he kept his thoughts to himself as he looked back over at Cam.

“She can’t not be at work for two days without someone asking questions.”

“She could be taking a couple days away.”

“You don’t understand. Miranda doesn’t take days off. Never.”

“One of those, huh?” Sawyer asked, sighing. “How about she works remote for a few days?” he asked. “Maybe she came down with some severe food poisoning. People don’t question not coming to work when there is a stomach issue,” he said.

And pretty much every woman I’d ever met would rather someone think they were insane than having embarrassing stomach issues. But he was right. It would probably work.

“You could work for her, could you not?” Sawyer asked.

“I, ah, yeah, I could do that,” Cam agreed.

“Okay. So you do that. Make it look like Miranda is getting all her work done from home in between trips to the can. Then when she shows up Wednesday looking tired and not herself, people will understand.”

“Okay. Right. Yes. That can work,” Cam said, pulling out his phone and jotting notes.

“Now, we can take on this case, but we can’t get permission from your boss until she’s free.”

“That’s fine. I’ll pay you.”

“You’ll pay us?” Sawyer asked, brows raising.

“She’s my boss. But she’s a good friend.”

“I don’t think you understand what the fees could be...” Tig reasoned since even the best personal assistants made, tops, eighty grand. Good money, sure, but not CEO money. Not full-scale personal investigation money.

“Whatever it is, I will pay it,” Cam said, lifting his chin, making it clear that Miss Miranda Coulter paid him very well for his services. Which explained not only his loyalty, but his willingness to go above and beyond for her when she wasn’t able to do so for herself.

“Okay. Marg,” he said as she came in with the coffee tray. “Can you draw up a contract?” he asked.

“Sure,” Marg said, giving Cam a hard look again.

“Thanks,” he said as he took a coffee, looking a bit sheepish under her disapproving, maternal glare.

“What do you need from me?” Cam asked Sawyer over the rim of his coffee before taking a big gulp. The man clearly hadn’t gotten any sleep in the thirty hours since he’d become aware of the situation with his boss.

“As much information as you can give us. Friends and enemies of your boss. Names of disgruntled employees. Anyone she might have fucked over in business. All that kind of shit,” Sawyer told him.

“I will have a list emailed over before the end of the day,” Cam said, jotting a note with one hand as he kept holding onto the coffee like a lifeline with the other.

“We will also need to know the name of the hospital. And when she will be released.”

“It took a lot of digging that was borderline illegal, but I got the hospital information. She was taken from the local hospital to...” he started, looking down at his notes.

“Bluestone,” I supplied, getting another of those looks from Sawyer that I promptly ignored.

“Yes. That’s the one. It’s an hour from here. I don’t understand how they got her there.”

“Strapped to a gurney in the back of an ambulance,” I told him.

“Can’t believe I’m going to say this, but I think Brock is going to be taking the lead on this one,” Sawyer said, giving me a look that even I couldn’t read, and we’d been tight since our military days. “Give him your card,” he demanded to me.

“I’d have to go get one from my office,” I said, watching as he shook his head at me.

“Always working hard to network for the business, I see,” he said. “Alright. Here. Take Tig’s but this is Brock’s number,” Sawyer said, jotting down on the back of it. “You can call him day or night. He might want access to your boss’s home to look around for clues.”

“I have the keys and codes,” Cam said, nodding, looking like a small bit of the weight on his shoulders had been shrugged off.

“My advice,” I said, drawing his attention to me. “Get some sleep this weekend. You’re not getting this overturned. She’s stuck there for the time being, as much as that sucks to hear. Get some sleep so you are on top of your game for the week of impersonating her.”

“He’s right,” Sawyer agreed. “You won’t do her any favors by driving yourself into the ground. Get rest. We will take the investigation from here. But if you have any thoughts or questions, a contract with us means access to us twenty-four-seven, so don’t hesitate to contact Brock or any of us,” Sawyer said, taking the paperwork from Marg as she came in. “Thanks. Okay. Let’s make this official.”

Then, just like that, I was given the lead on one of our biggest cases.

We didn’t know that at the time, though.

And I certainly had no fucking idea what was in store for me when I finally got to meet the elusive Miranda Coulter.

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## CHAPTER THREE

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*Miranda*

I ripped the stupid, cheap, white grippy socks off my feet and tossed them on the floor with a sigh of relief that I would never have to wear them again.

But, well, when you were confined against your will, they didn't let you have shoes. So the slipper socks were what you had to deal with.

Alice, the girl I'd been sharing a room with, a pretty normal woman who had a long history of bipolar issues, told me she had an entire dresser drawer full of the grippy socks from all her different psych ward stays.

When I'd asked why she'd kept them, she'd shrugged and said, "Hey, they were free! Who passes up on free socks?"

Me, I guess.

Not because I had anything against the socks, per se. Just what they represented. Days and days of my life that I would never get back. People looking at me and treating me like I

was both fragile and dangerous. Sleepless nights because someone came in with a flashlight every so often, flashing it in my face to make sure I was still alive.

As if there was anything in this godforsaken place to use to take my own life even if I were so inclined.

All it was was white walls and linoleum floors and barred windows and that ever-present scent of industrial cleaner that just didn't quite cover the smell of a bunch of human beings all crammed in the same airless space. Some of whom had objections to showering.

I'd been anxious when I'd been walked to the ward, wondering if I would be met with people screaming and rocking or spitting or trying to hurt me in some way.

I'd been both pleasantly surprised and incredibly sad to find that most of the people were just... normal. People who likely just needed more support—psychologically, economically—to be able to deal with life outside without wanting to kill themselves or falling into deep depression.

There were a few genuinely... unwell people around, though.

Including one older man who had, on more than one occasion, dropped his pants and either urinated or defecated on the floor. Right in front of everyone.

“That’s Pete,” Alice had told me, nodding as I went a little green at the whole ordeal. “He’s kind of a lifer. In and out like me. But, clearly, a little more bonkers. I might go manic and fuck too many guys in a twenty-four-hour period, but I’ve never taken a shit on their floor.”

I liked Alice.

She was way too young to have been in and out of psych wards so often.

“Oh, my mom had me locked up for the first time when I was eight. That was the worst,” she’d told me, her pretty blue eyes going stormy as she recalled it. “There was this five-year-old that first night. Sobbing for his mom over and over. And those pieces of shit who worked at that ward dragged him,



literally dragged him by his legs to the quiet room. Can you imagine? Being locked in a padded room, alone, because you were crying for your mom when you were five-fucking-years-old? Those were heartless monsters at that hospital.”

“I can’t imagine,” I said, my heart aching for that little boy, wondering where he was now, if he ever told his mom what had happened to him, if she even gave a damn.

“They aren’t all like that, though. This one isn’t too bad. I mean, there are some real nutters here on occasion. But so long as they aren’t violent, I don’t mind.”

“Can I ask you why you, you know, have to keep coming back?”

“Oh, you know us bipolar types. Never learn our lesson. Always go off our meds. I mean, of course, there are plenty of stable, well-adjusted bipolar people who take their meds. But, well, I know a lot of others like me. Then we go into a manic episode. That’s different for each of us. I get really slutty. And occasionally dabble in some drugs I have no business touching. Especially with how much they lace that shit these days.

“But things are always pretty good in the manic side of things. It’s the comedown from that high that sends me back here. I have no energy. I live in my bed. Not showering. Barely eating. Friends and family worry, but there isn’t shit they can do. Then, well, after a few weeks of that, the little voices start creeping in, saying ugly shit, making me believe it.

“I mean, not *real* voices. I don’t have a split or, like, schizophrenia. I mean, I love me a good multiple-personality friend. Those are the best. Some days you are talking to the real them. You know, Janet, aged forty, has a couple kids and a husband who loves her. And then other times, Janet is gone and in her place is this edgy, raunchy truck driver by the name of Russel.

“Anyway, yeah, it’s not real voices. Just the depression talking. That starts to get bad. And sometimes I try something, or sometimes I just... turn myself in before I can try something.”

“Wow. I’m glad you get help. I wish you didn’t have to keep repeating that cycle, though.”

“There’s an old saying about us bipolars and how often we have to hit our lows before we finally give in and accept that we have to take our meds. Haven’t gotten there yet, but I’m hopeful.”

“Why don’t you take them?” I’d asked. “If that isn’t offensive to ask.”

“We don’t really worry about being offensive in here. We’re all basically here for the same reason, right?” she’d asked, and I’d noticed the way her gaze slipped to my bandaged wrist. “The meds suck. I keep hoping for a new combination that doesn’t make me feel like a zombie, but so far, no luck.”

That was Alice.

Hopeful, yet fragile.

I was going to be sad to leave her behind.

“You’re leaving me, huh?” Alice asked, snapping me out of my memories, making me look up to find her standing in my doorway.

Small.

God, she was so tiny.

I wasn’t sure I’d ever seen an adult woman so childlike before. Short, so slight she looked like a strong wind could snap her bones, with a short crop of dark hair and these big, doll-like blue eyes.

She was almost hauntingly pretty. Like a ghost in a dream. You could see her and then immediately question if she was real or some ethereal being.

“The head-shrinkers don’t think I’m a danger to myself anymore,” I told her, nodding. That was her term for the psychiatrists.

“They always come to that conclusion for me too,” she said, dropping down on the bed across from the one I was sitting off the side of. “So, are you a danger to yourself? I won’t tell them.”

“I’m not,” I assured her. “I just want to get back to my life. I can’t even imagine how much work I’m going to have to catch up on.”

“Hey, do you think it’s possible that I could, you know, shoot you an email or follow you on social media or something? You know, when they deem me sane enough to leave again, that is. It’s cool if it’s a no. I get that sometimes you don’t want to have loony-bin friends outside of the loony-bin.”

“I would love to keep in touch, actually,” I told her. “But since we don’t have any pens here, you are just going to need to remember my number.”

“I still remember my sixth-grade locker combination,” Alice said, smiling. “Shoot,” she invited, listening as I rattled it off, then repeating it back to me.

“Let me know when you’re out, okay?” I asked, reaching out to give her wrist a squeeze. “You really made this stay tolerable for me. I can’t thank you enough for that.”

“Hey, that’s the job of the old timers, right?” she asked, following me out to the desk. “Now, don’t come back, y’hear?” she said, shooting me a soft, sort of sad smile as I headed back out toward my old life.

While she stayed there.

Without her newfound friend.

My heart ached for her, but I figured I would hear from her one day. And, like she kept telling me, she was a veteran of state-run psych wards. She would be okay.

So I needed to get my head back on my own life.

I didn't know what was going to happen once I was released, especially if my smartwatch wasn't charged to call anyone.

You could say I was floored to find a car parked and waiting for me.

"Miss Coulter?" the driver asked. If he had any thoughts about the place I was being released from, he kept them to himself.

"Ah, yes," I said, brows pinching, wondering why there was a stranger there instead of Cam, or Mitchell, my usual driver.

"Cam arranged for me to pick you up," he said, the words sounding rehearsed, which only assured me that Cam had, indeed, set this up. Because he was absolutely the sort to hammer a phrase into someone's head.

"Oh, okay," I said, following him toward the car. "Do you happen to have a charger—" I started as he opened the door.

I didn't get to finish the word because he was pulling a charging cord out of his front pocket.

"Cam?" I asked.

I got a nod to that. "Cam. He was... exacting," the driver said with a wicked little smile that said that what Cam actually was, was a pain in the ass. Which was exactly what he needed to be at times to work for me.

"That sounds like him," I said, blinking at the sudden stinging in my eyes. I may not have a lot of close people in my life, and sure, I had to pay Cam, but he was one of the good ones. I was lucky to have him.

As soon as I settled in the back of the car, I realized just how lucky.

Because not only had he arranged for me to have a charger for my watch, but there was a whole bag in the back full of little supplies he knew I'd appreciate.

Hand sanitizing wipes, which I promptly used all over my hands, neck, and even my face to hold me over until I could

have a proper full body scrub in my own shower. There was a bottle of my favorite iced tea, some little packs of cookies and chips, a nail file and clipper, a hairbrush and jaw clip, and a tin of strong mints.

Over the hour-long ride back to the city, I used every single thing in that basket, reminding me again how invaluable Cam was to my life, even if it did feel a bit strange that he hadn't shown up to pick me up himself.

"Thank you so much," I said, passing the driver a big tip from the basket that Cam had supplied as well, because people were less likely to talk crap about the psych hospital they'd picked you up from if you'd been good to them, grabbed my bags, and climbed out of the car.

"Miss Coulter. Been wondering where you'd been," Frank, my doorman, said as he held open the door for me.

"Oh, just a little long-weekend getaway," I lied, giving him the best smile I could given how crappy I felt.

"You needed it."

With just a couple more pleasantries, I was finally in my private elevator and heading up to my floor.

I just wanted a shower to scrub off the institution. Then a bath to calm my frazzled nerves. Some real food. A glass of wine. And sleep that wasn't interrupted by flashlights or some ranting and raving from fellow patients.

As soon as I got in the door, I dropped all my stuff on the floor, so intent on the shower that I couldn't even be bothered to put them on the table I had just for my bag and packages.

I was so distracted by the thoughts of my shower, in fact, that I missed him until I was a solid five feet into my apartment.

But there he was.

With his back to me, standing there looking out at the city.

"Whoever you are, get out of my apartment before I call the police."

There was force behind my words. Not because I was feeling particularly strong right then, but because fear made me angry. And every woman knew that a strange, uninvited man in her apartment was absolutely something to be afraid of.

He turned then.

Not quickly.

Not like my threat concerned him at all.

I don't know what I'd been expecting. But the hottest guy I'd ever seen was certainly not it.

He was tall and a compact sort of fit. Something about that body and the way he was holding himself screamed "ex-military" to me. His hair was short and a medium-blond. From across the room, it was impossible to tell what color his eyes were, but I could tell that they were dark.

But, damn, yeah, that bone structure.

God certainly favored him.

"Miss Coulter," he greeted me in a voice that had no right to be as smooth and sexy as it was coming from the lips of a man in my home without being invited. I mean, there was a little wobbling in my knees at the sound of my name in that voice.

"Who the hell are you?" I demanded, reaching over toward a table at my side, closing my hand around the only hard object I found there.

Was it a priceless antique statue of a war goddess?

Yes.

But if it was me or the statue, it was going to be me.

Besides, I had a feeling the war goddess would approve of using her to bash the skull in of a trespassing man.

"My name is Brock. I work at Sawyer Investigations."

"You say that as if it should have some meaning to me. It doesn't. And you need to get the ever-loving fuck out of my apartment."

“Ever-loving fuck, huh?” he asked. And, damn him, that boyish smirk of his was really appealing.

It must be easier to be a criminal when you could make your marks blush and flutter with one smile.

“I don’t know if you are dense or what, but let me make this clear. This is a door,” I told him, gesturing toward it. “I want you on the other side of it before I call the police to do it for you.”

“Liking the image of me with handcuffs on, huh, honey?” he asked, smile even warmer as he took a step forward. “Go ahead and put that statue down. It probably costs more than I make in a year.”

“Ten,” I told him, and he just kept smiling at me, his eyes doing a crinkling thing around the edges that was far too appealing.

“If you’ll put that thing down, we can talk.”

“I don’t believe there is anything I wish to discuss with a man trespassing in my apartment.”

“That ice princess thing? It works for you, babe,” he told me as he took another step closer.

My fingers tightened around the statue, but my mind couldn’t help but think it would be a sin to bash in a face as pretty as his.

I was worse than the girls who went into basements in their panties to see where the weird noise came from in horror movies.

“Gee, I’m thrilled to impress a random criminal. Get out.”

Was it my imagination, or were my demands that he leave getting less and less forceful?

No, that was ridiculous.

Of course I wanted him to leave.

“Cam said you were a real ball-buster,” he told me.

And then it all fell into place.

Of course it came back to Cam.

I got a message out to him about the 5150. He immediately tried to look into it, likely found out about the faux suicide attempt, then went to a professional to try to figure out what the hell was going on.

“Oh,” I said on an exhale, feeling the weight fall from my shoulders, my muscles relaxing once again as I set down my statue. “Cam.”

“Yeah, he barged into our office and offered to pay our fee to help you out.”

“He will not be paying,” I insisted.

“I figured,” he agreed.

“Why are you in my apartment when I wasn’t here?” I asked.

“I was here a couple of days ago to look for clues. Today, I am here to talk to you. You got released later than we’d anticipated, so Cam had to get to the office and pretend to be you.”

“Pretend to be me?” I asked.

“Yeah, you’ve come down with a stomach bug, so you can’t be away from the can.”

“Oh, lovely,” I said, letting out a whimper at the idea of everyone in the office thinking that. Couldn’t they have come up with something with a little more dignity than that? Shingles? Pneumonia? A freaking flesh-eating virus?

“Sometimes the best covers are the ones everyone can relate to the most. Who hasn’t had a stomach bug?” he asked, shrugging it off. “So, yeah, Cam is working from the office, pretending to be you working from home, so no one thinks you’ve been missing.”

“Oh, good,” I said, exhaling hard. I guess I could survive the embarrassment of a stomach bug that kept me home. Did it fit the perfectly crafted public persona I’d worked so hard to cultivate? No. But it was better than everyone knowing the truth, that was for sure.



“I, ah,” I started, waving toward the hallway.

“Really need to wash the hospital off of you?” he asked, sounding almost like he completely understood the feeling. Which didn’t make sense.

“Yeah, actually,” I agreed, nodding.

“Go ahead. Lock the door if it makes you feel better, but you’re safe with me here,” he said.

I immediately believed him.

I was someone who only put a small amount of weight on things like gut feelings. In my world, many of the people I was around had been groomed from the cradle to put on an ironclad persona that no one could see past. It was an old-money thing that took me years to truly understand, since I hadn’t come from that world. And it had been a tough lesson to learn. I’d lost money and friends along the way because of it.

But it was a valuable lesson to learn.

Now I knew that if someone gave me the ick immediately, then I could generally trust that. But if someone made me feel comfortable and safe at first blush, then that was a sign to tread carefully, to look for cracks in the corners where you could peel back the mask and see what was truly underneath.

Jaded?

Yes.

But a solid defense mechanism.

“How many people have you killed?” I asked.

That was another trick I’d learned.

If you asked a shocking, somewhat invasive and unexpected question, you were both showing confidence and dominance as well as putting the other person in a position to scramble.

When people scrambled, they tended to show parts of their true selves.

“Sixty-three,” he answered immediately. No hesitation. No fumbling over his words. He didn’t even break eye contact. Though those stormy eyes of his went darker at the admission, and the smirk fell from his face.

“Okay then,” I said, nodding. “If you’re going to hang around, though, would you mind...”

“The coffee maker is set. And the food is ordered,” he informed me.

“Cam?” I asked.

“Cam,” he said, nodding. “Go on. Get that ick off of you. I’ll be here to talk when you’re done. Take your time.”

With that, I did exactly what he suggested.

And I absolutely did not think about his hands being the ones rubbing the soap all over me.

Nope.

Because that would have been wildly inappropriate since he was going to be working for me.

An abuse of power, even.

But, God, did that sound like fun...

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## CHAPTER FOUR

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*Brock*

There hadn't been any pictures of her in her apartment. Which was something that experience told me to expect.

Hell, I'd fucked my way through most of the wealthy women in the country. Every single one of them had at least half a dozen pictures of them around the house. Smiling on a tropical beach, on a tennis court with a racket in hand, at a charity event in a flowing gown.

But Miranda Coulter had no pictures around her lavish apartment, just art. And a lot of it.

The apartment itself was both expected and a surprise.

First, she had the penthouse. And when you were closing in on being a billionaire, you tended to splurge for the top level. She didn't share the floor with another penthouse, either. Oh, no. Instead, she had an apartment that had to be over four thousand square feet. With its own private corridor and

elevator and a balcony that wrapped nearly around the whole building.

What was surprising was that she hadn't designed it in the very popular minimalistic style that seemed to be all over every wealthy person's house that I'd been to in the past several years.

It was... fine.

But it never felt homey, comfortable, like a place anyone would want to call home.

Just a place to stay here and there.

And, I guess, that was what a lot of houses and apartments were for the ultra-wealthy, since they had houses all over the world, and bopped between them all the time.

But Miranda didn't settle for that cold style.

Oh, no.

Everything about her apartment was a mix of traditional, mid-century modern, modern, and Victorian, somehow all together. And it worked.

There were pops of minimal wallpaper to warm things up, tufted material, lots of drapery, carpets, and fabrics. The woods were deeper, rich tones, but the walls were mostly in neutral gray or beige shades.

Mix all that with the personal touches. Like her art and her knick-knacks, all of which probably cost more than my car, it all made up a cozy, comfortable place to feel at-home in.

There were hints of her all around.

A collection of mismatched mugs, all of which with ducks on them. There were also at least half a dozen assorted to-go iced coffee mugs as well.

She had paperwork all over her coffee table; her laptop was sitting on her bed. Clear signs of a workaholic.

There were no signs of a man or a pet anywhere around.

And, fuck, did her place smell good.

Some kind of rich, spicy scent that matched the perfume bottle on her vanity. Like she maybe sprayed it on the curtains or carpets around the house. It was fucking hypnotic.

But aside from the little pieces of herself around, there was no evidence of what the woman herself looked like.

So I hadn't been prepared for her when she'd walked in the door.

She was on the taller side with dark, nearly black hair that was pulled away from her soft, feminine face with high cheekbones, plump lips, and dark brown eyes.

And the body?

Even in plain lounge pants and a tank, she was sexy as fuck with her ample chest, her thick thighs, her ass, and her belly.

I liked all sorts of women. But I always had a fondness for softer-built women.

And Miranda Coulter was definitely on the softer side from what I could tell.

She looked rough, though.

Her skin that looked like it should have had a golden hue, due to her other coloring, was pale. There were dark purple sleepless smudges under her eyes. Her hair was limp and a little greasy at the root.

And there was a bandage up her arm.

From the suicide attempt that wasn't a suicide attempt.

She looked institutionalized and beaten down.

I understood that sort of thing better than she could have known, better than anyone around me could have known.

So, I got her need for a shower.

I didn't even roll my eyes when, forty-five minutes later, the water was still splashing against the tile floors of her glass shower.

The only problem I was having with waiting was the fact that I couldn't keep my fucking mind from thinking about her in that shower, soap sliding down her curves, my hands...

"Fuck," I hissed, raking my hands down my face as I stood in her kitchen, making myself a cup of coffee.

"You alright?" a voice asked, startling me, making me realize I'd been so wrapped up in my little fantasy that I'd missed the fact that she'd not only cut off the shower, but gotten out, got lotion on, brushed out her hair, gotten changed, and even spritzed on more of that perfume that was all around her apartment.

She hadn't changed into more casual loungewear.

Instead, she had on a pair of form-fitting black slacks with faint white pinstripes, and a white square-cut top that cut a little low and didn't leave a whole lot to the imagination.

Her hair was still damp, the ends wetting the thin material of her top, making it see-through in spots.

She'd even taken the time to put on some mascara and some lipstick.

"I needed to feel like myself," she explained, sensing the direction of my thoughts.

"I get that. Coffee's hot. Chinese is... getting cold," I told her, waving toward the bag on the counter.

"I'd eat it freezer-cold after days of hospital food," she said, giving a little shiver. "I don't even want to talk about the food," she said as she grabbed heavy earthenware plates out of the cabinet, placing them on the island.

"How do you take your coffee?"

"Cream and sugar. A little extra sugar," she told me as she started to pull the containers out of the bag, flipping open the tops to see what was inside of each, then starting to fill her plate up. "Thank you," she said when I handed it to her. She reached for it like a lifeline, lifting it, and drinking the whole thing down in a few big gulps. "Now it's time for wine," she declared, going over toward the mini fridge, and pulling out a

chilled bottle of white. “Am I drinking alone?” she asked as she got the corkscrew and got to work.

“Not if that is the wine you’re serving,” I said, raising a brow at the label. What can I say? When you enjoyed the company of many well-to-do ladies, you learned a thing or two about wine, even if you typically enjoyed a good glass of whiskey instead.

“Okay, help yourself,” she said when she had poured the glasses, grabbing her plate and some silverware, then making her way to the dining room.

I went ahead and grabbed some food too, knowing she would be more comfortable if she wasn’t eating alone, even if she wasn’t conscious of that fact.

Her dining area was a bit ostentatious for someone who seemed like they enjoyed most of her meals alone.

There was a long l-shaped gray couch-like chair with a tufted back that sat behind a long black table. On the other end, where Miranda was seated, were oversized black and gray striped chairs.

I slid into the booth-like section across from her, but not directly, not wanting to be in her space too much after having been in a situation where she very much had a bunch of strangers all up in her personal business.

I watched as she twirled some lo mein onto her fork then slid the food into her mouth, her eyes closing as she let out a little moan that did not, by any means, make my cock twitch.

“Oh, God, I missed food with flavor,” she said as she reached for her wine, drinking in big gulps, completely oblivious to the pricetag it came with.

And, I guess, if you were getting out of the mental hospital you’d been locked in against your will, yeah, you deserved a drink of something good without pesky concerns like cost.

“Okay. So, you’re Brock,” she said after a minute.

“Yes.”

“Do you have a last name, Brock?” she asked.

“Barlowe.”

“Okay, so, Brock Barlowe, you’re a private investigator who has killed more than a few men. In the military, I am guessing based on your posture.”

“Yes,” I said, nodding. I might have been able to shake a lot from my service days, but my posture was not one of them.

“And you are here to figure out how the hell this happened to me,” she said, lifting her arm, and placing it on the table.

And there it was.

A nasty-ass red scar up the length of her arm.

Yes, up.

“What?” she asked, looking down at it, immediately grimacing. Even people who didn’t have a lot of vanity would likely wince at a scar like that. And what it represented.

“It’s up your arm.”

“Yeah...”

“Most suicide attempts go across the wrist, not up the arm. Up the arm is something someone does when they genuinely want to end things. It’s really easy to bleed out if you cut the vein.”

“I don’t think it did. But someone was clearly trying to either end me, or make it seem like I wanted to end myself.”

“You can say that again,” I agreed. “So, Cam told us that you don’t have any known enemies.”

“I can tell by your tone that you don’t think that is true.”

“In my experience, no one gets to a position of as much power and wealth as you have without someone out there plotting some kind of petty, or devastating, revenge.”

“Well, maybe my path up didn’t involve stepping on the backs of others.”

“Honey, that’s just not possible,” I insisted. A path to billionaire status meant someone, somewhere was suffering because of something you’d done. Workers who were making



slave wages, people working in dangerous situations, ex-partners who you ghosted, a person whose ideas you'd borrowed and made your own, something.

"I'm sure there are people out there who don't like me, Mr. Barlowe, just as I am sure you have people out there who don't like you either. Women you ghosted. Hearts you've broken. Friends you've come to blows with. No one gets through life with every single person on the planet loving them."

"That's true, but not everyone ends up on a 5150 because of a fake suicide attempt, Miss Coulter," I said, and I liked the way her lips twitched when she realized I was not going to back down just because she got a little haughty with me.

"Fair enough. I'm sure I can rack my brain and come up with a couple of names. But I genuinely don't think any of them would be capable of this. This is... insane," she said after searching for the right word for a second.

"It is," I agreed. "I can't figure out if you were just meant to die and have it look like suicide, or if it was purposely done to send you to the hospital and make you look, for lack of a better word, crazy."

"Yeah, that's the million-dollar question, isn't it?" she asked as she poured another glass.

"What do you remember about that night?" I asked.

"Not as much as I feel like I should," she admitted, brows scrunching. "I definitely remember coming home. Then I have flashes of ordering Chinese, running a bath, putting a bottle of red to breathe on the counter, and then hearing the buzzer. And that's... it."

"A bottle of red?" I asked, then watched as her gaze went to the kitchen, putting the pieces together. "Could someone have moved it?"

"Cam?" she suggested.

"No. He said he never touched anything here. He bought you all new shit for your little bag for the back of the car. He

didn't want to 'taint the scene' or anything. Do you have a cleaning lady?"

"Yes!" she said, brightening a bit. "Yes. I can ask her. She's never dumped an entire bottle of wine, though, is the strange part. She may have put the glass away, but I really don't see her doing that. She'd be worried it was expensive. And it was."

"We will ask anyway," I said. "Jot down what kind of wine it was," I said, reaching for the small notepad with its attached pen in my pocket, and passing it to her. "And this is the same Chinese food place you ordered from that night?" I asked, waving at the food.

"Yes. Always. They know my number when I call," she admitted with a guilty little smile.

"That's good, though, for the case. They'll remember if they sent someone out last week. Who found you?" I asked.

Her lips parted at that. "I... I have no idea. And my doorman didn't have any idea that anything had happened. I just spoke to him."

"Does he ever leave his station?"

"No... yes. To run errands for us sometimes. Pick up tickets. Grab something from the corner market. Not often, but he will do it because we all give him a handsome bonus."

"That could explain why he didn't know. But someone would have seen the ambulances and cops."

"You're going to talk to my neighbors?" she asked, looking horrified.

"I might have to," I told her honestly. "If they saw anything, we need to know about that."

To that, she let out a deep sigh.

"Okay."

"I am going to do everything I can to keep this quiet, Miranda," I promised her, understanding how it could impact her reputation and her status in her industry.

“I really can’t afford any negative publicity right now.”

“Why? Is something important happening?”

“My company is doing a takeover of another company,” she explained, making a chuckle escape me. “What?”

“And you don’t think you have any enemies, sweetheart? When you’re doing a takeover.”

“It’s not a hostile takeover. We all agreed to this.”

“No, correction. You and the other shareholders agreed to this. The workers didn’t. And when workers hear ‘takeover’ or ‘merger,’ they hear ‘layoffs’ at the same time. And people in tight spots, worried about their income, they do desperate-ass shit.”

“I can see that. But this level of desperate?” she asked, waving at her arm.

“Honey, some people are cracked,” I said, shrugging.

As much as I hated to think about those times anymore, I damn sure came across a lot of cracked people in my time. Some people did the most fucked up shit you can imagine. And some things that you couldn’t even imagine.

Most of those people walked around the world like your average, everyday people. Ones you brushed shoulders with on the street, you engaged in silly small talk with at the water cooler, ones you invited into your house to fix your hot water heater.

“Yeah,” she agreed, exhaling hard, her mind far away.

I guess maybe she was back at the psych facility, thinking about some of the people that she’d seen there.

The difference was, of course, that the people she was with at that facility were not criminally insane. They were a whole different thing entirely.

“Okay. Security,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“Do you have any here? Cameras? Motion sensors?”

“I’m just a businesswoman, not a celebrity,” she said, shaking her head. “I have good locks. I have a code. But no cameras.”

“Okay. Well, you need to have cameras,” I insisted.

“Yes, definitely,” she agreed immediately. “I don’t think I’d be comfortable being here alone without it.”

“You’re not going to be alone.”

“What?” she asked, looking over at me, brows scrunched. “Aren’t you an investigator? Not private security?”

“Sometimes we do both,” I told her. “We even have safe rooms at the office if we need them.”

“That’s good to know. Are your offices close?”

“They’re in Navesink Bank.”

“New Jersey?” Miranda asked. “Why would Cam go to New Jersey for an investigator?”

“Because we’re the best there is,” I told her, shrugging. “We’re known for dealing with a more elite clientele. Which is likely how Cam came across us.”

“You’re going to travel into the city all the time to handle my case?”

“For what you’re going to be paying us for, baby, we will squat in a tent on your balcony if it is necessary.”

“There is a team?” she asked.

“Yes. I am taking the lead on this, but we also have Sawyer, the owner, as well as Tig. We will all be on this case, but I am likely who will liaise with you personally. If that is acceptable with you,” I added with a small smirk.

I hadn’t missed the eye-fucking she’d done when I’d first turned around. Even if she’d been willing to bash my head in with a goddess statue for being in her place uninvited.

“That will be fine,” she said, averting her gaze.

“How is the security at your workplace?” I asked.

“There are guards in the lobby. You can’t get into the elevator without signing in and getting a pass. Then to get to my office personally, at least a dozen people will see you. And it is a glass office, so there’s no way something could happen to me in there.”

“Okay. That’s good. So you’ll be safe when you’re there. I can use that time to investigate. Then I can meet you back here when you are done with your workday.”

“Every day?” she asked, likely not used to having people in her personal space.

“Until the cameras are up and working, yes. And then anytime there is something to discuss on the case.”

“Okay,” she agreed, exhaling hard.

“Hey,” I said, voice soft, waiting for her gaze to lift to find mine. “It’s going to be okay,” I told her.

“It needs to be,” she said. “So what is the plan for tonight? I’m assuming there isn’t enough time left to get a new security system in here?”

“There’s always enough time if you are willing to pay. But, personally, I wouldn’t just want to take anyone’s system in a situation like this. I would want the good shit. And that is going to require a consultation.”

“Alright. And you can set that up?”

“I have them on stand-by. Give me a time that works for you.”

“Tomorrow evening. When I finish work.”

“And when do you finish work?” I asked.

“Typically after seven or eight. But I will cut it early tomorrow. Will six be too late?”

“No. That’s fine. I will let them know,” I told her, already reaching for my phone. “Speaking of phones. Cam is coming by sometime to drop off yours. My number will now be in there, under my name. Sawyer and Tig’s numbers will be there as well, just in case you can’t get in touch with me.”

“Okay. Good. Do you really anticipate there being more problems from this person?”

“Yes. If they didn’t finish what they planned to, then yes. You’re going to need to be careful and aware when you are alone.”

“I can do that. So what about tonight?” she asked, looking toward her front door.

“Tonight, I am going to stay here.”

“You don’t have to do that,” she said, but there was no conviction behind her words.

“It’s already settled,” I assured her. “Don’t mind me. I won’t be in your hair. Just do what you would normally do. Try to ignore that I’m even here.”

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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*Miranda*

Ignore that he was there?

Only a man who didn't know just how attractive he was could say something like that. But everything about the confident, borderline cocky, way that Brock carried himself said he was very much aware of how hot he was.

Besides, even if he wasn't so blessed in the looks-department, ignoring his presence would be impossible.

It had been longer than I cared to admit since I'd had a man in my apartment who wasn't Cam. Hell, there were never any women either.

My apartment was my sanctuary, the place I could shrug off the public persona of Miranda Coulter, and just get to be Randi, a girl who still couldn't quite believe what she'd accomplished with her life, who still enjoyed a box of store brand mac & cheese—powdered cheese packet included—like

she'd eaten for dinner many times in her childhood, even though the adult version of her could have splurged on five-hundred dollars of sushi. Or where I would opt out of my nice, silk pajamas and pick a pair of sweatpants that came from a big box store in horrifically unflattering bright primary colors. Or where I would do my own manicure.

I didn't like inviting other people into my inner world where parts of the old me still peeked through on occasion.

But, I guess, if someone was going to be privy to that, someone that was being paid to be there was probably the least likely to judge or say anything. Client-employee confidentiality and all of that.

"I have a guest room," I offered him a while later, after the food was mostly eaten, the dishes in the dishwasher, and the wine bottle finished. Mostly by me.

I could feel it shimmering in my veins, making me feel light and sparkly, but without the sluttiness that came with hard liquor for me.

"I saw that," he said, reminding me that he'd been all up in my personal space when I wasn't around to watch him.

He'd seen the cheap boxed mac & cheese. And the sweats. Hell, he probably knew about my collection of battery-operated devices in the bottom drawer of my nightstand, and even drawn conclusions to how long it had been since I'd known the touch of a real, flesh-and-blood man, since I kept a damn bulk-sized pack of batteries in that drawer as well.

"I'd rather stay on the couch," he added when I said nothing. "Closer to the door if there is trouble."

"And if there's trouble?" I asked, stomach clenching a bit. And, I swear, as illogical as it was, I swear the damn cut on my arm burned too.

"You lock your bedroom door, go into your bathroom, lock that door as well, then climb into that massive-ass tub of yours."

"While you..." I prompted.



“Handle it,” he said, and there was something in his eyes, in his tone of voice, that told me he was more than capable of doing just that.

“Do you have a gun?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Should I have a gun?”

“Honey, I can’t answer that question for you,” he said, shaking his head. And I did not get a little flutter at the endearment. It was the wine, damnit. That was all. “Having a gun or not is a personal decision based on a lot of factors. Like your personal feelings on them, your knowledge on how to use and safely store them, and whether or not you think that, in the worst-case scenario, you could actually point one at a fellow human being and pull the trigger, being fully aware that you could remove them from the world.”

Well, that was a little... intense. But fair.

“I once bashed a man’s teeth out with a tire iron when he tried to assault me instead of help me change my tire like he claimed he was doing.”

“Good for you,” he said, giving me a small smile.

I never told anyone that story.

It was part of my old life.

And in my new life, you didn’t bash men’s teeth in with tire irons, no matter how much they had it coming. That was what security was for. What never changing your own damn tire because you had people to do that was for.

People in my current world viewed violence as base and low class, even if it was in self-defense.

So I just kept those types of tales to myself.

“I think I could do it. But it would take some research and practice before I felt comfortable with it.”

“It can all be part of the package,” Brock offered, shrugging. “If you want to go to the range to try it out, just let me know.”

“How is that part of the package?” I asked. “That doesn’t have anything to do with private investigation.”

“No,” he agreed. “But we are pretty full-service for our clients.”

I’d seen the paperwork from the contract that Cam signed. And, yeah, for the fees they were charging, I guess they’d better be full-service.

“Okay. Well, depending on how long this goes on, I might want to pencil that in.”

“Sounds good,” he said, nodding.

“Can I at least get you pillows and blankets?” I asked, waving toward the couch that I bought because it was pretty, not because I anticipated anyone sleeping on it. And pretty couches were not comfortable couches.

“That I can agree to,” he said, nodding.

Glad to have an excuse to leave the room, I went into the guest room to grab some pillows, blankets, and pillowcases.

Why I went into my own room to grab my perfume and spritz the pillows, yeah, that was completely beyond me. I was going to go ahead and call it muscle memory, since I always sprayed my own pillows before I slipped the cases on. Any other reason—like wanting him to smell me on them—would be borderline insane.

No matter how gorgeous he was.

“Is two pillows enough?” I asked as I walked back out with everything, finding him watching the darkened city out the windows that surrounded my apartment.

“Sweetheart, I’ve slept in mud puddles in pouring rainstorms,” he told me with a sweet smile. “Two of your very plush-looking pillows is more than enough.”

“I’m not used to having anyone else here,” I admitted to him as I set everything on the couch, figuring he would want to make things up himself.

“I can tell,” he said. And the worry must have been clear on my face because he shook his head at me. “I’m not trying to be offensive. You just don’t seem to know what to do with yourself in your own home. Which is usually how people act when they’re accustomed to being alone. That’s all.”

That was fair.

I’d spent several hours just walking room to room, putting random things away, fussing, not quite sure what I was supposed to be doing. It was going to feel extra strange to have someone sleeping on my couch.

Because while I did have a guest room, no one had ever stayed in it. Not even Cam. When we were working late. Or when we’d had too much wine. That was sort of the perk to living in the city, wasn’t it? Everything was a short cab ride away. No one had to stay because they were tired or drunk.

“There’s a TV inside that cabinet,” I told him, pointing toward it. “The remotes are in the box on the coffee table. I can’t sleep in silence,” I said, trying to make him feel comfortable with turning it on if he felt the same way.

“Thanks, babe.”

“And help yourself to anything in the... well... there’s nothing in there, I guess,” I said, wincing at the idea of him being hungry.

“Miranda,” he said, making my gaze move back to him. “I’ll be fine,” he assured me.

“Okay. Right. Good. I’ll leave you alone then.”

“Goodnight, Miranda,” he said, and I tried not to like the way he said my name too much.

“Right. Goodnight,” I said, making my way toward the hall.

Then I made my fatal mistake.

I looked back.

I looked back and saw this already too hot man reach up and pull off his damn shirt.

I always thought that thing about feeling weak in the knees was the stuff of fiction, or at least history, back when a glance at an ankle was scandalous, before hot, mostly naked men were splattered all over billboards across the city.

But, yeah, Brock put them to shame.

And those knees of mine?

Yeah, a little wobbly.

Because, well, *goddamn*.

I mean, yes, I'd known even with his clothes on that he was well-built, but I couldn't have known just what sort of perfection was hiding under that tee. The indents of his abdominal muscles, the deep little V cuts of his Adonis belt that disappeared into the waistband of his jeans, the breadth of his chest, the swells of his arm muscles.

There were also a few tattoos that I was too far away from to make out. And what looked like some scars.

I had to force myself to turn back around and make my way to my own room, closing the door, then leaning back against it, reminding myself that it was not possible to use one of those battery-operated devices of mine with him in the apartment, close enough to hear the buzzing.

“Get it together, Miranda,” I grumbled to myself as I walked through my bedroom and into the closet, picking out some pajamas. The nice ones. In case I decided to go out to the main area of the house before getting ready in the morning.

Then I got myself ready for bed, climbed in, turned on the TV to play repeats of an old favorite comfort show, then tried to drift off to sleep.

I expected it to be easy, after several restless nights in the hospital, but I tossed and turned for hours before I finally passed out.

I woke up without my alarm, as I always did, feeling disoriented and foggy.

So disoriented and foggy, in fact, that I found myself wandering out to the main area of my house, completely

forgetting about the presence of a certain someone until I ran straight-on into his hot, shirtless self in my kitchen.

“Whoops,” he said, sounding amused as he put an arm around my waist, further disorienting me as my face met his bare chest, smelling a little spicy like cologne, but also a little bit like, well, him. “Not too sharp first thing in the morning, huh?” he asked.

And that hand wrapped around me?

Yeah, it started to rub.

“If it helps, the coffee just finished brewing,” he told me as I had to force myself not to take a deep breath and breathe his scent in.

“That helps,” I agreed, making myself pull out of his hold before I did something stupid. Like jump him. “I sort of forgot you were here,” I told him as I made my way to the coffee pot. “I didn’t sleep well,” I admitted as I poured us each a cup.

“It’s hard to adjust to life back at home sometimes,” he said. And maybe I should have thought that was some comment about coming home after his service, but there was just something too familiar in his voice. Like maybe he knew what it was like to be away at a hospital for some length of time. But likely just a hospital-hospital, not a mental one. Maybe he’d been injured while on duty or something like that.

“I’m sure it was just a fluke. I should be good and tired after work today. Cam is more than capable, but...”

“But he’s not you,” Brock finished for me, taking the coffee from my hands.

“Essentially, yes. I’m sure he kept everything afloat, but I always have little things going on that I don’t really tell anyone about.”

“It takes a lot to keep a company like yours afloat.”

“It does. Hence the extra-large coffee.”

“And the collection of to-go mugs,” he said, taking a sip of his coffee.

“Exactly,” I agreed.

“I wish I could offer you some breakfast, but I’m not much of a breakfast person,” I told him.

The beginning of my day involved about three or four cups of coffee that would keep me reasonably full and fueled until my lunch break.

“Me either,” he said, shrugging. “This works for me.”

“So what is your plan for today?” I asked.

“Finding a way into the hotel’s security system, talking to —“

“Wait... seriously?” I asked.

“Yes. There are a few of them. Not as many as there should be, considering how much you pay to live here, but a few. That hopefully would have caught something. Then I need to put feelers out with your neighbors. And a contact I have up here who has an in with the police force, so I can maybe get some information from them. Then possibly, if I have time, the hospital itself. See if I can schmooze some information out of someone.”

“It will be really upsetting if that is possible,” I admitted.

“Unfortunately, in my line of work, you find that not much is private. Not even the shit that is supposed to be by law. And, for our sake, it’s a good thing. But if I can’t find out much, you should be able to. Given that they’re your records.”

“Right,” I agreed, trying not to let the idea of that bother me.

I guess, naively, I thought that once I got out, I wouldn’t have to deal with that whole ordeal again. But, yes, logically, this was going to be a part of my life. At least for a short while. And, well, longer than that unless I could find a way to make the scar disappear.

“Okay,” I said, taking a steadying sip of my coffee. “I am going to throw myself together,” I told him. “Feel free to use the shower in the guest room if you want to shower.”

With that, I went through the motions, taking care to put on my persona perfectly, even if it felt a little cracked around the edges from the events of the last few days.

I pulled my hair back into a tight bun. I swiped on some mascara and lipstick. I put on some gold hoops. Then I slid into slacks and a long-sleeved blouse as well as some ankle-aching heels. I spritzed on some perfume.

“Okay,” I said to my reflection with a deep exhale before turning and making my way out into the main area of the apartment.

Where Cam was standing talking to Brock like they were old friends.

“Randi!” Cam said, throwing up his arms and walking toward me for a hug. “Are you okay? Really,” he pressed as he squeezed me.

I wasn’t usually much of a touchy-feely person, but, God, did a hug feel good after the past few days.

“I’m okay. Ready to get back to things,” I told him.

“Well, I brought you your phone. And a latte. Your lifelines,” he said as he pulled back to hand each of them to me. “In your email, you will find a detailed report of everything I have done while pretending to be you for the past few work days, so you can go over it.”

“I trust you,” I told him. “Implicitly,” I added. “And I owe you so much for everything you have done since you found out what happened. I don’t deserve you.”

“You do,” he said, giving me a scrunched brow look that said he thought I was being an idiot. “When you catch up, we need to drop an obscene amount of money on shoes while you tell me all about the hospital. Was it like *Girl, Interrupted*?”

“Seeing as that was based in, like, the sixties, no,” I told him.

“No hot Angelina Jolie?” he asked.

“Why would you care? You don’t go that way.”

“Honey, I think everyone goes that way for Angelina,” he said, smirking. “Okay, so, GI Joe here has a whole day planned it seems. Which means we need to get on with our day,” Cam said, taking charge, which was what I liked best about him.

He gathered my things, and started to make his way to the door.

“Don’t worry. I’ll lock up,” Brock told me.

“I’ll see you here later?” I asked.

“Absolutely,” he told me.

I don’t know why, but that fact filled me with both relief and just a small dose of pleasure that I was going to go ahead and blame on my dry spell.

“Was it awful?” Cam asked on the elevator down to the lobby.

“Yes. And no. It’s awful for people to think you’re crazy or in crisis when you’re not. And some of the people were definitely in crisis, so it was difficult to watch. And it had its humiliating moments,” I added, inwardly cringing at the complete indignity that was the strip search.

Forced mental hold.

Forced to get naked in front of strangers.

I was pretty sure the trauma from that hadn’t quite set in yet, thanks to the mystery surrounding being sent there, and the fact that I needed to get my life back on track.

But I knew, eventually, that it was all going to come creeping in sometime. And would likely need to be dealt with in therapy.

Ironic, wasn’t it?

I hadn’t actually needed therapy before going to the psych ward. But afterward, I was probably going to need boatloads of it.

“Well, we can put that behind us now. It is time to get back to work. People have been understanding of your bug, but I



think getting a little weirded out that their steadfast leader hasn't dragged her ass into the office in days."

"That makes sense," I agreed. I never took days off. I gave the entire office off the day before Thanksgiving every year, but stayed at the office and worked it myself.

Along with Christmas Eve, New Year's Eve, my birthday, and every other day I gave my employees some time to themselves and their families.

The one perk, it seemed, to not having family of my own, was being able to work those holidays without feeling like I was missing out.

"Okay," Cam said when we were settled in the back of my town car, pulling away from the curb. "Can we talk about how *hot* Brock is?" he asked.

"You are a happily committed man," I reminded him.

"Committed, not dead," he shot back, fanning himself with his notebook. "I about fainted when I saw him. Well, not really. I was too frantic about you, but once we got a plan into place, there was swooning. That bone structure. Those dark eyes. And if anyone I've ever met had big-dick energy, it's him. I bet he would give you a good tour of the sheets. A much-needed tour, I might add," he said, giving me a knowing look.

Because when someone knew you well enough to buy your tampons on time each month, he damn sure knew when you were—or weren't—getting laid.

"He's working with me, Cam," I reminded him.

"Oh, he is contract work. It's not exactly an abuse of power. It's a gray area."

"I won't be banging the hot private investigator," I told him as the car pulled up beside our building.

"But you admit he's hot," Cam insisted, following me out of the car.

Oh, he was hot alright.

And while I would never speak this part out loud, it was going to be harder than I liked to admit to keep my hands to myself.

And keeping my hands to myself was non-freaking-negotiable.

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## CHAPTER SIX

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*Brock*

“None of this shit makes sense,” I told Sawyer over the phone as I scanned the aisles at the bodega a couple corners away from Miranda’s apartment.

“How did no one see anything?” Sawyer asked.

“How did you question them?” Tig asked as Sawyer put me on speaker.

“I didn’t try to fuck information out of them, if that’s what you’re asking,” I said, rolling my eyes, but shooting a guilty look at a group of teens playing hooky and laughing at what I’d said. “I just casually brought up ‘all that hubbub Friday night’ kind of thing.”

“And no one remembers an ambulance or cop cars?”

“No,” I said, settling on a protein bar, then making my way over toward the coffee station.

“Yeah, that makes no sense. She was taken by ambulance to the hospital, right?”

“That’s the billion-dollar question right now, isn’t it?” I asked, pouring some caramel syrup into my cup to cut the bitter, stale scent—and therefore taste—of the coffee.

I instantly missed the fancy-ass machine at Miranda’s apartment, and the perfect coffee it produced. But I didn’t want to be around the place too much in one day, raising brows. I’d already brought enough attention on myself for one day.

And it wasn’t easy to avoid the eagle eyes of the doorman around that place, men who were clearly paid well and had if not affection, then respect, for the tenants of the building.

I needed Miranda to make up some sort of story about my presence. A boyfriend, maybe.

Though, yeah, that felt a little bit like playing with fire.

I had to keep my fucking head in the game.

Not imagining the client naked in the shower.

Or with her skirt hiked up in the kitchen after work, taking it from behind to help her unwind from a long day.

“Fuck,” I hissed.

“What?” Sawyer asked, snapping me back to the moment.

“Coffee’s hot,” I said, shaking my head at myself.

“So what now?” Tig asked.

“I’m off to see a friend about a connection to the cops. Then I am back at the apartment to oversee the new security system.”

“Keep us updated,” Sawyer said.

“Will do.”

“Oh, and Brock?” Sawyer called before I could hang up.

“Yeah?”

“Don’t fuck the client.”

The line went dead after that.

A part of me wanted to be offended. But the other part of me knew that I had a pretty awful track record. Not with active clients, of course. I went ahead and waited until we closed the case before I gave into their advances.

What can I say?

A single gentleman liked to be accommodating to the ladies.

And as tempting as all of those women had been, none of them came close to Miranda Coulter's sexy ass.

Never mind her incredible looks. She was smart and driven, two qualities I'd always been drawn to. She was together and capable, with just a hint of vulnerability that she clearly didn't like anyone to see.

And what a fucking treat it would be to get trusted enough to get more of that side of her.

Not that I was going to get the chance.

"Hey, guys," I called to the teens who were lurking around, likely wondering if they would be able to snag a couple of the beers from the fridge without the owner seeing. "Any of you up around the Chapel Lane building on Friday?" I asked.

"I didn't steal shit," the youngest of the group, a the scrawniest of the bunch with a mop of blond hair and a wicked case of acne, making his milky skin red and puffy.

"Good to know," I said, nodding. "But I was actually just wondering if you saw a bunch of cop cars and ambulances at that building on Friday night."

"What you gonna give us for that kind of information?" the oldest and, clearly, the most street-wise of the bunch asked.

Tucking my protein bar on top of my coffee, I fished into my wallet with my free hand to pull out a twenty.

"Cop cars, ambulances, what did you see or hear?" I asked.

The kid reached out and snagged the twenty, tucking it into his pocket.

“There weren’t no cop cars or ambulances at that fancy-ass building.”

“You’re sure?” I asked.

“I was scouting that night. Was there from like seven to five or six in the morning. Didn’t see shit.”

Maybe I should have lectured them about scouting for a gang or the mob or whoever the fuck they were working for. But, sometimes, a kid had to do what a kid had to do. You didn’t know what kind of home life they had, how much they needed that extra cash.

So I kept my mouth shut.

“Anything else weird?” I asked.

“Nah, man. It was a calm night. Just fancy-ass people in fancy-ass clothes going out into fancy-ass cars. Same old shit as any other night. Just maybe busier, being a Friday night and shit.”

“Alright. Thanks,” I said, nodding at them, then walking out of the bodega even more perplexed than when I’d gone in.

Could the kids have been bullshitting me to get some extra cash? Sure. But something about that kid’s certainty told me he wasn’t lying. And in affluent neighborhoods, the gang or mob or whoever was running the coke in the area, would have scouts around. Especially on a weekend night.

I ate my makeshift lunch in the back of a cab on my way to a much less luxurious area of the city.

Back to an area where I found another private investigator office right next to a bail bonds place and a few doors down from a kickboxing gym.

All of whom were owned by old buddies of mine.

Xander ran the private investigator firm. K operated the kickboxing gym. But it was the owner of the bail bonds place I was after. Gabe. Who I’d happened across on a case we were both working, just from different angles.

We'd both gotten our asses handed to us by a six-foot-six, four-hundred-pound bodybuilder, then nursed our wounds over a few drinks as we tried to work out how to bring the bastard in.

We weren't close, not really, but he would get me some information if I asked.

His office was a nice place in a bad area, proving that bail bonds was still a solid business if you knew what you were doing. The walls were gray, and all the other accessories black.

It had been remodeled a bit since the last time I was around.

A woman sat behind a desk in the front behind what I imagined was some bullet-resistant glass. Directly beside that was a thick metal door that led to the back where Gabe and his office must have been if he was in.

"Can I help you?" the woman asked, giving me a friendly, but professional smile. The kind that said she might have worked with people who needed help with bail, but she didn't date them.

"Is Gabe in?" I asked.

"Yes, he is, but he is busy. May I ask who is asking?"

"If you could just mention the blonde in Baltimore, that'd be great," I said.

"Okay then," she said, then reached for her phone.

I moved a few feet away, rocking on my heels, knowing he was on his way out.

Not a minute later, the locked door to the hallway was bursting open, and there was Gabe.

He was a pretty-boy type with blond hair and a tall, sturdy frame.

"I had to fucking bleach my eyes after walking into that hotel room," he said, giving me a smirk.

"Yeah, not one of my finest moments," I said, thinking back to calling his ass because he was the only person in that

damn city that I knew when I found myself chained to a bed naked save for the fucking pillow over my junk after getting robbed by a chick I'd taken back to my room after all that drinking I'd done with Gabe.

“The fuck are you doing in my neck of the woods?”

“I have a case,” I told him.

“That brings you into the city? Must have deep pockets.”

“She does. And I have a favor to ask if you still have contacts on the force.”

“Yeah, of course,” he said, nodding. “Let’s take a walk,” he offered, leading me outside. “So, what do you have going on?”

“A rich businesswoman—“

“Christ, don’t fuck her,” Gabe said, making a snort escape me.

“I’ve had that lecture already. Anyway, she woke up in a hospital with her wrist slit, was forcibly put on a 5150, and has no fucking idea what happened.”

“No shit. That’s an interesting one.”

“Yeah. The problem is, none of the neighbors remember seeing cops or ambulances. Neither do some kids who were scouting on the street that night either.”

“Yeah, that’s weird,” Gabe said. “Did she not remember any of that?”

“Not a fucking thing,” I told him. “All she remembers was expecting Chinese food delivery. She was alone. Then she woke up in the hospital.”

“And you’re sure she just didn’t have a bad night?”

“She’s pretty fucking certain. As is her personal assistant who tracked us down and hired us.”

“Alright. Well, yeah, I can ask if any cops were sent to her address at...”

“The Chapel Lane building.”



“Oh, she’s *rich-rich*,” he said.

“Penthouse of the Chapel Lane building,” I clarified.

Gabe let out a whistle at that.

“Yeah, someone would remember being called to that apartment.”

“Exactly.”

“I will ask around today and get back to you.”

“I appreciate it.”

“Maybe when the case is done, we can grab some drinks and talk about how it went. Too fucking interesting not to know what went down. Assuming you’re not balls-deep in the client at the end of the case.”

“I can behave myself, for fuck’s sake,” I said, letting out a laugh as a car pulled up and parked a few yards away, a slick jet-black sports car that cost a cool hundred grand, easy.

“Who’d bring a car like that into this...” I started, then the door opened, and out walked a gorgeous woman with black hair and a killer body.

“Brock, this is my girl, Corey. Corey, this is Gabe,” he explained, placing a hand at the small of the woman’s back.

“The blonde in Baltimore,” she said, grinning at me.

“That’s me,” I agreed.

“The chains thing, is that a preference of yours?” she asked. “Gabe never knew.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head.

“Don’t mind her. It’s an occupational hazard to ask.”

“Yeah? What’s the occupation?”

“I own a BDSM club,” she told me, making my brows shoot up.

“No shit?”

“No shit.”

“Good for you. And I get shit for liking successful women?” I asked, giving Gabe a look.

“I like this woman, regardless of her success,” he said, shrugging. “You have a pathological compulsion toward a certain type of woman.”

That was the general belief.

That I liked wealthy women.

What no one got was that it wasn't about the money. I made my own money. Good money, too, considering I slacked a lot on initiative when it came to my job.

It wasn't the money.

It was the worldliness.

It was their sense of adventure.

But above all else, it was the confidence.

Thus far, I hadn't found anyone quite as self-assured as a wealthy woman who knew that, no matter what happened in her life, she would land on her feet.

No one, least of all a man, could knock her down and keep her down.

That kind of confidence, yeah, it was sexy as fuck.

And, well, they tended to be sex-starved because those silver-spoon guys weren't shit in bed because they never *had* to be, because any girl with dollar signs in her eyes would moan and writhe like she was having the best lay of her life if it meant she got to take a ride on his yacht.

Uptown girls and backstreet guys, it was a tale as old as time.

“I gotta take this,” I said, seeing the name of the security guy on the phone.

“Yep. I'll be in touch,” he said, nodding at me.

“Appreciate it,” I said as he led his woman back toward his office.

The rest of the afternoon was spent working out some finer details with the security guys, shooting off texts to Sawyer with updates, and writing down notes for other shit to look into when I had some free time.

*- Randi is leaving the office now.*

The text from Cam saved me from more monotonous work, making me head back in the direction of Miranda's apartment building, and waiting outside for her town car.

She pulled up twenty minutes later, a to-go coffee in her hand, even though her workday was over, sliding out of the car looking just as fresh as she'd looked going to work, and I wasn't exactly sure how that was even remotely possible.

"How'd it go?" I asked as her gaze lifted to mine.

"Cam held it together really well, but it was a lot," she admitted. "What time is the security guy getting here? Do we have time to order something for dinner?" she asked. "Thank you," she said, giving the doorman a smile as he opened it for us to pass through.

"We have a little time," I told her. "It would be faster to go grab something, though, than to order it," I said.

Turning back to me, she sucked her lower lip in slightly to nibble it and I swear to all that is holy I wanted to grab her and fuck her right against the front desk of the building, right in front of anyone who was around.

"Okay," she agreed, nodding.

"You good in those ankle-breakers to walk?" I asked.

"Honey, I could run a marathon in my heels if I needed to," she told me, giving me a smirk as she moved ahead of me, and I got to see that thick ass of hers for a second before I snapped myself out of it and rushed forward to go outside with her. "There's a salad and wrap place up the block," she told me. "I think I need something halfway healthy after eating my body weight in Chinese food last night," she added.

“Sounds good to me,” I agreed. I could go for anything. My stomach had been grumbling for hours, objecting to just a protein bar and coffee for lunch.

“What?” I asked a few minutes later as I quickly pulled out my card before she could get her hand in her purse to find her own.

“You don’t need to pay for me,” she said, brows still a little furrowed.

“And, yet, I am going to,” I said, giving the girl behind the register a smile as I took my card back.

“I can pay for my own food,” she insisted.

“Baby doll, you have eight-hundred-dollar shoes on,” I said, watching as her brows went up at that knowledge. What can I say? When you hooked up with a few wealthy women, you were inevitably going to get dragged to a shoe store or two. “Of course you can pay for your own food. But I am doing it this time.”

I didn’t know a lot about Miranda Coulter’s early life, but I was going to put a good chunk of money on her not having grown up rich. If anything, she might have struggled. That hyper-independence, that need to take care of herself even in the most minute ways—like paying for food—spoke to her feeling like she’d spent a lot of years wanting to prove herself, to show that she belonged in the upper echelon.

That unsure look kept getting shot in my direction on the walk back to her apartment and the elevator ride up to her apartment as well.

“How many cases do you work a year?” she asked as she pulled out plates for the food.

“Honey, they’re wraps. We can eat them out of the clamshells,” I told her, shaking my head at the plates.

Hot.

Smart.

Wealthy.

Independent.

And just a little bit uptight.

I can't express how much I wanted to show her how to loosen up in a much more mutually satisfactory way. As it was, though, I could just force her to eat out of plastic instead of a plate that probably cost fifty bucks a piece, if not more.

"Right," she agreed. "Do you have any objections to wine glasses?" she asked, throwing me a smirk over her shoulder. "Or should we drink from plastic cups?" she added. "Do you have a preference? Red or white," she clarified.

"Not especially. Whatever you're in the mood for. So you don't even slip out of those shoes at home, huh?" I asked as she clicked over toward the table.

"Not when I'm expecting company."

Right.

She had to keep up the persona.

So no one knew she didn't grow up with a silver spoon in her mouth.

"But back to your question, the company gets several cases a month. I get maybe one every six weeks. I'm not the biggest go-getter there, so Sawyer and Tig tend to take more cases than I do."

I could see her doing the math.

Trying to figure out my income, so she could understand why I, someone who made significantly less than she did, would offer to pay.

"Why were you given my case if you're not a go-getter?" she asked, doing quotes with one hand.

"Because I knew more about psych hospitals. And the lifestyles of wealthy women."

To that, her brow raised.

"What? Are you a sugar baby or something?"

I'd been asked that countless times before.

And the answer was always the same.

No.

I might have spent time with many a wealthy woman, and, sure, I'd take a glass of her wine when it was offered. But I always paid my own way. I paid both our ways if I was taking her out somewhere.

It wasn't about the money.

"If I was a sugar baby, Miranda, would I have paid for dinner?" I reminded her.

"Fair enough. So you've dated wealthy women. Any that I might know?"

"Probably. And I think... 'dating' might be too strong a word," I said.

"Oh," she said, smile going a little saucy. "Not the commitment type?"

"Not so far," I admitted.

"You're, what, in your late thirties?" she asked. "How many wild oats do you have to sow?"

"Hey, it's not my fault that the right woman hasn't shown up in my life yet," I said, shrugging.

"So you're not planning on being a lifelong bachelor?"

"I always figured that might be my path. But then I watched my partners find their spouses has changed my ideas on that a bit."

I always figured that variety was the spice of life. But there was just something about the way Sawyer and Riya and Tig and Kenzi looked at each other that made me start to want that as well.

That kind of pure, undiluted love and admiration? Yeah, that was something I was pretty sure I'd like to find in life.

"You? Are you married to work? Actually, while we are on that topic, a list of men you've seen over the past two years is probably a good idea," I said.

“I am, to an extent, married to my work,” she admitted with a shrug. “My success is important to me. And not every man is understanding of that.”

That was a common complaint, unless you were dating someone in your social circle, in which case, that opened up a whole other world of problems.

“And the list?” I asked, reaching for my notepad.

“Oh, Michael Richardson,” she said, sighing.

“How’d that end?” I asked.

“Amicably. Two people who were so busy with work that we didn’t realize for a while that we just didn’t like each other,” she admitted.

“Okay. Who else? Come on,” I said when she shrugged. “There’s got to be someone else. In two years, just one guy?”

“One guy that I let into my life, yeah. There were a couple of dates, but that was all they were. Dates. They never even led to anything after dinner,” she clarified.

“Okay. Well, give me those names too. You never know. Some guys can mistake a casual glance in their direction for love, then stalk the shit out of a woman for five years.”

“Ugh,” she grumbled, then reached for the pad to jot down three names.

One seemingly casual fling and three dates. That was all her personal life had to offer for two years.

She really was married to her work.

It was no wonder she was wound so tight.

“Oh, before Lennon gets here, I am supposed to ask you to consider where you want the monitoring system set up. With the screens and such,” I explained.

“Sounds unsightly,” she decided.

“It is,” I confirmed.

“I guess the guest room then,” she said, shrugging. “It rarely gets use anyway.”

“Okay. That works. I am waiting for a call back from a friend about the fact that none of your neighbors remember anything at all about cops or an ambulance.”

“Wait... what?” she asked.

“Yeah, I know. It makes no sense,” I agreed. “So he’s contacting a friend on the force to see if someone was dispatched. If not, we have a whole new scenario to try to work out. If someone showed up here, would you have left with them?” I asked.

“If I knew them, maybe. But only if there was a good reason. I would have thought it was bizarre for someone to show up here, then ask me to leave with them. Without texting or calling first anyway. You think it’s possible that it happened somewhere else?”

“If the ambulance didn’t pick you up from here, then that is the only explanation. Or if someone dropped you off at the hospital.”

“But why would they do that if they’d intended to kill me?”

“Yeah, that’s a great question. I’m leaning toward you left with them, and then they did it somewhere else. I can’t imagine why. But the why comes when we find the who. I couldn’t get into the system today. For the building’s footage,” I clarified. “But that’s my plan for tomorrow.”

“Are you staying over again tonight?” she asked, and there was just something in her tone that made me think she wanted me to, that maybe she just didn’t feel quite safe yet in her apartment, even with a new security system. And, honestly, that was valid considering what may have happened to her inside of it.

Though, yeah, the more I thought about it, the less likely that seemed. There would have been blood. Quite a bit of it, too.

There hadn’t been a drop anywhere.

Clearly, it had to have happened somewhere else, which made the whole ambulance thing make more sense.



I had to get the footage, so I could see who may have gone up her elevator to get her.

“If you want me to stay, I can absolutely stay,” I offered.

Her gaze slid to mine for a second, looking for any signs of reservation.

Finding none, her gaze slid away again, going to the door to the hall. “I’d like you to stay. If there is a service I can add on to my bill that would include you staying here until the case is solved, actually, I would like to do that.”

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

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*Miranda*

What the hell did I just say?

Surely not that I wanted him to *live with* me.

Albeit temporarily.

I mean, that was insane.

I never lived with anyone. Not even my most serious boyfriend, back before I got my little empire going. I always needed my space. I valued my privacy. I didn't want anything to alter my routines or invade the peace I found in the sanctuary that was my personal space.

"That can absolutely be arranged," he told me before I could take the words back. Because I was absolutely going to take them back. Right? "I just need to take a trip back to Navesink Bank to pick up some of my things."

“Can I go with you?” I asked, feeling my eyes turn to saucers as I realized what I’d just said. “I would like to meet your boss,” I added, trying to cover my tracks, trying to make it seem less like I was interested in Brock’s world.

“Yes, of course. Sawyer would love to meet you. Then I can just swing by my place, pack a few things, and we can be back here before the end of the night. Are you working late tomorrow night?”

Not if those were the plans.

And I was going to choose to not think about why I was going to leave work early, shirking important responsibilities, to go see the home of a man I barely knew, one I was going to allow to live with me.

Because if I thought about that too hard, I might come to the conclusion that I belonged in the psych ward I’d just been released from.

“No, actually,” I said, shaking my head, trying to be casual. “I underestimated just how capable Cam was. He got me a little ahead on a couple of little projects. So I don’t need to stay as late as usual while we are figuring some of these things out.”

“Great. It’s only about an hour and twenty minutes from here to there,” he told me.

“Sounds... is that the friend?” I asked when his phone started bleeping.

Putting down his food, he checked his texts.

“Just confirming what I have pretty much concluded myself,” he said. “There were no cops or ambulances dispatched here that night. But he did find that there was a call for a woman who’d attempted suicide several blocks away.”

“Where?” I asked, straightening, truly not believing I would have just... taken a walk with someone late at night when I knew I had food coming. Maybe I would have taken a car or a cab if I thought it was something serious. But not walk. At night. In leisurewear. Just because someone wanted me to.

“In an alley,” he told me, shaking his head.

“They found me in an alley?”

“Yes.”

“Someone took me to an alley, slit my wrist, and then left me there to die?” I asked, jaw—and therefore my tone—getting sharp.

“That’s what it sounds like,” he agreed, keeping calm to offset my escalating mood.

“Why the ever-loving hell would the cops, paramedics, or the doctors at the hospital believe that I would try to take my own life in a disgusting, garbage-ridden alley?”

“They might not have thought it was so weird. Most women who attempt or complete suicide, do so in places where they won’t leave a mess for loved ones to clean up. So the bathtub is popular. But so is their car. Or outside somewhere that wouldn’t taint anything of theirs.”

I got that.

I did.

“But an alley?” I pressed.

“Yeah, if they’d found you in a park or something, I might even say that, hey, you had a bad night. But an alley is suspicious. But, keep in mind, that these people had no idea who you were. For all they knew, you were homeless or looking for a fix or something like that. You might be wealthy, but you’re not a celebrity. They would have no reason to question the location you were found in.”

“I guess that’s true,” I agreed, though it didn’t make the anger inside me feel any less hot and destructive.

Because somebody, likely someone who knew me, had left me to die in a trash-filled alley.

Treating me, in turn, as trash as well.

That burned more than it had any right to.

Mixed with that anger, though, was a deep sort of sadness.

I didn't trust anyone as it was.

The idea that someone in my very tight circle could have done that to me...

"Hey, don't let it get to you. What they did has nothing to do with you, and everything to do with them."

"I know. But that doesn't mean it doesn't sting," I told him, reaching for my wine.

"I have to ask you this, and I understand if it is going to upset you, but I have to do it."

"Okay," I agreed, tensing.

"Could it have been Cam?" he asked.

"No way. You said it yourself. He tracked you down, came to you, and even tried to pay you for this job. That makes no sense if he'd done it."

"Devils Advocate here," he said, resting his arms on the table and leaning forward toward me, creating a little intimacy to try to make it easier for me to see his side. "If he'd attempted it, if he'd failed, and he realized that when you got a text out to him on your smartwatch, would it not make the most sense for him to do everything he could to make it seem like it couldn't possibly be him?"

That was a perfectly sound argument.

But everything inside of me rebelled against it.

This was the guy who went shoe shopping with me, who tried to force me to go to the doctor when I didn't want to, who'd helped me change my bloody gauze when I'd needed to have oral surgery done.

Yes, I paid him well.

But I would have paid him well even if he hadn't done those things.

If he hated me enough to discard me like garbage, then why would he go above and beyond in all other areas?

“I see you trying to make it make sense,” Brock said, reaching out and placing a hand on my wrist. “But I need to remind you that people who’d do shit like this? They aren’t rational. What they’ve done or haven’t done won’t make any sort of sense.”

I was only half processing what he was saying.

What with his big hand on my wrist, and his thumb absentmindedly stroking, my system was trying to also process the surge of desire that bloomed within me.

“All I am saying is to really think about it. Go over it in your head. If after doing that, you conclude that it isn’t remotely possible, I’ll believe you. But you have to be objective.”

“Okay,” I agreed, nodding.

“And on safety standpoint, I have to ask.”

“God, what now?” I grumbled, yanking my hand away from him and resting it in my lap. I felt like my head was spinning. I needed to focus.

“Are you alone with Cam at any point during the day where something bad could happen?”

“No. I mean, we’re never really alone at work. And even the drive in, we have my driver. The only time we would have been alone would be if he came into the apartment.”

“But with me here, that’s not going to be a concern.”

“Exactly,” I agreed, glad to have a reason to have him around. On a rational, less hormone-driven level, anyway.

“That’s probably the crew,” Brock said when there was a buzz to my room.

After buzzing him up, I felt the need to turn and rush to put the food away, only to find that Brock had already done it.

“Brace yourself for Lennon,” Brock said as I reached for my glass of wine, taking another sip. “He can be a little intense.”

“Intense how?”

“Intense in the way that says he’s seen and heard all the crazy ass stories about shit that can happen in someone’s home if they don’t have it properly secured, so he is ultra-vigilant,” Brock explained. “He’s going to have a fucking field day with the balcony,” he added, shaking his head as he smirked.

“It’s a penthouse balcony,” I reminded him. “There’s not even a fire escape.”

“I guarantee you, he will have a story to strike the fear of God into you about it.”

Lennon, like Brock, screamed ex-military from the moment I laid eyes on him.

He was a giant of a man with dark skin, legs the size of tree trunks, and the biggest arms I’d ever seen.

He had a handsome face, all square jaw and a stern brow.

Everything about him was serious, but there was a slight kindness behind his brown eyes as well.

“Lennon, this is Miranda. Miranda, Lennon.”

“Miss Coulter,” Lennon said, giving me a handshake so firm I felt like my bones were crushing. That voice of his? So deep you could practically feel it reverberate through your chest when he spoke. “We need to talk about that balcony,” he said, making my head swivel in Brock’s direction, seeing his self-satisfied smile.

“Brock mentioned you would think it was problematic. I can’t imagine why. It’s a penthouse balcony with no access to lower levels.”

“It is, ma’am,” he said, nodding. “That does not mean that it is impenetrable. I have seen on more than one occasion, people in climbing gear or using window cleaning equipment, penetrate penthouse balconies.”

“I really don’t think anyone who is out to get me is anywhere near that highly trained,” I insisted.

“Ma’am, I am here for your safety. And I do not feel comfortable with your balcony or the access it has to your apartment,” he told me. “We can go over options to mitigate

those dangers after my man here,” he said, waving to a guy who was loaded down with bags of equipment, “finishes setting up your cameras.”

“I thought you were exaggerating,” I told Brock as I moved in at his side while Lennon and his employee got to work, walking around my apartment, pointing to things with very grave faces.

My entire apartment, it seemed, was a logistical nightmare and a danger to me and everyone in it.

“If anything, I was underplaying it,” Brock said, smirking. “I thought maybe time would have chilled him out a bit. Seems only to have reaffirmed his belief that everyone was in danger from unseen forces plotting our downfall. Though, objectively, that is the case with you.”

“Yeah, but I really don’t think anyone I know could, like, parachute onto my balcony or something like that.”

“I’m kind of with you on that one. Though I have an issue with that balcony as well, just for a different reason.”

“What reason?” I asked, looking over at it.

“Just that it is very high. And whoever slit your wrist clearly wants it to make it look like you want to end your life. So a balcony...”

“Oh,” I said, stomach sinking at the idea.

“I actually never go out to the railing,” I admitted. “Anyone who knows me would know that. I like being up high, but I get dizzy too close to the railing or the window.”

“That’s good to know,” he said.

“Do you think Lennon has some sort of method to prevent me from going over that balcony if someone tried to force me to?” I asked.

“I’m sure he does.”

And, boy, did he.

But it would involve actual construction that couldn’t be done for a few weeks, thanks to some scheduling difficulties.



“This is the best of the best that money can buy, Miss Coulter,” Lennon told me, even after I insisted he call me Miranda no less than three times.

“Money is not a factor,” I insisted. “Time, however...” I said, waving toward the balcony. “I’m sorry,” I said, sighing. “I’m just paranoid.”

“Paranoid is good,” Lennon insisted. “Paranoid keeps you alive. I understand your anxiousness to get the project done to both of our satisfaction. It is a complicated process, unfortunately, so it can’t be rushed. But my advice for the time being would include a specialty lock to that balcony to keep you or anyone else from being able to go out there. And Miss Coulter?” he called.

“Yes?”

“Don’t apologize for being concerned for your safety,” Lennon insisted.

Apologizing.

It was the hardest habit to shake, I’d found.

It was something you really had to work to avoid doing in the business world. If you paid close attention, men rarely apologized. Especially in business settings. No matter how wrong they might have been. Apologizing was a sign of weakness. So I worked hard never to do it.

Except, of course, sometimes everyone slipped up.

Especially after the week I’d had.

“I feel like this might be a good time to bring up the topic of a tracker.”

“A... tracker?” I asked, face scrunching. “Like a chip? Like for dogs?” I added.

“Just like that, yes, but not internal. Though, of course, those are available.”

“Of course,” I agreed, feeling like my head was spinning a bit.

Men parachuting onto balconies. Implanted tracking chips. It all just seemed so insane.

But the way Lennon talked about it said that it not only happened, but that it wasn't even that rare. Which was kind of terrifying.

"So you want me to carry around a tracking dog tag," I summarized.

"I want for us to be able to track your location at anytime while you are under our protection," Lennon clarified.

"What does this tag look like? How will I carry it around? Wouldn't my phone or my smartwatch do the same thing?"

"The thing is, Miss Coulter," Lennon said, clasping his fingers together on the surface of the table, "if we are dealing with professionals here, they will know that both your phone and smartwatch can be tracked. They would, therefore, deactivate them. And then we would be in the dark."

"Okay. What do these look like then?" I asked.

Lennon waved toward his man who was hovering a few feet away with a box that he handed to his boss.

"First, we have the keychain," he said, producing a little leather circular-looking owl.

"There's a tracker in this?" I asked, taking it from him.

"Yes. That is step one. You would typically have your keys on you."

"Step one?"

"Yes. Step two is this little clip that you will put on every morning, hooked so it sits inside the waistband of your pants," he told me, producing a little black circle with a hook for the top of your pants. "But since there is a lot of room for error with that, we also have step three," he told me, going back into his box to grab a jewelry box.

I braced myself for the worst.

Jewelry was so subjective.

I was very particular.

Or as Cam would say, ‘impossible to shop for.’

Lennon popped the top off and passed the jewelry to me.

It was a piece of round rose gold with this very intricate, lacy, rose gold bow on top.

As far as jewelry went, it wasn’t exactly Tiffany. But it wasn’t off the shelf at some novelty shop, either.

“This is all genuine rose gold, so it should pass inspection from acquaintances of yours. But since you will be wearing it from this point on, it might be wise to come up with a cover story for it. A gift from your family or a boyfriend is usually the best bet.”

I didn’t ever talk about my personal life with my staff. Or even my acquaintances, unless we were discussing things like shows we’d seen or gallery openings we’d attended.

But it would be unusual for me to wear the same exact piece of jewelry for days or weeks on end. Sure, I had my staple pieces—about a dozen sets of earrings, and eight to ten bracelets or necklaces to choose between—but I usually wore them in rotations.

“Okay,” I said, nodding, the old part of me annoyed that the new part of me was being so vain over something so insignificant. After all, the old me wore the same gold hoops—a gift on my sixteenth birthday—and tennis bracelet—a graduation present—every single day for years. “Is that it? Or are there more steps?”

“For now, that should do,” Lennon said, giving me the hint of a smile. “When something happens, and we don’t know where you are, Brock and I will both have access to the tracking information from these devices. They’re very accurate. So when something happens, you don’t need to worry. We will be on our way.”

“And when he says ‘when something happens,’” Brock said, tone reassuring. “He means if. And it is extremely unlikely.”

Except, of course, according to Lennon, that was statistically untrue when it came to wealthy clients.

He had one client who was taken three times over the course of one year.

“I could never do his job,” I told Brock as he closed the door to the hallway after Lennon and his man left. “I would be paranoid about everything.”

“Yeah, that does seem to be an unfortunate consequence of the job,” Brock agreed.

“What do you think his apartment is like?” I asked, envisioning rooms full of screens that showed camera angles of every inch of his space. Multiple locks and alarms on every window and door.

“Whatever you are imagining is probably pretty accurate,” Brock said. “He keeps his knife drawer locked. And his toolbox is in a safe. Since a lot of people end up beaten, stabbed, or shot with items the intruder found in their houses.”

“Fantastic. Another terrifying statistic to have rolling around in my head, keeping me from sleep,” I said, going into the kitchen to set the kettle on, feeling too wired for coffee, but needing a comforting hot drink regardless.

“No one is getting in here,” Brock assured me. “Not with me here,” he added, and I immediately felt a bit of calm wash over me. Because, as un-feminist as this was for me to admit, I did feel safer knowing there was a man in the house.

Then again, it might not have had anything to do with his maleness. It could have very well just been his training. I likely would have felt just as safe with a female ex-military guard in my house. Anyone who would know what to do if someone attacked, who wouldn’t hesitate, who could at least distract the bad guy long enough for me to call the police for help.

It wasn’t that this was the first time in my life where I worried about my safety. I mean, I was a woman. We had it hammered into it our entire childhoods and adolescence that we were practically moments away from kidnapping, rape, and

murder. Because, well, the statistics didn't lie. It was true for one in three of us. But I guess gaining success, having the kind of income that would allow me to live in a building with a doorman, those sorts of things had insulated me a bit from threats in the past.

Random people didn't just get to waltz into my building, going wherever they wanted to.

I also had a driver, so I wasn't worried about standing on subway platforms at night, or walking around in sketchy areas.

Sure, there was always that heart-drop moment when a guy appeared out of nowhere, or when someone was being a little creepy, but it wasn't as prominent a part of my life as it had been when I was younger.

It was unsettling to be forced back into that old mindset, to have to be paranoid about anyone who got close to me.

At least until we figured out who'd done this to me.

"So what time tomorrow?" Brock asked.

"Tomorrow?" I repeated, mind a little fuzzy from all the new fears and information clouding it.

"To take a trip to Navesink Bank," Brock clarified.

"Oh, right. Well, I have two meetings in the morning, then some conference calls. But after that, it is mostly busy work that I can do from the car, or some other time," I told him. "We could head out by three, if that works for you."

"Yep. I've got nothing else going on while I'm on your case, sweetheart."

"Okay. I will tell Mitchell... why are you shaking your head?" I asked, brows drawing down.

"I'll drive."

"That's silly. Why drive when I have a driver?"

"Miranda," he said, tone a mix of amused and firm as he got closer, a little too close if you were asking my libido, and ducked his head down a bit. "I'm driving. Give Mitchell the day off."

“Okay,” I agreed, feeling my belly doing little flip-flops at his nearness. We weren’t going to talk about what another part of my anatomy was doing about it.

“Okay,” he agreed. And, was it just me, or had his voice gone a little sexy-soft when he said that?

No.

That was my wishful thinking.

“I am going to go take this and have a long bath,” I told him, reaching for my cup of tea.

This time, though, I was almost positive it wasn’t wishful thinking, that his eyes did go just a bit hooded and heated at that comment.

Which only made the situation worse.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “A shower and some sleep sounds good tonight.”

Oh, damn him.

Did he do that on purpose?

I made him think of me naked, so he had to make me think of him?

No.

That was ridiculous.

I needed to get it together.

“Okay. Well... goodnight,” I said, taking a step toward the doorway.

“Goodnight, Miranda,” he said, and I pretended to ignore the little thrill in my belly at the sound of my name in that soft-sexy voice, and the way his gaze was still on me until I was completely out of the doorway.

But when I looked back, he was leaning on the doorjamb, watching, until I caught him, then he retreated back into the kitchen.

It wasn’t long after that I was sunken deep into a hot tub, my head slamming back on the porcelain as I heard him move

into the guest bathroom that shared a wall with mine.

Probably taking off his clothes, getting ready for his shower.

Taking a deep breath, I gave into the raging need between my thighs, letting my hand move down my body to tease my fingers up my cleft at the sounds of water splattering on the tile floor one room away.

In my mind, I imagined him overcome with the need as well as he reached down to start working his cock as I worked on my clit.

I was so wrapped up in the moment that I forgot all about being quiet, about not being alone.

The cries of my orgasm echoed off the walls of the bathroom, the sound jerking me right out of my daze and into the present moment, suddenly all too aware of the fact that the water had stopped in the other bathroom, the sound that may have muffled my cries.

So, yeah, I was reasonably sure he'd heard.

"Damn it," I hissed as my foot unplugged the drain as I stood up.

Maybe he'd gone to bed before I'd gotten loud.

At least, that was what I had to hope for.

Since we were going to be cooped up in a car with each other for more than an hour the following day.

The sad thing, I realized as I climbed into bed and turned on the TV, though, was that it hadn't helped.

It wasn't just about an orgasm that I'd needed.

Because as I tossed and turned in bed, the need was not abated. If anything, it just seemed to keep building.

Which left me with one conclusion.

It wasn't that I was just in need of release.

It was that I needed Brock to give it to me.

And that, well, that just couldn't happen.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

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*Miranda*

“Is everything alright?” Cam asked after walking into my office and closing the door.

There was no such thing as privacy, what with the whole office being glass, but at least the sound didn’t carry when we wanted to share a couple stolen bits of conversation.

“Ah, I mean, yes. As alright as they can be, I guess. Why?”

“Because your shoes, purse, and that hideous necklace don’t work together,” Cam said, giving me a small, familiar smile to help ease the sting of the words.

“I...” I started, glancing over at my bag, then down at my shoes.

I mean, there was nothing wrong with them in and of themselves. And a normal person likely wouldn’t have seen anything off about them. But this wasn’t a normal person. This



was Cam. The man who knew what kind of panties I bought and dental floss I liked.

He knew when an outfit choice was a manifestation of something else.

“The necklace is a security thing,” I told him, shrugging. “I am under direct orders to wear it every day from now on.”

“Oh, that is truly unfortunate.”

“I know, right? It’s fine for a one-off, but daily?” I said, grimacing.

“How have things been going?” he asked, coming closer to sit in one of the chairs across from my desk as he often did, settling his clipboard on his knee as he’d done a thousand times before.

“Bizarre, I guess. The security expert is making me remodel my balcony. My guest room is now outfitted with hideous monitors. But, yeah, it’s... okay.”

“Randi,” Cam said, leaning forward a bit, giving me raised brows. “This is me,” he reasoned.

To that, I let out a sigh.

“In the vault, right?” I asked.

“Of course.”

“I want to bang my private investigator,” I told him, feeling the weight fall from my shoulders almost immediately at getting a chance to admit that out loud.

“Um, duh,” Cam said, leaning back in his chair with a big smile. “I mean, you have eyes, don’t you?”

“He’s stupidly attractive. Couldn’t you find me an aging, blading, chain-smoking private investigator? You had to find the one who looks like he moonlights as a model?”

“I mean, of course, I tried very hard to find the ugliest one for you. Alas, Brock’s crew is considered the best there is. Which is exactly what you deserve.”

“What did the other two look like?”

“Attractive, each in their own different ways. But they’re married.”

“And I had to have the single one why?”

“Sawyer put him on the case. I don’t really know why. He just seemed knowledgeable about the situation, I guess. So what’s been going on in that penthouse?” he asked, wiggling his brows.

“Nothing. Well, a lot of eye-banging,” I admitted, shaking my head at myself. “In particular, my eyes doing a lot of the banging. Which we can’t even call my fault since the man sleeps with his shirt off.”

“You’re... watching him sleep?” Cam asked, looking a mix of amused and a little creeped out.

“No. I was just walking away after saying goodnight and he took off his shirt. And, well, it goes to follow that first thing in the morning, he is walking around without his shirt as well.”

“I have to know. Is he as fit under that shirt as I think he is?”

“Yes,” I confirmed. “And he has a couple of tattoos. One is some sort of military one. Another is, of all things, a tattoo of Reptar.”

“Reptar,” Cam repeated. “Like from *Rugrats*?”

“I’m surprised you’re old enough for that reference, but yes. Like from *Rugrats*.”

I’d been both curious and endeared to find that he’d actually put that on his skin. If fear that he would think I was ogling him hadn’t had a death grip on my tongue, I might have asked him about it.

“I got the feeling from him that he’s a mix of very light and very dark,” Cam said.

“He paid for my food,” I blurted out.

“Is that weird?” Cam asked.

“I mean... it wasn’t a date.” And even if it was, Cam would be surprised how many times I’d been on dates since

getting my life together and men would just let that black book sit on the table until I, inevitably, got sick of sitting there, and slipped my card in.

“He has that vibe, though, right?” Cam asked. “The ‘I take care of the womenfolk’ vibe, but without all that gross misogyny.”

“I guess that’s true,” I agreed.

“So, did I read your text right? You’re cutting out in the early afternoon?”

“Yeah. Brock is bringing me to meet his boss,” I told him, uncharacteristically leaving out the real plan. To go with Brock to his house, to see how he lived, to get a feel for who he was as a person.

I never shied away from telling Cam anything, even the kind of stuff I might find embarrassing or even a little silly.

I didn’t know what my reservation was right then.

Was it because Brock told me to keep a close eye on everyone, Cam included? Was some part of me doubting my implicit trust in him?

Or was it simply because I had clear and apparent schoolgirl sort of crush on Brock? And I didn’t want anyone to know about that? Especially because I was generally very rational about men.

I didn’t pine.

I didn’t feel shy or unsure of myself.

Everything about how I was feeling toward Brock was uncharacteristic of the woman I worked so hard to become. And maybe just too much reminiscent of the girl I’d needed to leave behind to get to where I am.

“Sawyer seemed very professional,” Cam said. “Tig too.”

“That’s good to know, since my very life seems to be in their hands.”

“Yes, speaking of that,” Cam said, making my stomach tighten. “I did some research and I have some creams coming

for that scar when it is healed enough to start treating it. People who've had plastic surgery swear by it."

It was incredibly vain of me, but I was really upset about the scar. About people possibly seeing it and coming to conclusions about it. If I couldn't fade it, what was I supposed to do in seasons when long sleeves wouldn't be appropriate or comfortable?

"You could always get a tattoo to cover it if the creams don't work," Cam reasoned. "And don't try to tell me you don't like tattoos. I saw your little secret," he reminded me.

Yes, another glorious moment for me.

I'd fallen in my shower and sprained my ankle badly enough that I needed help getting out. And try as I might have to cover myself with the towel, Cam got an eyeful of hip and ass, which meant he saw the little tattoo I'd gotten very low on my hip, low enough that it was practically on my butt.

"That was a different me," I insisted.

"Come on. The world is different. Plenty of wealthy people and CEOs have tattoos now."

"Not that many," I insisted.

"You've already proven you fit in with them, Randi," he insisted. "You don't have to keep proving it. If you want to cover it with a tattoo, cover it with a tattoo. Fuck anyone who has anything to say about it."

He was right, of course.

It was absurd that I still ran every aspect of my life through the lens my peers would look through.

I had proven myself.

I had the job, the money, the house, the clothes, the charitable donations. I mean, I was single-handedly paying for the much-needed renovations on a library in the neighborhood I grew up in, with the hopes that more kids like me would be able to use it, gain some of the knowledge inside of it, and get out of that area like I had.

I didn't have to care what they all thought anymore, that they might see me as an outsider.

“And, I mean, when it comes to the old money families, there's just no way to get them to think you're equal. Even if your fortune was fifty times theirs, they just think their names mean something. And those are the snooty people who would have something to say. Luckily, old money isn't so prominent anymore and new money is taking over. Tech billionaires and guys who created social media sites.”

“That's true. Well, if the creams don't work, it may come to that. I can't be covering up my arms forever. And I don't know how I feel about creating a lie about it,” I said. “Oh, I almost forgot. Your morning meeting tomorrow is pushed to eleven. Shandy is having her baby as we speak, so we had to give John a couple extra hours to work on the presentation.”

“Oh, okay. That's fine. We need to send Shandy...”

“Already in the works,” Cam cut me off.

“What would I do without you?” I asked, shaking my head.

“Still get it all done, but you'd have a lot more gray hairs and wrinkles,” he told me with a smile as he got up. “Have a good little day trip. Don't work in the car,” he added as he got to the door.

“You know me too well,” I said, shaking my head.

The rest of the day was the usual putting out of fires and trying to talk project managers off cliffs.

Then, finally, it was time to head out, and I felt oddly self-conscious walking out of the office when everyone else was still steadily working.

That was another thing it was probably time to get over. I had a full staff. I didn't always need to be the one who left last, who burned the midnight oil, who worked weekends and holidays.

At a certain point, you had to trust other people to each do their parts without being watched over.

And what was the point of working so hard for so many years if you didn't eventually give yourself a chance to truly enjoy the fruits of that work?

I would get there.

Maybe.

But I would call it progress that by the time I got back to my building, I was no longer stressing about what my employees were thinking about me cutting out early.

And I didn't bring a bunch of paperwork to go over on the trip, either.

Though I did tell myself that I would grab my home laptop to bring to check my emails and such in case it was needed.

Though I promptly forgot all about that as I slid out of my car to find Brock leaning against my building, looking casual, at home, even.

His dark gaze was on me as I approached.

"A little extra cream and sugar," he said, holding out a coffee toward me.

"This mug looks familiar," I said as I took it.

"I stole it out of your cabinet. It didn't look like you had enough room to fit one more up there, so I am reusing," he told me. "How was work?"

"The usual. Are we about ready to head out?" I asked.

"Do you want to change?"

"No. Why?"

"To be more comfortable," he said, looking down at my shoes.

"Comfort is overrated," I shot back.

"Alright then. My ride is around the corner," he said, reaching out to gently touch my hip to turn me.

I should have been annoyed.

I hated when men put their hands on a woman to move her out of his way or even to move past her. *If you wouldn't put your hand on a man's lower back to move past them, don't put it on mine.*

But with Brock?

Oh, yeah, I was a lot more into that than I should have been.

It was just a quick touch, though, gone before I could even fully process it.

I couldn't tell you what I expected a man like Brock to drive. For example, I could generally picture ex-military guys driving pick-ups for some reason. But also, in my mind, private investigators drove really nondescript black sedans.

What Brock drove, though, was an unexpected 4Runner in this unique pale greenish blueish color that I didn't even have an example to compare it to. But it stood out. Definitely not something that suspicious people would miss parked on the street.

"Front, sweetheart," Brock said when years of riding in the back of a town car made me go to the rear passenger door.

"Right," I said, shaking my head at myself as he pulled the door open for me.

"Been a while, huh?" he asked.

"I honestly don't remember the last time I rode in the front of a car," I admitted. "Years, I guess."

"Don't you ever drive?"

"I never learned how," I told him. "I was born and raised in the city. There was never any need for me to learn. And then when I decided having a vehicle was smarter than wasting time on public transit, it made more sense to go with a town car and a driver, so that I could get work done on my way to and from places."

"Makes sense," he agreed, pulling out of his spot. "For a workaholic, anyway," he added. "I'm surprised you didn't bring your laptop."

“The only reason I didn’t is because you were waiting for me outside,” I told him.

“Won’t it be nice not to be working for a couple of hours?”

“That is a good question that I don’t have an answer to yet. So what is Navesink Bank like? I haven’t been to a lot of places in New Jersey. Aside from Cape May.”

“It’s a big small town, if that makes any sense. Lot of people, and a lot of diversity in socioeconomics. There’s a rougher area, a big suburb, and a rich suburb. And I mean rich-rich. You rich,” he clarified. There’s the Navesink River along one part, and the beach is only maybe fifteen or twenty minutes away, depending on where you live in Navesink Bank.”

“Is it where you grew up?”

“Yes. And then I went away after the military.”

“Why did you go back?”

“Sawyer. He’d gotten his shit together and opened up the private investigator agency. He wanted people he knew that he could trust on his team. So he came to find me, dragged me back to town, and I’ve been there ever since.”

“Do you like your job?”

“I guess that depends on the case,” he said, shrugging, and it was refreshing that he didn’t just answer yes. No one loved every aspect of their work. Not even ‘workaholics’ like me.

“Which cases don’t you like?”

“While they’re the easiest cases to work on, I’ve had about enough of cheating spouse cases. It’s hard to enjoy the breaking up of a marriage or family, even if the person did bring it upon themselves.”

“I get that. There’s a lot of trauma involved. What are your favorite sort of cases to work on?”

“The ones involving beautiful, single women?” he said, shooting me a smirk. “I also like helping the families of missing persons after the cases go cold, or when their local



department is just not doing enough. Those can be heartbreaking a good chunk of the time, since most people who go missing end up being dead.”

“But at least the families get closure.”

“Exactly. And when you can, on a rare occasion, find someone alive, that’s a high you don’t come down from. Even if there is often a lot of trauma involved in that too.”

“But you helped get them out and back to their families where they can heal.”

“Yeah. It’s definitely nice to get some good mixed in with some of the shitty stuff.”

“Do you get a lot of cases like mine?”

“With the faked suicide and 5150? No, babe, you’re my first.”

“I kind of meant with some unknown foe wishing someone unwell.”

“It’s not as common as the cheating spouses, but, yeah, it happens. We get a lot of stalker cases in particular. It’s hard for victims to get any sort of help from the police with shit like that, so they come to us for help.”

“What can you do? I mean, aren’t stalking cases notoriously hard to prosecute? Even with evidence?”

“Yeah, definitely. But we help the victims build up cases, get information on their stalkers, and try to weigh the danger level. Sometimes, just knowing we are involved with scare the creeps off. Other times, we have to refer clients to other organizations to help them disappear and start a new life away from a real psychopath. What?” he asked, giving me a long look, making me realize my thoughts must have been on my face.

“It’s just... I spent two hours today going over financial reports,” I said, laughing at myself. “Your job sounds so much more interesting.”

“Don’t underestimate how nice predictability can be,” he suggested.

The rest of the ride was riddled with little funny stories about cases he'd been on, situations he'd gotten himself into, and how I'd managed to get my career going at such a young age.

Grit and tireless determination, that was how.

"This is the Navesink?" I asked as we neared a bridge over a body of water.

"That's it," he confirmed as we passed what looked like the rich suburb he'd mentioned earlier.

I didn't know what I was expecting with Brock. But I guess, in my mind, I pictured bachelors living in apartments.

Brock, however, pointed toward a suburb as we passed. "I live down there, but I wanted to do the meeting with the team first," he told me. "They have families to get home to. And we have all night."

The offices of Sawyer Investigations was an upscale, two-story building with a very masculine decor style—all dark black and grays, nothing soft or frilly around.

"Marg! The one who got away!" Brock greeted the woman at the front desk who looked old enough to be his mother. And, judging by the annoyed, yet affectionate, smile she gave him, that was likely very much the dynamic the two of them shared.

"Oh, you. You still need to get your comeuppance from Terry, you know. She's asked for you twice already."

"Marg, the love of my life, not in front of the client!" Brock said dramatically, one hand to his chest, the other gesturing toward me.

"Oh, you must be Miss Coulter," Marg said. "With the extremely persistent assistant."

"In his defense, I pay him to be a bit of a pain in the ass," I told her.

"These guys," she said, waving to the office. "They pay me to be the same."

“We pay you because we love you and your time is valuable,” Brock insisted.

“You are putting it on thick today,” Marg told him, rolling her eyes. “You can go on in. He’s free,” she said, waving toward the hallway to the side.

“She’s the office mom, huh?” I asked as we walked.

“She would love to hear you say that,” Brock told me, reaching for a door and opening it without knocking.

“For fuck’s sake, Brock,” a man inside grumbled as he leaned back in his chair. He was tall, handsome, somewhere around the same age as Brock. “Miss Coulter,” he said, tone going a little more professional as he looked at me.

“You must be Sawyer,” I said, moving forward to offer my hand. “I’ve heard next to nothing about you,” I admitted, getting a surprised chuckle out of him.

“That’s no surprise,” another voice said, a deep, booming sort of voice, making me turn to find another man walking in. “He does tend to talk mostly about himself.”

“This is where I might adopt a Rodney Dangerfield voice and grumble about not getting any respect,” Brock said.

Sawyer ignored that.

“How have things been going, Miss Coulter? Is there anything we can do to improve your experience?”

“I mean, on the one hand, I wish this was all over...”

“Understandable,” Sawyer said, nodding.

“But on the other, I have no complaints. Everything has been very thorough.” Including my wholly inappropriate fantasies about my now live-in investigator.

“We promise we will be doing everything in our power to bring about a resolution as soon as possible,” Sawyer assured me. “If necessary, we can also come to the city to do some digging, but I have full confidence in Brock’s skills.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Brock has been keeping us in the loop about the progress on the case. I’m glad you have all the

security set up. How did you find Lennon?”

“Intense, but I imagine that is a good thing in his line of work. He is having me do construction on my balcony.”

“I’ll bet he is,” Sawyer said with a smirk. “If there is anything else you would like for us to do...”

“So far, I have no complaints. I’m still alive and not in a psych ward, so that’s good. I won’t keep you any longer,” I said, getting back to my feet. “I just wanted to drop in and introduce myself since we are in town anyway.”

“To get some of my things,” Brock supplied at Sawyer’s puzzled look. “Because I will be staying with the client for the time being. Did I forget to tell you about that?” Brock asked, looking like a mildly apologetic younger brother when caught not giving his big brother the whole truth.

“It must have slipped your mind. But I’m glad to hear it. Especially since we have no leads,” Sawyer said, also getting to his feet, and walking us toward the door.

Brock gestured for me to walk out first, and I got the feeling that Sawyer wanted a word with Brock, so I kept moving out into the lobby, where I found Marg giving me a curious once-over.

“You’re very beautiful,” she told me, making me jerk back at the unexpected compliment.

“Oh, thank you,” I said, giving her a smile.

“You know, Brock,” she said, shaking her head, full of maternal disappointment. “He tends to like a lot of this beauty,” she said, gesturing to her face. “But there isn’t always a lot here,” she added, tapping her temple. “I get the feeling you have both.”

“I like to think so,” I agreed.

“Good. That’s good. The beauty,” she said, waving a hand out like the wind wiping something away. “But the brains, those stick with you.”

“What are we talking about?” Brock asked, coming up from behind me with the silence of a damn cat.

“Your preferences in women,” I told him, wanting to catch him off guard, but he seemed completely unbothered by it. “Who is Terry?” I asked, and to that, I got a slight reaction. A bit of a grimace. Widening of the eyes.

“She is the delivery person around here.”

“And why is she looking for you?” I asked.

“Because I slept with her girlfriend,” he admitted.

I’d been expecting him to say he’d slept with *her* and then maybe ghosted her. But the truth had me losing my composure for a second.

“*What?*” I gasped.

“Look, in my defense, I didn’t know it was her girlfriend until after when I saw the couple pictures in the house.”

“I mean... can you really be to blame there?” I asked, shrugging. “She was the cheater, not you.”

“That was the exact argument that I made,” Brock agreed. “But my coworkers didn’t want to hear it.”

“I imagine that is because it leads back to pathological behaviors like this,” I said, watching as his smile went a little boyish, all charm, all guilt.

“You could say that,” he agreed.

“Too old...” Marg grumbled. “Playboys are young. You? Not so young anymore. You need a woman. And babies. Do you want babies?” she asked, looking at me.

And I never felt quite so put on the spot before as I did right then.

“I, ah, I can’t,” I told her, shrugging it off. For many, that was a gaping, painful, festering wound. For me, someone who had a sort of innate fear of childbirth, it had been a sort of roll with the punches moment for me. “Biologically,” I added, casting a glance over toward Brock, oddly wanting to see his reaction to that statement. “But I’ve always wanted to adopt. Maybe older kids. So my priceless sculptures and vases aren’t at risk.”

“Miss Coulter...” Marg said, pressing a hand to her heart. “I always forget,” she said, wincing. “It’s not something I am supposed to ask.”

“I’m not offended, really,” I assured her. “For me, it wasn’t as sad as it is for many women. Pregnancy and childbirth scare the hell out of me.”

“Sawyer has adopted,” Brock said, drawing my attention over to him.

“Really?”

“Yeah. It was important to his wife.”

“That’s nice. It has always been, you know, something I figured would happen eventually. Once I got to where I want to be professionally.”

“With a husband?” Marg prompted.

“Oh, the husband is the totally optional part,” I told her with a big smile that she laughed and returned.

“You know... sometimes they are not all they’re cracked up to be. But some of them, they’re good. Sawyer, Tig...”

“Let’s just say that I’m not holding my breath or putting my life on hold for the so-called ‘right man,’ but I wouldn’t mind if he showed up, either.”

“That is a good way to think of it,” Marg said, nodding. “That’s me,” she said when the phone rang. “It was nice to meet you. Brock, be a good boy,” she told him before picking up the phone.

“I always feel like the naughty kid when I go into the office, I swear,” he said, shaking his head when we moved outside.

“And I’m sure you’ve done nothing at all to deserve that reaction from them.”

“Oh, baby, I’ve done everything you can think of and worse,” he told me, mischief dancing in his eyes. “Come on. Let’s go get to my house so we can snag some food before heading back into the city.”

With that, we were heading back toward the suburbs where Brock drove halfway down a street of very nice, mismatched houses—a ranch here, bi-level there, a Victorian over yonder.

And parked his unexpected car in front of an unexpected house.

A quaint craftsman-style house with a big porch with a wide overhang, a partial second level, with white bricks on the lower level and warm wooden shakes on the upper.

The man even had rocking chairs and hanging plants. They were looking pretty sad, given him being away for a while and the weather taking a turn for the cool, but he *had* them.

“I like it,” I decided out loud, making Brock shoot me a soft smile.

“Me too,” he said before climbing out and making his way around the hood toward my door.

I found myself almost nervous about his house, knowing that I was going to judge him based on it, and wanting to like it more than I should have.

All my worries flew out the door, though, when he unlocked the door and ushered me into a space that I immediately felt comfortable in.

It wasn't flashy or showy in anyway. That wouldn't have fit with the architectural style, which wanted you to feel homey.

The walls were white with a sage green accent on the bookshelves on either side of the brick fireplace. That green carried through to paint the walls of the kitchen that was dominated by a large island and warm wood tones to the cabinets.

It was masculine in the way that it felt a little old-fashioned, a bit rustic, but not in the way that it felt cold and uninviting.

Oddly, it just seemed to suit him.

I could picture him building a fire in the fireplace, standing in that kitchen making coffee, even reading one of the books in

the cases.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Brock said, nodding. “It needs a dog.”

“Oh, is that what I’m thinking?”

“Unless you don’t like dogs. In which case, I think there must be something wrong with you.”

“I love dogs. I just... work too much.”

“That’s my hold up too. But, hey, you’re the boss. Get yourself a purse dog and bring it to the office with you.”

“Don’t think I haven’t thought about it,” I admitted. “So, do I get a tour?” I asked.



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## CHAPTER NINE

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*Brock*

I never had women in my house.

Save for my coworkers' wives and Marg or friends, I didn't invite women into my space.

Not because I didn't want them to see it, but because it felt like a kind of sacred space to me, a place where I finally started to put my life back together, where I hoped to have a future one day.

It felt wrong to invite temporary people into that space.

Which had to be the only reason I was so uncharacteristically nervous about Miranda being there.

One could rationalize that it was nerve-racking because Miranda was someone with the kind of wealth that meant her apartment in the city was larger than my house in the suburbs.

I didn't have priceless sculptures or vases. My art was bought off the wall at various coffee shops I'd been to across the country that featured pieces from local artists.

I didn't have an interior decorator to show me what colors would work best, or what kind of furniture went with the house style.

In fact, I spent years learning how to renovate the place myself. If you looked closely, ninety percent of the books on the shelves flanking my fireplace were books on refinishing floors, building cabinets, doing your own brickwork.

Having that kind of project to focus on had made the transition for hiding in the woods, drinking too much, disassociating in front of the TV, just trying to do whatever it took to keep my mind from going to dark places.

It had been therapeutic. Like some part of me was working on myself as I worked on the house.

Between that, and gaining the purpose that having work again brought, I finally shook off all that shit that had been keeping me down for years, and found some peace and joy again.

It was why I was feeling so sensitive about it, why I'd made the comment about needing to get a dog. Because some part of me was more worried than I should have been about what she thought of the space.

I led her through the living room, the kitchen slash dining space, the small study in the back, then up the back staircase to the three bedrooms before heading back down to lead her onto the porch that overlooked the backyard.

"Wow," she said, exhaling hard as she looked around.

It wasn't a huge space. Not many people in Navesink Bank had big yards, save for the rich people in the fancier areas. But I'd busted my ass to make it feel bigger. And private, despite having neighbors.

There was a stockade fence all around the backyard with mature trees and some pretty extensive, but not overly fussy, landscaping.

There was a hammock hanging between trees, a fire pit with Adirondack chairs, and a grilling and picnic section.

“It almost makes you want to take off your shoes and sink your feet in,” she said.

“Go ahead then,” I invited.

“I said *almost*,” she said, shooting me a smirk over her shoulder. “I really like your house. It feels very warm and inviting. I can imagine curling up in front of the fireplace when it’s snowing outside with a cup of coffee and some music playing.”

“That’s exactly what I was going for. Cozy winter vibes inside, and lazy, relaxing summer vibes out here.”

“Well, you nailed it. If your career as a private investigator ever becomes unfulfilling, you could fall back on an interior decorating career.”

“Always good to have options,” I agreed. “Why don’t you come and make yourself comfortable while I pack a few things?” I invited.

“Do you mind if I make coffee?” she asked, absentmindedly running her hands over the countertop in the island.

And she just looked so... right there.

I could see her there, making her coffee or tea, ordering in takeout since she didn’t seem like she cooked much, maybe occasionally glancing over at her laptop on the dining table, but not feeling quite so pulled to reach for it anymore.

“Help yourself. Might want to check the date on the creamer, though,” I said as I turned back. “I haven’t been here to keep an eye on it,” I added before making my way up the stairs to the second floor.

I packed like I would for both work and a world-tour affair with a wealthy woman.

So there were jeans and tees and henleys, but also slacks and a button-up, and I went ahead and even rolled up my suit, tossing a bottle of wrinkle release in the bag for good measure.

Which meant I had the normal shoes on my feet, a pair of loafers, and a set of dress shoes as well.

From there, I grabbed my smaller bag, tossing in a razor, shave gel, some cologne, body wash, and some hair product just in case, even though I kept it relatively short.

I didn't need a toothbrush or paste since I'd stolen the ones in the guest bathroom drawer. She had an impressive stock of guest products considering she said she didn't typically have guests over.

Preparedness seemed to be a hobby of hers. She needed everything to be just right in case anyone did need to stay over sometime. I'd bet she had it in her—or Cam's—calendar to rotate that shit out every so often so nothing went past its expiration date.

I was reasonably sure there was toothpaste in my guest bathroom. Whether it was still any good or not was up for debate.

I heard her heels on the steps, prompting me to move out of the bathroom just as she was moving into the doorway of my room.

"I brought you a coffee," she said, giving me a smile that, for her—a woman who typically portrayed herself as a bulletproof kind of confident—seemed almost shy.

"Thanks, sweetheart," I said, moving forward toward her, watching as something flickered across her eyes as I spoke.

She liked the endearments. Whether she would admit that or not.

She liked *me* whether she was willing to admit that or not as well.

I probably shouldn't have delighted in that as much as I did. But after hearing her make herself come in the bath while I was already standing there with my cock in my hand because I couldn't stop thinking about her in said bath, yeah, you could say my interest had only gotten more and more intense.

I needed to get a grip.

It didn't seem like this case was going to be as open and shut as a lot of ours were. And I couldn't be fucking a client while I was still working for her.

It really shouldn't have been so hard to resist the pull.

I'd had clients practically throw themselves at me on more than one occasion. It had always been a hard line that I never struggled not to cross that I couldn't get involved with them until after the cases were closed.

As much as Sawyer and Tig, and damn near everyone else in my life, liked to dig at me about my women troubles, I did have some self-control. And I didn't struggle with holding onto it when I needed to.

But with her standing there in my doorway, looking like she looked, smelling like she smelled, giving me the soft eyes?

It was taking every bit of control I had in me not to put the coffee on my dresser, grab her, and toss her on the bed, then cover her body with my own.

My cock was stiffening just thinking about the possibility.

"Where did you get this coffee?" she asked as I took the mug from her hands, careful to avoid her fingers because I swear to fuck, I was pretty sure just a brush would be my undoing right then.

"She's Bean Around," I told her as I took a sip.

"Yeah, it says that on the bag, but I've never heard of it."

"It's a local coffee shop. They have their own special blend. It's what keeps people lining up halfway down the block on busy days. And why some of us pay a small fortune to buy the beans, so we can make it at home when we don't feel like waiting on line. We can hit it up on our way out of town if you want."

"Absolutely," she said, no hesitation. "I think I need to buy about ten bags to keep at my place. How is packing?" she asked, moving into my room, going over toward my bags. "You are prepared for everything," she declared after looking at my clothes, then zipping the bag herself and setting it on the

floor so she could sit off the edge of the bed. “You know that thing I keep insisting about my shoes being fine?”

“Lies?” I asked, smiling at her as she flexed her feet inside the shoes, but was too stubborn to slip them off.

“Totally. I mean, don’t get me wrong, shoes that cost eight-hundred dollars are definitely more comfortable than the ones I used to get on a BOGO deal on the shelf at *Payless*, but they still hurt after a while.”

“Why do you insist on wearing them even outside of work then?” I asked, even though some part of me was cataloging what she’d just said. What she’d just admitted to, even though I don’t think she’d meant to.

It was exactly what I’d been suspecting.

That she’d come from much more humble beginnings.

Buy One, Get One deals at *Payless* was not something anyone who’d grown up rich would ever cop to even knowing about. In fact, many of the wealthy women I’d known in my life would be deliberately dense about “commoner” stores. Even if they technically did know about them, they would never cop to that because they would think that even having that knowledge made them seem poorer themselves.

“I think it started off as a status symbol, honestly,” she told me, shrugging. “Then it was really clear that some men in business have a real issue with women in business still. Especially those of us who are more successful than they are. And they look down on you. Quite literally, in some circumstances. So I always want to be as tall, or taller, than them.”

“It’s why you go for the handshake first too,” I said, thinking back to her meeting Sawyer.

“Exactly. But it’s also just a preference now. With the shoes. They make me feel put together. I’d feel naked without them on if I were in a work situation. Or,” she went on, sensing my objection about to come, “when I am in a situation where I might be meeting people for the first time. Like Sawyer and Tig.”

“No one would say shit about a businessman wearing a suit and cufflinks and a Rolex, right?” I said, understanding the argument.

“Except that no one who is actually wealthy would wear a Rolex,” she said, shaking her head. “That is what moderately wealthy people wear to appear richer. When the truly rich people are wearing—“

“Patek Phillipe,” I supplied for her.

“Yes,” she said, a smile spreading across her lips. “You know your watches.”

“I’ve seen a few.”

I’d packed one for the off chance that I needed to dress up to go out with her somewhere. She would want to be seen with someone who exuded the kind of quiet, confident luxury that she herself did.

“I am not a watch person,” she admitted. “Aside from my smart one.”

“Which is more about being accessible every single moment of the day than actually telling you the time,” I qualified.

“Ah... I guess,” she admitted, able to see the parts of her that didn’t, objectively, paint her in the best light. “But we can’t complain too much about my watch when it was the only way I could get a message out to Cam.”

“That’s true,” I agreed, wincing a bit at how she went from light and comfortable to tense and dark at just the mention of that place and her time there. “You ready to talk about that yet?” I asked, moving forward, ignoring the alarm bells going off in my mind as I put down my mug and sat on the bed beside her.

I was almost painfully aware of the way the bed depressed at my weight, making hers shift until she was brushing up against me.

“I don’t know,” she admitted, shaking her head as her fingers danced over each other in her lap.

“I’m assuming you didn’t talk to Cam about it.”

“Why would you assume that? The man knows when to buy me tampons and chocolate,” she said, smirking.

“Yeah, but that’s job-related, in a way, isn’t it? I’m going to assume that Cam doesn’t know about Buy One, Get One deals at *Payless* either, does he?”

“He... doesn’t,” she admitted, her brows drawing down a bit.

“Does anyone?”

“Aside from you? No.”

“Hey,” I said, reaching over to put my hand on top of hers that wouldn’t stop fidgeting, making her back go ramrod straight at the contact. I went ahead and pretended to know how I swear to fuck I felt some sort of electrical shock at the touch. It wasn’t the fucking time for that. “I can’t spill your secrets,” I reminded her. “It’s in the contract and shit,” I added, ducking my head to catch her gaze, then giving her a smirk.

“That doesn’t mean you have to be my shrink,” she said.

“I want to listen if you want to talk. I don’t think it’s good to bottle up that shit. In fact, I know that,” I told her, folding forward to reach into my toiletry bag to find the little medicine bottle with my free hand, then showing the label to her.

“What’s this?” she asked, frowning at the label.

“My meds. For my anxiety and depression,” I told her, watching as her head whipped over to me. “Yeah,” I said, nodding. “Some of my healing was putting this house together, and getting a job that gave my life purpose again, but another part was the meds and therapy. So I know a thing or two about what bottling shit up does to you,” I told her, tossing the meds back into the bag.

“From the service, right?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I agreed, but didn’t elaborate. This wasn’t my time. I didn’t need the shoulder.

She did.



“There was one woman at the hospital who had PTSD from the service. She didn’t handle the thunderstorm we had one night very well.”

“Yeah, those can be rough for a lot of people who saw that sort of active duty. Was she your roommate?”

“No. But I had a great roommate. I don’t think I would have made it out of that place with my sanity intact if it weren’t for her. Am I allowed to talk about her?” she asked, frowning at me.

“That’s up to you. You didn’t sign some non-disclosure. But you don’t have to give details if you don’t want to.”

“She was so sweet. A lifer. That’s what she called herself sometimes. She’d been in and out of psych wards all her life. On the downslide... that was when she started getting some... bad thoughts,” she said, and I liked that she was trying not to give too many details. But it sounded like she had a bipolar roommate to me. “She thought that I’d really...” she said, waving down at her arm.

“You didn’t tell her otherwise?”

“You think she would have believed me? The scar was pretty damning.”

“Did you tell the doctors?”

“No,” she admitted. “I figured that saying I didn’t do it, when they were sure I did, was only going to make me look crazy, and that they would extend my stay.”

“That is, unfortunately, probably the case.”

“I just played it off as best I could. Put on my best not suicidal face. Because, well, I wasn’t. And I’ve never been. Not that I’m judging,” she rushed to add, looking over guilty.

“I know you’re not,” I agreed, my hand giving hers a reassuring squeeze. “You must have felt really fucking powerless in that place.”

To that, her eyes immediately went glassy, making her look straight ahead to try to hide it.

“You could say that,” she agreed, voice thick. “There were times that the whole experience was just... dehumanizing,” she added.

There was nothing private when you were locked up against your will. Strip searches and forced medication and people asking invasive questions and expecting answers.

Mental healthcare had come a long way from icepick lobotomies and freezing cold baths, but it still had a long way to go to get to a more humanizing standard of care.

“I really struggle with feeling like I have no control,” she admitted. “And I didn’t have any there. I couldn’t pick what time I went somewhere or if I could leave at all. It was just... horrible. And the crazy part is, I didn’t need it before, but I’m pretty sure I am going to need therapy now.”

“There’s no shame in that. It’s important to work through that shit, not tamp it down. And I get that it’s hard,” I added. “Especially for someone like you who feels like they have it all together, to ask for help. But once we’re sure it’s safe to, you should talk to someone about it. And, by then, we will hopefully know who it was, and have their asses locked up, so all that shit on your record will look a lot different.”

“That would be nice,” she admitted. “Cam got me creams for my arm. I’m dubious that they will work.”

“So, get a laser treatment. Or a tattoo.”

“Cam suggested a tattoo. Visible ones aren’t really my style.”

“Visible ones, huh?” I asked, smirking, and she heard the amusement in my voice, making her glance at me. “I feel like that means there are ones that aren’t visible.”

“There’s one,” she admitted. “We can call that teenage idiocy.”

“Nothing wrong with teenage idiocy. Mine once made me take mushrooms with my friends and trip fucking balls in the woods. The trees came alive and told me stories.”

To that, a laugh bubbled up and burst out of her.

“Sorry,” she said, still chuckling. “I’m sure that was terrifying, but it’s kind of funny. What kind of stories did they tell you?”

“They shit-talked the other tree species. Apparently, the Weeping Willows were the whiny, emos. And the Oaks thought they were better than everyone else. They also complained about the woodpeckers. Sawyer said he sobered up first and found me hugging a tree and assuring it that I would be a human scarecrow for it, so the birds wouldn’t peck at his bark anymore.”

“Does Sawyer have this on video, perchance?” she asked.

“Thankfully, my teenaged shenanigans took place before the rampant use of recording shit. No one knows that story but me, Sawyer, and now you.”

“We really were lucky that way,” she agreed, nodding. “There’s not a lot of evidence of my overly plucked eyebrow phase. Or when I used to wear beige lipstick with bold brown liner. It was... a look. One I am glad no one remembers.”

“I had a extremely long and wide-legged pants phase,” I admitted.

“Six inches deep in the water on rainy days?” she asked, remembering that phase of male fashion well, clearly. “And chains from your belt to your empty wallet?”

“Hey, it wasn’t empty. There was an old condom in there that I snagged from a friend’s older brother. And, yes, in case you were wondering, by the time I found someone who wanted to go to bed with me, the damn thing had expired.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“They expire,” I said, nodding, deliberately pretending to misunderstand her.

“I meant that it would take you that long to find a willing girl.”

“I was a gangly kid with a pizza face,” I admitted. “It took me years to develop into the disarmingly good-looking man I am today,” I told her, watching as she gave me a big smile.

“And by then, I managed to develop some personality. So now I’m the best of both worlds.”

“I’ve met many a men who clearly grew up attractive and their personalities are as deep as a puddle,” she said, shrugging. “I think awkward phases make us well-rounded people. So... what passes for food in this town?” she asked, smirking at me, a silent dare for me to knock her socks off.

And, well, Navesink Bank might not have been NYC with hundreds of restaurants offering up crazy fare, but what we did, we did well.

“Are you in the mood for Italian?” I asked.

“Always,” she answered immediately.

“Then I have a place with great food, nice wine, fantastic atmosphere, and one hell of a story...”

Because I was pretty sure she hadn’t eaten at a restaurant owned by the mob before...

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## CHAPTER TEN

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*Miranda*

“No way,” I said, shaking my head as I swirled the wine that the owner himself had come over to bring to us. “That sweet gentleman?” I asked, thinking of his great suit and his attractive face with his salt and pepper hair.

“That sweet gentleman runs the most prominent mafia family in the state,” he told me, nodding. “Him and his sons,” he clarified.

“And people just... know this?”

“I’m not sure how many normal, average people know that,” he admitted, looking around. “The Grassi Family works hard not to have their names end up in the papers or on the news, so it’s entirely possible that more than two-thirds of the people in here have no idea.”

“But that means a third of them do? And they keep coming here to eat?”

“You’ve seen the place,” he said, waving out toward the balcony over the water. I’d bet, weather permitting, it was amazing to sit out there and eat. Especially at night. “And the food is the best you are going to find in the area. Navesink Bank is a... curious town.”

There was just something about the way he’d said ‘curious’ that had *my* curiosity immediately piqued.

“Curious how?”

“So, you know how the mob used to really pretty much run the city?”

“Yeah, of course,” I agreed, nodding. They’d had their hand in literally everything.

“Well, it’s like that here. Except it isn’t just the mob.”

“Who else is it?”

“There’s the outlaw bikers, the family of loan sharks, the paramilitary camp, then at least a dozen other people working independently, with deep enough pockets to grease the palms of the local police force.”

“You have to be exaggerating. Why would people live here if the crime was that rampant?”

“That’s the thing, though. Most of the organizations here have a code. They don’t let their crimes put the locals at risk. In a way, it is almost safer here for the normal families because of them. And the cops, with their hands tied with the organizations around here, focus more on the petty crime shit, so that is kept to a minimum as well.”

“It’s still a little hard to believe,” I said, taking another sip of my wine as the owner of the place came from the back with another bottle of wine, walking over toward a table and greeting them like old friends.

“See that table Antony just went to?” Brock asked, jerking his chin toward it.

“Yes,” I said, nodding, as I glanced at the lovely dark-haired woman and her distinguished-looking man with some graying hair and bright blue eyes.

“That is Charlie and Helen Mallick. The heads of the loan shark family I was telling you about. They and their sons lend out money and break kneecaps if you don’t pay.”

“You’ve got to be pulling my leg,” I said, seeing nothing nefarious about the couple.

“Charlie is partially retired from the actual enforcing now. They run the local bar in town. But make no mistake, that is a fearsome man. And that woman is even more so if you cross her or the ones she loves.”

“Why would the mob and the loan sharks be so friendly?” I asked, ever the skeptic.

“A lot of the organizations around here are allies. They band together when common enemies show up in town. And since their business isn’t in direct opposition to each other, they can do it without any issues. You still don’t believe me,” Brock said, smiling. “Tell you what, the next time you have contact with Sawyer or Tig, ask them.”

“I think I might need to,” I said, unconvinced. Though it was a good story, and it made what could have been an awkward date-like moment feel comfortable and easy.

After he’d held my hand in his room and I’d opened up to him, I wasn’t sure that we could go back to casual and carefree.

Clearly, I’d underestimated Brock.

He could go from intense to laid-back in a blink.

It was both off-putting yet extremely welcome.

I did want to talk about the psych ward, let out a little of the steam before it made me implode, but I didn’t want to harp on it.

Brock seemed to understand and respect that.

“If the food is half as good as the coffee was, I guess I might be able to look past the fact that I’m enabling crime. So how did you come to know about all the crime around here?”

“I actually grew up, in a way, around it all. Antony’s sons—Luca and Matteo—went to our school. So did Reign, who runs the biker club. And Charlie and Helen’s kids,” he said, nodding toward the couple. “Sure, everyone was tight-lipped about family business, but shit always gets around.

“You never felt, I don’t know, unsafe, being privy to all that information?”

“Nah. Like I said, they have their code. Innocents don’t get caught up in their shit.”

“I hardly think you could call yourself innocent,” I shot back.

“Me?” he asked, pressing a hand to his chest. “I’m a starry-eyed virgin over here,” he insisted.

“Really? Is that why the bartender is giving you both a death glare, and a longing look?” I asked.

Maybe someone else might have been jealous about that. But, first, this wasn’t a date, regardless of how it looked, and even how I was beginning to feel about him. Also, second, we all had a past. Neither of us were starry-eyed virgins. I had men in my past, he women in his. That was life. It was silly to be jealous about that.

“You noticed that, huh?” he asked, looking both bashful and cocky at the same time, something that shouldn’t have been possible, but he managed to pull it off.

“I think it says something that it’s both, not one or the other,” I said.

“It was casual fun... two years ago,” he said, shrugging it off.

Two years ago and she still had that longing look? How good was this man in bed?

What?

No.

I could not let my mind go there.



Oh, who was I kidding? My mind had been there almost since laying eyes on him.

And since I'd been batting the question around for a few days, I was pretty sure I could say with some level of certainty that he was probably amazing in bed.

I had the feeling that he was not a one-trick pony. You know... the guys who had one move only. The ones who couldn't handle a position change, let alone anything else.

And Brock's casual confidence told me that he wasn't the kind of guy who was intimidated by bringing some fun toys into the bedroom either.

I mean, I could just imagine him saying something about how toys were friends, not foes.

"Miranda," Brock said, making me jolt, having been so lost in my own mind.

"Yeah?"

"I'm going to need you to stop looking at me like that," he said, voice just a shade huskier than usual.

My sex clenched hard in response, damn him.

"Like what?" I asked, going for casual, breezy, as I reached for my wine glass, my mouth suddenly feeling dry.

"Like if I offered to climb under this table and go down on you, you'd let me," he said.

And, yeah.

Not once, not ever in my current life, or my life before, did I ever choke on my drink because of something someone said to me.

But it happened right there, in the middle of a crowded restaurant, making a couple of heads swivel in our direction, concerned.

Brock silently passed me one of the crimson napkins, and I reached for it, wiping my mouth, trying to give myself a second to think clearly, to come up with something to say to that.

“I was not thinking that,” I insisted, folding up his napkin.

“Baby, you have a lot of skills, but hiding when you’re turned on is not one of them,” he told me.

It was right that moment that our server came back with bread and some kind of oil dip with herbs floating in it, and asked if we were ready to order.

Saving us from letting the conversation continue. Because I had a feeling that it wasn’t going to go well if we did.

We all had our flaws.

And I had a really hard time being called out. My pride wanted me to fight to the bitter, bloody end. I knew me. If it got heated enough, I would have demanded that Tig or Sawyer be put on my case instead of him.

Quite frankly, I would have said that just to save face, not because it was actually what I wanted.

Luckily, I had some menu questions, and our server was chatty.

As she wandered off, my phone bleeped, and I went ahead and let myself be rude and answer Cam.

Better rude than without my private investigator and live-in protection detail.

“I’m sure Cam is holding down the fort,” Brock said as I, admittedly, typed off a never-ending response just to have an excuse not to face Brock again so soon.

“He did a great job while I was... away,” I agreed, tucking the phone away. “I’ve never met anyone who can anticipate needs like he can.”

“Have you given any more thought to what I said about him?” Brock asked.

“I have. And I know you might think it is naive of me, but I am something like ninety-eight percent sure he had nothing to do with this. What would he have to gain if something happened to me? He has no stake in the company, no position in it if I weren’t around. The worst thing that could happen to

him would be that I died. He would immediately be out of a job.

“And he would never find one again that would pay him what I do. What?” I asked as his head turned to the side as he looked at me.

“You really have given it a lot of thought, and I’m apt to agree with you when you put it that way. He was willing to pay our fee. That says you pay him at least three times what a normal assistant would ever get.”

“Exactly. But where does that leave us?” I asked.

“There’s still a lot of avenues to look into. I will be getting the videos from the building cameras tomorrow when the super heads out to grab lunch. What?” he asked.

“The super,” I said.

“What about him? You suspect him? Have you had issues with him?”

“Issues might be... pushing it,” I said. “I’ve only directly dealt with him maybe twice. But he’s... this sounds so rude...”

“Trying to murder someone is rude, honey.”

Well, when he put it that way.

“He’s a creep. Or, at least, he gave me creep vibes. He came up to work on my kitchen sink once. And I caught him in my bedroom when I came in.”

“He has access to your room?” Brock asked. “I know they typically have master keys, but you have the private elevator with the keycard.”

“He has an actual key to access the elevator.”

“And your door?”

“Not anymore, with Lennon’s updates, but yes.”

“Alright. I will focus on him for sure. Does anyone else have keys or keycards? Aside from you, me, and Cam, that is.”

“The doorman. He brings up my dry cleaning and packages sometimes if there are too many behind the desk,

since he can just leave them outside my door and they can't be stolen."

"Alright. That is a good direction. It makes a lot of sense," Brock said, reaching for some bread, breaking off a piece, and swirling it in the dip. "They could come up the elevator without you being notified. Then they could knock at your door. And you remember there being someone at the door."

"Right," I agreed, still annoyed that no other memories of that night had come back to me. The best I could come up with was that the second the door was opened, I had been, like, chloroformed.

"What?" Brock asked, seeing my gears turning.

"Could I have been chloroformed? Is that why I don't remember anything?"

"No," he said, shaking my head. "I mean, yes, it is always possible to be chloroformed. But it is nothing like what you see in movies and TV shows. It takes several minutes of having that rag over your face to make you pass out. It's possible, but unlikely. I think the lack of memory is more of a trauma response, your brain protecting you from unpleasant memories."

"That just... that doesn't sound like me."

"Typically, no. But sometimes there is no control, babe. Your brain does it subconsciously. And sometimes it comes back, but most of the time it doesn't. I get that it's scary to have gaps like that, but it's probably something you're going to have to learn to live with."

I hated that.

I was such a control freak, to the point that I never let myself get too drunk because I didn't want to not be in complete control of myself and my image.

I damn sure didn't want to black out and have no idea what I did the night before.

But he was probably right. If it didn't come back yet, it likely isn't going to. So being upset about that is just a waste

of energy.

“We’re going to figure this out, honey,” Brock said, nodding. “You just have to trust us and give us some time.”

Him.

I had to trust him.

Because as much as I was sure Sawyer and Tig were one call away, and keeping abreast of all the details of the case, they clearly weren’t the ones working the case. Brock was.

The thing was, I did trust him.

Almost implicitly.

The problem was that I didn’t trust myself. Around him. Especially now that I knew I wore my desire right there on my face for him to see.

That was going to be an issue. Especially since I didn’t seem to have any control over my feelings toward him. The longer I spent with him, the worse it seemed to be getting.

I just had to... distract myself.

No more trips out with him when he didn’t need me to tag along. No more going out to eat, just the two of us.

I was sure there was extra work I could be doing instead. There was *always* work that could be getting done. I needed to focus on that, let him handle the case, and keep some damn distance.

Luckily, conversation dipped back to more casual things as our food arrived and we ate.

By the time we were done, I had to admit to him that he was right. It was the best Italian I’d ever had. And I would likely be back weekly if I lived closed, regardless of who owned it.

“Brock, no,” I objected as the server brought the book over to him.

“Miranda, yes,” he shot back as he reached for his wallet.

“This is ridiculous. Technically, you’re working for me. That makes this a business dinner. I should be paying.”

“And yet... you’re not,” he said, slipping his card into the book and holding it out for the server to grab on her way past.

I liked to pay a lot of the time.

I felt like it gave me a little more power.

When a man paid, they often thought of it as transactional. They bought the meal, so you owed them something.

When I paid, they didn’t get to have that entitled train of thought.

That said, I couldn’t deny that Brock insisting on paying twice was giving me the warm and tinglies.

“So... coffee?” I asked as we made our way out of the front door.

“I would never go back on my word when it comes to She’s Bean Around,” he agreed, placing a hand at my lower back, then sliding it to my hip, as we started down the very steep, somewhat slippery from the water, stairs.

Just a few minutes later, we were standing on a long line, listening to some song I remembered from years ago about people doing it like on the *Discovery Channel* while the women behind the counter sang at the top of their lungs as they prepared drinks at lightning speed.

I employed the help of Brock to help me carry all the bags of coffee I was going to take home with me. Including all their regular blends and their flavored ones, inwardly wondering if they carried seasonal ones around holidays or not.

“Well, we know what your pretty-ass wants,” the woman said, looking Brock up and down in a way that was both appreciative, yet dismissive. “What can we get *your* pretty ass?” she asked, looking at me. “Aside from almost every bag of coffee we have in the building.

“I know it’s rude to clear shelves, but I don’t live here, and I need all of this,” I told her as she rang them up and put them in canvas bags with their logo on them.

“Hey, we are never going to complain about making some extra money,” the woman, whose name tag said Jazzy, declared. “How about you order something snazzy, since you have all this regular stuff for home?” she suggested, waving up toward the latte section of the menu on the wall behind her.

After some hemming and hawing, I decided I had to go with the caramel Praline latte with an extra shot.

“Of course you want whipped cream on that, correct?” Jazzy asked, giving me a knowing smile.

“It seems almost wrong not to have it,” I agreed.

“I like her,” Jazzy told Brock.

“Me too,” he agreed.

It was a throwaway comment, damnit. He didn’t mean it the way my stupid little heart skip wanted him to mean it.

Unsurprisingly, Brock slipped cash across the counter before I could even reach for my wallet.

“Go wait at the pick-up,” he demanded, hip-checking me until I moved out of his way. “Normally, I’d say we can get a table, but the youths have descended upon the place,” he said, gesturing around to the young clientele that had occupied every single table.

“It’s hot in here anyway,” I said, shrugging. “I think I would enjoy this more in the cool air outside,” I told him, moving through the crowd and out the door. “Can we walk?” I asked, waving toward the street lined with storefronts.

“Yeah,” he agreed, but I didn’t miss the casual glance down at my feet.

Admittedly, they were killing me. But I’d be damned if he knew that. So I started walking as I waited for my coffee to get just a shade cooler than ‘the fires of hell’ before I took a sip.

Apparently, Brock was immune to third-degree mouth burns, because he chugged his coffee and tossed his cup before I could even fully tolerate the heat through the cup and the coffee collar around it.

“Are you going to try it or not?” Brock asked, shooting me a smirk.

Deciding it was probably drinkable, I leaned back against the brick of a closed office, took off the cap, took a deep breath to breathe in the scent, then took a long sip.

It was like all the best parts of fall and winter combined to have a party in your mouth.

There was no way to keep the primal groan of pleasure in as I closed my eyes and tipped my head back for a second, just enjoying it fully because I knew I would probably never have a first sip of anything quite as good as that coffee.

But then I sensed Brock moving closer, making my eyes slit open just in time to watch as his arm rose, and his thumb moved out to wipe down my nose where, I imagined, some whipped cream had accumulated.

Everything in me seemed to freeze at that moment, something inside of me sensing the electricity sparking between us.

Finished cleaning off my nose, his thumb moved down, wiping down my lower lip, forcing it down slightly so he could wipe off the foamy cream.

There was no stopping the way my lips parted in a silent invitation. And, I imagined, there was no mistaking the desire in my eyes right then, either.

“Oh, fuck it,” Brock hissed just a second before his hand shifted to my jaw, and his lips crashed down on mine.

I froze for just the briefest of seconds, like some part of me was afraid that any movement would break the spell, would ruin the moment.

But then his lips were pressing harder into mine, and there was no stopping them from responding.

My head tilted back as my lips pressed to his, as my free hand rose to slide up his side, settling on his ribs as his shifted from my jaw to the back of my head, holding me there as his



teeth nipped my lower lip, as his tongue moved inside to claim mine.

“Ah, hey Brock?” a voice called right at that perfect moment. “Whatcha doing?” it added, making Brock pull back, his forehead meeting mine for a second.

“Fuck,” he hissed under his breath.

“I sure hope she’s not who I think she is,” the blonde added as she walked past us with a massive bird sitting on her shoulder.

“Who was that?” I asked as we both watched her go.

“Clarke,” he said, moving suddenly away from me, and the small space between us may as well have been a cavern with all the distance it seemed to create.

“Who is Clarke?” I asked, holding my coffee with two hands, making it create some sort of barrier in front of me.

“Sawyer’s brother’s woman,” he said, exhaling hard.

“She has a giant bird,” I said.

“It technically belongs to a vigilante and his woman, but they share custody with Barrett and Clarke.”

“That was a whole lot of crazy in one sentence,” I decided, and couldn’t help but look as the woman stopped in front of a building to unlock it before moving inside.

“Let’s get back to the car, and maybe I can tell you it,” he told me.

With that, he did.

For the whole ride back to the city, almost as if he was afraid that if there was a second where the conversation lapsed, we might be forced to discuss what had just happened.

And, clearly, he didn’t want to do that.

I tried not to feel just a little bit crushed at that idea as we walked into my apartment building, then silently rode up the elevator.

“What’s your schedule for tomorrow?” Brock asked, his tone more guarded than usual. Which, of course, only made me throw up more of my own guards.

“Work.”

So much work, in fact, that I wouldn’t even be able to think about the man.

That is, of course, until I was calling him for help...

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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*Brock*

I tried to give myself a little slack.

It was, for all intents and purposes, inevitable.

I knew it from almost the moment I'd laid eyes on her, and she'd given me a once-over that said her mind was on the same wavelength.

Things were absolutely going to get physical.

But it was supposed to happen after the job was done.

Admittedly, though, I wasn't exactly focusing on the job the way I knew I needed to be.

This wasn't a cheating spouse.

This was a woman who was nearly murdered.

If someone hadn't come across her bleeding out on the ground, she likely would be dead right now.

She didn't need me saying shit about going down on her, telling her that she wore her desire for me on her sleeve, or kissing her in the street of my hometown. Where someone like Clarke could see.

She needed me fucking focusing on the case, finding who it was who'd hurt her, and making him pay for it.

So that was why I pretended to be sleeping in when I heard her moving through her apartment, getting her coffee, putting herself together.

I knew that if I spent too much time in close contact with her, I wasn't going to be able to keep my mind on the job.

So, I took the chickenshit way out of it.

I avoided her.

Once she was at work, I was free to roam through her apartment again, making myself a coffee, then shutting off all the lights, and closing all of the curtains before grabbing a flashlight, and slowly and methodically working my way through every inch of her house.

She'd said she'd gotten creep vibes from the super. A man who'd been in her house, roaming around.

It wasn't absurd to wonder if he'd been leaving cameras behind, if that was why she'd found him in her bedroom instead of the kitchen where he belonged.

But after almost an hour of the painstaking project, I was reasonably certain there was nothing hidden in her smoke detectors, alarm clocks, her shower head, in her statues, or anywhere else for that matter.

It was worth a look.

It definitely would have pointed a finger a little more firmly in the super's direction, anyway.

I watched out the front window, waiting for the man himself to appear to head down the street to grab some lunch.

He wasn't creepy in the way you could often find a super to be creepy. Greasy-haired, unkempt. Clearly, that kind of

inattention to detail would never stand at a building such as Chapel Lane.

The super, a man named Aaron, was five-ten, with a medium build that leaned a little more toward doughy than muscular, dark hair that was receding just at the temples so far, a wide face with a stern-looking brow over dark blue eyes, and the kind of lazy, shoulder-swinging walk that just made him seem kind of cocky.

Taking my cue, I grabbed my phone and my kit, and made my way down the elevator to the main floor, since it didn't have an option to get off anywhere else.

I held my breath, wondering if the keen-eyed doorman would see me, but he was busy talking to the newspaper guy out front, giving me just enough of a chance to make my way across the lobby and out the door that led to the back alley.

The nice thing about old buildings like Chapel Lane was that the plans were pretty much public access, so I knew that from the back alley was a door that led into the super's office.

He exited through the front because the alley was a dead-end to both sides thanks to a massive dumpster the building next door had placed at one end so they could toss construction debris into it.

"Nice," I mumbled to myself as I found an old green metal door that had no fancy bells and whistles to keep anyone out, just an old lock that was child's play to pick.

I hadn't exactly been in a lot of super's offices before, so I didn't know what to expect, but it was a pretty roomy space with wire racks lining one and a half of the walls. The shelves were loaded down with what you might suspect—endless rolls of paper towels, toilet paper, room sprays, cleaners, and lightbulbs. There was also just about any kind of tool you might need from a saw to a toilet plunger and drain snake.

He had a small desk pushed up against the wall, and when I moved closer, all I found on top of it was some sort of electronic that he was clearly trying to fix.

Nothing overly, well, creepy.

No pictures on the walls. No stash of panties belonging to the female residents. No notes.

It was just the man's kind of sad, dark, little office.

That didn't mean, of course, that he was innocent.

He could have just been smart enough not to leave any traces out where anyone could see them.

Scooting his chair back, I sat down to open the drawers of his desk, rifling through the mixed contents. Rubber bands, pens, about a dozen different Alan wrenches which were probably from furniture assembly jobs some of the residents had talked him into, old sticky notes with the font completely faded, some pennies, a couple cans of WD-40.

But there, way at the back of the second drawer, I found it.

The little credit card key that matched the one Cam had given to me to use to get into Miranda's apartment.

The thing was, it was quite literally covered in dust, so much so that I left fingerprints on it when I picked it up.

There was no way it had been used recently.

Sighing, I tucked it into my pocket.

Guilty or not, Miranda thought he was a creep, and creeps didn't deserve access to her apartment.

Swirling in my chair, I let out a deep sigh.

If it wasn't the super, then who?

The doorman?

It was an avenue worth looking into.

He did, clearly, use his key. Often. Bringing her dry cleaning and packages up.

But he was an older guy. Married, judging by the ring on his finger. A man who'd worked at the building for years.

He saw Miranda daily.

Why would he just... all of a sudden decide to attack her?

Especially when there seemed to be no other motive aside from the attempted murder.

If there had been a sexual assault component to it, I guess I could maybe understand it. The guy who saw her daily, pining over her, wanting her, mistaking her cordiality for interest. Then one day, something just triggers him and he attacks.

I could make that scenario work in my mind.

But without that, it just didn't make any sense.

Sighing, I climbed out of the chair, and made my way back outside, but went ahead and walked down the alley, squeezing past the dumpster, and making my way down the block, just far enough that the doorman wasn't looking at me as I watched him.

Outwardly, he seemed to be everything that a doorman at a fancy-ass place should be.

Friendly, efficient, anticipating of needs.

"Yeah?" Sawyer asked, leaving me to try to work with that one syllable, to see if Clarke had spilled the beans to Barrett, who had in turn told Sawyer.

That said, Sawyer wasn't the type to wait for me to call. If he was pissed at me, he'd have reached out to let me know that.

Clarke, for whatever reason, was keeping my secret.

"The super seems clean. He had her keycard, but it was so dusty that there's no way he used it recently."

"Damn. That was a promising angle," he said, exhaling hard. "Okay. Well, it's out. So what are you thinking now?"

"I'm working on the doorman angle," I told him. "Can you run a check for me? I don't have my laptop right now."

"Yeah. Give me a name. I'll get back to you as soon as I can. We just got two new clients, so it might be a couple of hours."

With that, we hung up, and I went to grab myself some lunch, hating the fact that I didn't have anything else to work

on right then to distract me from thinking about all that shit.

Her in my house.

Her in my favorite spots in the town.

Looking like she fit right in at all those places.

Then, of course, her with a little foamy cream on the tip of her nose as she let out a moan that I felt in my dick as we stood there on the street.

I don't know what the fuck happened to my self-control at that moment, but there seemed to be nothing holding me back from grabbing her, from sealing my lips over mine, from exploring her with my lips and teeth and tongue, feeling her soft body melt into mine as I did so.

All I could think about was *more*.

More kissing. Down her neck, between her breasts, down her belly, between her thighs.

And the sound of her moaning urging me on as I went.

"Fuck," I hissed as I let myself back into her apartment with my cock straining in my pants, making me feel like a goddamn horny teenager as I put my to-go drink down on the counter in the kitchen before making my way through the guest room, then into the bathroom I'd been using.

My hand worked with impatient fingers on my button and zipper before reaching in and pulling out my straining cock.

I thought about her there on her knees in front of me, her plump lips parting around my dick as I stroked myself, as I tried to purge myself of the need that was courting through my body, despite everything within me knowing that nothing was going to ease it but finally getting to fulfill the fantasy.

To strip her bare.

To lick, nip, suck, her into a frenzy before settling between her thick thighs and surging inside of her.

That was the only real relief from the feelings I was dealing with.



But that didn't stop me from fisting my cock, bringing myself up and through a powerful orgasm that made me have to slam a hand on the countertop to keep myself upright as it moved through me.

"Christ," I hissed afterward as I washed my hands, looking up at my reflection in the mirror. "Get it the fuck together," I demanded, rolling my neck, then reaching into my bag for my meds, realizing I hadn't taken them because I hadn't gone out first thing for my coffee like I normally would have.

I wasn't ashamed on being on meds. They kept me even. But that didn't mean that everyone around me knew about them. Hell, I wasn't even sure I'd ever told Sawyer or Tig about them.

Though, objectively, Sawyer would probably understand more than anyone else.

He was the one who'd seen me almost at my worst. Almost. He'd been the one to drag me out of the woods and force some normalcy back into my life. He gave me a reason to climb out of bed, to get dressed, to be a functioning member of society again.

That said, he didn't know my lowest of lows.

And the crazy part was that I'd been so close to telling Miranda about that phase in my life. Not just because it would help her feel better, either, but rather... I just wanted her to know.

I'd spent a lot of time with a lot of different women in my life. Flings, mostly, but some lasting weeks or even months of casual fun where we were with each other almost day and night.

Not a single one of them knew me, not really.

They knew parts of me, of course.

But not anything past surface level.

Up until a day or so ago, I didn't want anyone to know me deeper than that. Yet there was no mistaking that some part of me wanted to let Miranda all the way in.

That was probably why it was proving so damn hard to stay away from her, keep my hands off of her. Because, whether I truly understood it or not, I was interested in her. In more than a fun, casual way. Or, at least, that was what it felt like. What the fuck did I know? I had no experience with anything other than casual when it came to women.

I was still waiting to hear back from Sawyer when my phone started to ring on the counter in the kitchen.

I felt a strange swirling tightness in my stomach as I saw Miranda's name there.

Because something within me told me that she wasn't willingly calling me to talk about her day or something like that.

Something happened.

"Miranda," I answered, hearing a choked sound to my own voice.

"Brock," she responded, voice shaky.

I was already moving through the apartment and out the door.

"Where are you?"

"Work," she responded in that same uneven voice.

"What happened?"

"Hey, Brock, it's Cam," Cam's voice said.

"Cam, what the fuck is going on?" I asked, taking the elevator down.

"Miranda was attacked."

"What the fuck do you mean she was attacked?" I asked, racing through the lobby and outside, side-eyeing the doorman as I went, since I still hadn't marked him off my list. Though, clearly, he was still at work.

"She decided to take a walk to go grab lunch. To clear her head," he added, and his voice was going lower, like he was

trying to keep Miranda from overhearing, and getting her even more worked up.

“And?” I growled, hailing a cab, then throwing myself inside, knowing it would take much longer to use my car and find parking once I got there.

“Someone caught her between buildings and shoved her into the wall.”

“Fuck. Is she hurt?”

“She’s a little scratched up. But I think she’s more freaked out than anything.”

“Was she mugged? Did they take anything?”

“No.”

That was... bizarre.

It wouldn’t have been completely crazy for her to have been targeted to be mugged. Looking like she looked. Wearing the nice shit she wore. Anyone who knew anything about brands would have seen her and known there would be a nice amount of cash in her wallet.

But if they didn’t take anything... what the fuck was the point of attacking her?

I mean, sure. It was the city. Sometimes there were just crazy and violent people around. But just random acts of small amounts of violence weren’t that common.

“Did they say anything to her?” I asked.

“Not that she heard, no.”

“Okay. I’m five minutes away. Can you make sure the security lets me up?”

“Already done,” he said. And of course it was. This was Cam, after all.

“Okay. Try to keep her calm. I’ll be right there.”

My heart was hammering in my chest as we wove through the traffic in the city, the driver clearly overhearing my conversation, and putting a bit of a stick in it.

I'd been in a lot of crazy situations while in the service. More than a dozen occasions where my life was quite literally on the line, and I don't ever remember feeling as anxious as I was sitting in the back of a cab, trying to get to Miranda's side to assure her she was going to be okay, that this was never going to happen again, that I was going to find who did it and make them pay.

I'd scoped out Miranda's building when I first started the job. It was a massive glass and metal structure that proved just how big of a business she'd built for herself in such a short amount of time.

I'd never been inside before, though.

There was a sprawling lobby with white floors and cozy-looking beige-colored chairs and couches. Live plants were smattered around. There was art on the walls. It looked less like a lobby to a billion-dollar business, and more like someone's living room, if it weren't for the front desk, the security, and the dozens of people milling around.

"Brock?" the security officer asked as I rushed forward.

He looked shaken up.

Maybe from seeing his boss come rushing back into work, roughed up, and terrified.

"Yeah," I said, flashing my ID even as he passed me a visitor badge.

"Straight to the top," he said, waving toward the last elevator.

Unable to stand still, my fingers thrummed on the bar on the side of the elevator as it quietly beeped as it went up the floors until it finally reached the top.

The doors opened to a wide space full of a dozen or so desks. All white. All with the option for being seated or standing, as evidenced by people doing both while pretending to do work, but all casting glances over toward the glass office at the back of the building.

Cam was standing fidgeting at the side of Miranda's desk where she was sitting with her back to the glass, likely not wanting her employees to see her having a private moment.

I made my way through the rows of desks and right into Miranda's office, rushing forward to drop down to a squat in front of her.

"Hey, honey," I said, giving her a soft smile as rage boiled through my system.

Objectively, the damage was minimal. There were some cuts up above her eyebrow and toward her temple. Depending on how hard she hit the wall, it might bruise. And it seemed to have bled a bit, judging by the bloody paper towels in her hand and the drop of it on her shirt.

It was all minor.

But the fucking rage was burning through my system regardless.

Because someone had put their hands on her with the intention of hurting her, of causing some kind of damage.

They'd fucking made her bleed.

And, perhaps just as unforgivable, they'd made her cry.

My hand moved out, closing over the two of hers that were clasped in her lap. The other rose, prodding a bit around the cuts.

"Does this hurt?"

"A little. It's fine. I'm... fine."

"You're not fine," I shot back. "You were attacked. There's nothing fine about that. Have you cleaned out these cuts at all?" I asked, getting a short shake of her head. "Cam, do you have a first aid kit around here somewhere?" I asked, glancing back at him.

"Yes, of course," he said, looking happy to have a task to carry out. "I'll be right back," he said, rushing out.

"Miranda," I called, waiting for her to give me some eye contact. "It's okay not to have it all together right now. No one

is judging you. You aren't being dramatic. You were attacked. It's okay to be upset."

At that, her lower lip wobbled and tears she'd clearly been trying to hold back poured down her cheeks.

"There you go," I said, slowly getting to my feet, reaching down, and pulling her up, then to my chest, wrapping my arms around her.

It didn't escape my notice that everyone in her office was watching the interaction, likely putting pieces together, thinking that I was the man in Miranda's life.

And, hell, maybe that was for the best.

If this was not her super or the doorman, then it was possible it was someone else she knew from work. They would all likely know where she lived and her schedule on any given day.

Perhaps if they thought she wasn't alone anymore, then she would be safer.

"It's going to be okay. I'm going to find this fucker," I assured her as my hand rubbed up and down her back.

"I shouldn't have gone on a walk alone."

"Are you really victim-blaming yourself here, sweetheart? It was a busy street in the middle of the day with a shitton of witnesses." Which was likely the only reason she hadn't gotten more worked over than she had.

"I don't understand why..." she said, sniffing hard.

Behind her back, Cam was holding up the first aid kit, and I held up a finger to him, begging for a minute. "Why just grab me, shove me into a wall, and run?"

"My best guess right now is that it's just to scare you," I told her.

"Who would hate me that much, though?" she asked, losing some of the sadness, replacing it with fire. "I try really hard to be fair and kind to everyone. I don't have enemies. I try not ever to fuck anyone over, even in business moves."

Oh, yeah, she was getting heated if she was cursing. She was usually so careful with how she spoke, never wanting to seem like she was anything other than well-bred and well-raised.

“This isn’t on you. This is on the asshole who is doing this to you,” I assured her, pulling back so I could wipe her cheeks. “You know that.”

“Yeah,” she agreed, taking one slow, deep breath.

“Okay. Sit,” I said, pushing her onto her desk as I waved Cam in. “Let me clean that up. You might have bruises tomorrow. But if that bothers you, there is some good makeup that can cover it up,” I told her as I opened the first aid kit to find the cleaning wipes and the triple antibiotics. “Cam, are you busy right now?” I asked.

“Not particularly.”

“Can you compile a list of all current and past employees of this company, but have two separate lists for me.”

“Yeah, of course. That’s easy enough. We keep very detailed records. You think it could be someone here?”

“I’m not writing off any options right now. I don’t like the timing of this attack, so I want to look for any red flags around here.”

“If you want, I can also flag some people who have just been a little... problematic,” Cam offered.

“Yeah, but give me details on how they’ve been difficult,” I said, wincing when Miranda let out a whimper as I cleaned the deeper of the cuts.

“Can do,” Cam said, jotting down notes. “I can have all of that to you by the end of day,” he said.

“Appreciate it. Okay, this shit is medicated, so the sting should stop,” I told her as I added the triple antibiotic to some gauze and blotted it to the cuts. “Do you have any important meetings?” I asked.

“No. But I’m not going home either.”

“Why not?” I asked, just barely resisting the urge to sigh at her stubbornness.

“Because if this was someone here, or around here, I don’t want them to think they scared me away, that they won. Even in a small way.”

Okay, well, I had to respect that.

It was important not to let your enemies know they’d even gotten a small victory over you.

“Alright. But stay here, okay?” I demanded. “And by here, I mean in this office. With a couple dozen eyes on you at all times.”

“I can do that,” she agreed, looking relieved to have at least the illusion of safety.

“I am going to be around as well. I am going to check the street. Look for any cameras. If I find them, maybe bribe the footage from the building owners. See if I can come up with a face.”

“Okay,” she agreed, shoulders relaxing at the idea that I was going to be nearby. “And then I will ride home with you. No more going anywhere alone.”

“Agreed,” she said immediately. “Hey Brock?” she called as I made my way to the door.

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for coming when I called.”

This was where I was supposed to say something like *That’s the job* or *That’s what you pay me for*.

But I didn’t want to make the distinction.

“Anytime you call me, baby, I will come.”

And with that, I was out. Before I could say anything else that was going to further muddy an already murky connection between us.

I had to try to focus on the job.

No matter my growing feelings for the client.



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## CHAPTER TWELVE

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*Miranda*

I hadn't been that hurt.

Just... terrified.

I mean, it was every woman's worst nightmare to be grabbed and pulled down an alley. Your mind couldn't help but run through all the horrific things that could possibly happen to you when someone with bad intentions got you alone.

I'd never felt bone-deep terror like I did in that moment or two.

Sure, waking up in a hospital, confused, then being forced into a psych hold had been its own horror show, but at least I knew I was *safe* in that scenario.

Being grabbed and slammed against a wall was a whole other thing entirely.

I swear my mind raced through fifty different scenarios so fast I felt like I was spinning. It overwhelmed me so entirely

that I didn't even think to scream. Not that a scream would necessarily mean anyone would come to my aid. People were routinely attacked on crowded subways and no one did anything about it.

Humans, it turned out, were pretty much selfish and heartless that way.

But just as soon as it started, it was over, and I was running out of the alley with blood trickling down my face.

The security at my work had been quick to ask questions, to rush outside to see if anyone was lurking about.

But I was in a rush to get upstairs, to get to my office so I felt safe again.

And who did I call?

Not the police.

Brock.

In my most terrified moment, he was who I wanted to reach out to. He was who I wanted at my side.

Sure, I could lie and tell myself that it was because he was my investigator, he was being paid to figure out who was doing this to me. Or that I was comforted by his ex-military training.

Those were even factors.

But that wasn't the real reason.

I just... wanted him there.

I didn't understand it logically. I mean, objectively, I barely knew the man. But I was finding that I just... liked the way he handled me. I appreciated his personal brand of sweet kindness and care that never went overboard. He gave concern and comfort, then went ahead and moved things along, not harping.

It just... worked for me.

When he'd come rushing in and dropped down in front of me, reaching for my hands, giving me the soft eyes and the

sweet voice, oh, man. If I believed it was possible to fall for someone you barely knew, I'd have fallen right that moment.

Then when he'd grabbed me and pulled me to his chest?

Good Lord.

The man... he was the dream, wasn't he?

The guy we all secretly wanted, but didn't quite believe actually existed.

Then he went ahead and cleaned me up.

I'd never had a man clean a wound for me before. The idea was so foreign it had seemed borderline laughable.

It was all just too much.

I was kind of glad he decided to go and look around, do some investigating. Because things were complicated enough.

I needed some space to put my mind and feelings back into place.

By the time the end of day rolled around, Brock was back and waiting for me, giving me a head shake as if to say he had nothing when he likely saw some hope on my face as I walked toward him.

"It was a bit of a blind spot," he told me as we got in the elevator to ride down. "I could see the back of someone in a black puffer jacket, but their hood was up, so I really didn't get much. Six foot, maybe. Somewhere between thin and average. That's... it, unfortunately."

"You'll figure it out," I said, some part of me picking up on defeat and disappointment in his voice, and not liking hearing it there. "It's just going to take some time."

"The super is probably a dead end," he told me as we walked through the lobby. "He does have your card, but it's all dusty and shit. I still have to find where the camera feed is, so I can access it, but it wasn't in his office."

"Okay. It makes sense. You can totally be a creep without being an attempted murderer."

“And to put your mind at ease, I went through your place with a fine-tooth comb, making sure no one had planted a hidden camera anywhere.”

“I hadn’t even thought of that,” I said, chewing my lower lip at the idea of that sort of invasion.

“Now you don’t have to,” he assured me as he opened my car door.

That night and the following few days were pretty much the same. Brock brought me to work, then got lost working on the endless employee records and snooping around my building, trying to locate the room where the security cameras were.

Apparently, his best—and last, at this point—guess was the basement. Which was hard to get into since the access was behind the doorman’s desk, and he was rarely away from it long enough to sneak behind, go explore, then come back up.

He’d suggested we might need to work out a plan for me to be a lookout and distract Frank while he came back out.

As for me, well, I worked.

And I tried to pretend I wasn’t jumping at shadows.

“Damn it,” I hissed as the text came in from Cam while I was pulling food out of the delivery bag in my kitchen.

“What is it?”

“A charity event,” I said, sighing hard. “I’d agreed to it a full year ago,” I added. “With everything going on, I totally forgot about it.”

“If you have to be there, that’s workable,” Brock said, taking his clamshell, then mine, and making his way over toward the table.

We’d gotten comfortable with the casual intimacy that came with living together. The morning dance of making coffee. Choosing meals then eating them together.

Aside from Cam, I couldn’t remember the last time I’d spent as much time with a person as I was spending with

Brock.

I was more than a little worried that it was to the point where I was going to miss it when it was gone. When he was gone. And he *would* be gone. As soon as he figured out who was out to get me.

I probably should have been trying to distance myself, spending more time alone, things that would make his sudden disappearance easier to learn to live with.

Was that what I did, though?

No, no it was not.

“Will you go with me?” I asked, trying to inject as much confidence in my voice as possible, even though it was the most nervous I’d felt in ages. Which was absurd. I did multi-million dollar business deals. I stood up and spoke in front of some of the brightest minds in the world. And never, in any of those situations, did my belly wobble like it was wobbling in my own dining room, sitting across from a man I liked more than was healthy.

“Yes, of course,” he said immediately, sparing me any further torment. “I’d be happy to take you,” he added, somehow wiping away the lingering worries that he was doing it because he was obligated, because he didn’t want me to get attacked again. Because he didn’t say he would go *with* me. He said he would *take* me. There was a distinct, monumental difference between those words. “And before you ask, yes, I have the appropriate attire,” he told me. “It’s the Falkes Benefit, right?” he asked.

“How do you know that?” I asked, unable to stop my lips from parting in surprise.

“I’ve attended a few benefits in my time,” he said, shrugging it off.

But this wasn’t something you shrugged off. The Falkes Benefit was invite-only. And those invites tended to only go out to the very elite. It had been one of those moments when I’d truly felt like I’d “made it” when I’d gotten my invitation

with its thick linen paper with its understated art nouveau style flowers... and *my* name printed there.

“Have you attended this one?” I asked, trying for casual, but I felt like my tone was a bit too curious, so played it down by opening up my food and poking around with my fork.

“Not in years,” he said, making my gaze shoot up to find him smirking at me, knowing how curious I was, but making me beg for the information.

“When did you go?” I asked.

“About six years ago,” he told me, giving me nothing else.

“You’re being deliberately difficult.”

“Only because it clearly drives you up a wall,” he shot back, making a laugh escape me as I reached for my wine.

“Were you there with a client?”

“An ex-client,” he told me.

“Another in a long line of conquests?” I asked.

“I’d prefer not to think of women as conquests. But, yes, it was someone I’d been casually seeing.”

“There’s nothing casual about the Falkes Benefit.”

“No. But this certain woman wanted to wave her younger date in the face of her older husband she’d just recently divorced.”

“Did he cheat on her?”

“Yes.”

“Well, then, I guess I can’t fault her for being petty. Did you enjoy the event?”

“For all the exclusivity, I’d had better food at smaller events.”

“That’s exactly what I said after the first time I went!” I said, throwing up a hand because no one else had ever said anything negative about it before. “What is it about ‘exclusive’ events that means the food has to have no flavor and not enough calories to feed an infant? I had to stop for fast food on

the way home. In a gown. Because whoever thought one slice of meat and a piece of carrot draped over a single spear of asparagus would be filling was clearly out of their damn mind.”

“So that’s the plan then.”

“What’s the plan?”

“We hit up the benefit. Let you toss some money around. Choke down the disgusting food. Then you and me, we hit up something actually filling on the way home.”

“That sounds perfect,” I agreed as alarm bells went off in my head about how much I liked his use of the word ‘home’ there.

“Do you have a gown already?” he asked. “Or do we need to squeeze a shopping trip in today?”

“I don’t have one that I haven’t worn already,” I admitted. “But I might just have Cam pick me out some options. He has a better eye for evening wear than I do,” I said, reaching for my phone.

“What?” Brock asked when I smiled down at my phone a moment later.

“Cam. He was already at the store, snapping pictures of options.”

“Have you ever taken him?”

“The year before last. While he loved the venue and the drinks, he was miserable. Cam likes aspects of wealth, like the nice shoes and the good champagne, but he has no use for a lot of the stuffiness.”

“I was once forced to sit through an hour-and-a-half discussion about yacht repair,” Brock said.

“Exactly. It can definitely be dry. If I have to listen to one more person talk about golf, I might strain my eyes from trying not to roll them.”

“Why is it always golf?” Brock asked, shaking his head. “They could do any other sport, but they choose golf?”

“I think it is sport-lite and business-heavy,” I said. “I remember someone advising me when I was really starting to get some success that I should invest in a membership at a very exclusive club just to rub shoulders with the ultra-rich. As much as I was desperate for connections those days, I couldn’t bring myself to do it.”

“Probably for the best. It’s still such a boys-only type atmosphere. You’d have been constantly hit on.”

“That was part of my thinking as well,” I agreed.

“What time is the benefit?” he asked.

“Eight.”

“But you don’t want to get there at eight.”

“No, I do not,” I agreed. “Eight twenty to be there. So leave here at ten after.”

“I’ll be ready,” he told me.

I guess I just hadn’t been prepared for *how* ready he would be.

I figured he had a suit. Any man who made it to his thirties had better have a suit.

But this wasn’t just any suit.

This was the to-the-book black-tie-affair suit.

A single-breasted black dinner jacket made out of barathea with silk peaked lapels and covered buttons. Under that was a white marcella evening shirt with bib detail and double cuffs and pricey-looking cufflinks. The pants had a nice taper, neither too tight nor too loose, and his black shoes looked shiny and in good shape.

The bowtie was where most men screwed up.

It was always too small or too wide, making their heads look disproportionate.

But Brock nailed the bowtie as well.

In fact, he actually looked good in it. Which was not an easy feat.



“Wow,” Brock said when he sensed me standing there, and turned to look.

It was a good *wow* too. The breathless sort. Like I’d taken his away.

I won’t lie. Brock had absolutely been on my mind as I scanned through Cam’s options, as I wondered what would be most flattering to my figure, be appropriate, but still sexy.

I’d settled on a floor-length—obviously—gown in a green so deep it was almost black. It was off the shoulder with a deep slit between the breasts that gave the appearance of cleavage, but had a modesty panel blocking you from actually seeing anything. It was high-waisted, tight through the hip, then flared out into a mermaid hem from the knee.

“You stole my line,” I said, giving him a soft smile.

“You don’t do that enough with your hair,” he told me, taking a single step forward. Almost like he didn’t trust himself to get any closer than that.

I almost never had my hair down, in fact. Having it up meant it was a little more fuss-free when I was working long days at the office.

Then when I got home, I couldn’t take it down because it had that thick crease from being back all day, so I tended to just continue to keep it up.

Sure, an updo would have been perfectly appropriate for the benefit as well, but I’d carefully washed, dried, and styled my hair instead, wanting a soft and feminine look for the evening.

I never went crazy on makeup, but I did some mascara and light liner around my eyes as well as a slight tint to my lips. And maybe a swipe of blush just to warm up my cheekbones.

I opted out of a necklace, but went with simple drop earrings with two-carat teardrop emeralds.

Understated and classic was what I was going for.

There were no rings or bracelets either.

Just a spritz or two of my signature perfume.

That was it.

“I have a problem,” I told him.

“That no one is going to be able to look at the presenter with you in the room?” he asked, giving me another quick once over that had my belly flip-flopping.

“Well, yes, there is that,” I said, smiling. “But, actually... this is not a bend forward sort of dress,” I said, pressing a hand between my breasts where my boobs were just barely staying contained in their strapless bra. It was a big ask for them to stay put, and they were behaving so far. I didn’t want to push it. “But I didn’t put on my shoes beforehand,” I told him, waving over toward the box.

I didn’t technically need new shoes for the event, especially seeing as no one was going to see them. But Cam, well, we shared that footwear fetish. He told me that he’d seen them and knew instantly that I had to have them.

I hadn’t even looked at them yet.

“Well, if this isn’t just a real-life *Cinderella* moment,” Brock said with a boyish smirk before he turned to fish the shoes out of the box, pulling out the velvet wedge put inside to keep the shape, then coming over toward me with them.

Cam was right for choosing them.

They were nude Louboutin with a scalloped edge that was to die for.

Then I watched as Brock went down on his knees before me, making my mind flash with a bunch of vivid, steamy images.

He set the shoes down as he reached to bunch up my skirt, then reached for my ankle, drawing it up.

I was balancing just fine.

But did I reach out to place a hand on his shoulder anyway?

I sure as hell did.

His hand gently held the back of my ankle as he reached for the shoe, then carefully slid my foot into it, before settling my foot back down.

This time, I genuinely did need his support to balance on my left foot as he lifted my right, so my fingers dug into him a bit as he continued the process.

It was an unexpectedly intimate moment, and I felt oddly buzzy by the time he was done, and looked up at me.

I didn't really think, I just let my hand slide down his arm to hold his hand, helping him back onto his feet.

"Thank you," I told him, feeling like he was too close. Too attractive. Too tempting.

And, God, he smelled good.

"All set?" he asked, taking a careful, deliberate step backward.

"I, ah, yes. No," I said, shaking my head.

"Which is it?"

"I forgot my clutch," I said, turning and making my way to my bedroom. Where I paused to take a few slow, deep breaths before grabbing my bag and heading back out. "Okay. Now I'm all set," I said, giving him a bit of a forced smile as I moved toward the door.

There was a bit of strained silence between us on the way down and ride across town.

It was in the backseat of that car, though, that I saw something I'd missed before.

Brock's sleeve slid upward.

And there was a watch I hadn't seen earlier.

Not just any watch, either.

Nope.

A Patek Phillippe.

If I wasn't mistaken, with the rose, red, and pink gold mixed with the blue leather band and partially blue face, it was

a Ulysse Nardin.

That was easily over thirty thousand for that watch.

And while a part of me respected the casual way he didn't even try to put it on display, I couldn't seem to help the surge of jealousy that grew inside of me at the idea of one of his well-to-do ladies buying it for him.

"Have you ever run into a man named Fenway Arlington?"

"Is it possible not to run into Fenway?" I asked, smiling at the last memory I had of the man. Spinning a former First Lady around on the dance floor with a rose between his teeth. To this day, no one knew where he'd gotten the rose since the venue hadn't had any.

"Fenway has required extensive... assistance. And he typically turns to a fixer agency. But every once in a while, he comes to us for help. The watch was a gift for helping him track down a random man on the streets of Spain to ask him what cologne he was wearing."

"You can't be serious," I said, smiling.

"You've met Fenway."

"That's true," I agreed. And the Fenway I knew would absolutely be that absurd. "Here we go," I said, looking out the window at the long building with stately old pillars.

People were milling around on the steps, greeting one another, putting off going inside for whatever reason.

"Just keep reminding yourself about French fries," Brock told me as he slid out of the car, then dipped down and held a hand out toward me. The perfect gentleman.

I'd never taken a date to the Falkes Benefit.

Cam didn't count.

And all other years, I went alone, all the while telling myself it was a power move to go to such an event without someone else. It screamed confidence, since I could clearly bring someone if I wanted to.

I was a mix of nervous and excited about actually having company, someone to talk to, to share jokes and observations with, someone to discuss the event with afterward.

“Miranda!” a voice called almost as soon as I’d exited the car.

“Here we go,” I said under my breath as I plastered a smile on my face.

But then Brock’s hand was at the small of my back.

“I’m right here,” he murmured.

And I swear I melted right then and there.

The next hour or so was a blur of greeting people that I only saw once or twice a year, people I went out of my way not to get too close to.

But it was somehow made much more tolerable by Brock’s presence right there at my side, his hand a reassuring presence at the base of my spine, a touch that was both comforting and possessive at the same time.

“Miranda, you gorgeous creature!” a genuinely welcome voice called.

“Bellamy!” I said, turning with a smile.

“And who is the lucky...” Bellamy started, then broke off when he saw Brock turn. There was a moment, just a quick flash of something dark on Bellamy’s face before it was gone, and he was reaching out toward Brock. “Brock, long time,” he said as the two shook. “How did you get so lucky to be escorting the lovely Miranda Coulter?”

We’d agreed that it was best no one knew about my situation.

“I’m not sure,” Brock answered before I could think of something to say to brush it off. “But I am enjoying every moment. How have you been?”

“Oh, touring the world. Romancing beautiful women. The usual. Is that Teddy and his father over there?” he asked, looking past us toward the man standing beside a little person

who was, objectively, a bit too young to be at the benefit.  
“Excuse me,” he said.

With that, he was gone.

“You know a surprising number of people here, considering you don’t live in the city,” I said when we were alone.

“I know Bellamy from our service days.”

“Bellamy was in the service?”

“Yes.”

“*Bellamy?*” I asked, incredulous.

“Hard to believe, but yes. What?” he asked, looking down at me with drawn-together brows.

Apparently, he could read me well.

Because I’d felt my stomach clench when I saw another familiar face. One with makeup that was just barely hiding some fresh bruises. Jenny. And her shitbag husband who had given those to her.

“Oh,” he said, following my gaze.

“She’s so isolated,” I said, feeling my heart break for her.  
“So cornered by his well-connected family.”

“All you can do is offer to help,” Brock said, his hand sliding a bit to squeeze my hip.

I had.

Several times.

Anytime I caught her alone in the bathroom at an event.

I couldn’t begin to understand the psychological damage that being so horrifically abused caused, but, clearly, her husband had beaten her down so much that she didn’t even realize she could rise again without him.

My heart always broke for her.

“Come on,” Brock said, leading me away from the crowd.

“Where are we going?” I asked as he led me out of the banquet hall.

But he didn’t answer me, just guided me down a hall, then another, before he opened a door and ushered me inside.

“How did you know this existed?” I asked, looking around the small space with its comfortable-looking couches and chairs. Some sort of private lounge that I didn’t know about.

“I was looking over the plans before we came, just in case I needed an exit strategy.”

“In case of uncomfortable social interactions?” I asked, frowning.

“In case of an attack,” he clarified as he lowered down onto one of the couches.

When his hand reached out, I figured he was just inviting me to sit too, to get off of my aching feet.

Then my hand was in his, and he was yanking hard, pulling me off my feet, and sending me crashing down.

Right onto his lap.

One look in his eyes after I’d landed told me everything I needed to know.

He wanted me right where he had me.

And we were done pretending that we didn’t want each other...

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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*Miranda*

I was somehow aware of nothing—and everything—all at once.

The classical music gently carrying through the building. The way my heart was thumping against my ribcage. My breathing that went faster and more shallow as my chest seemed to get tighter and tighter with each passing second.

The strong legs under my thighs and ass.

The big hand still in mine.

The way his dark eyes were heavy-lidded and heated as I finally forced my gaze to find and hold his.

“All I could think of all night,” he said, his hand releasing mine so his fingers could glide up my arm instead, “was this. Getting you alone. Getting you to really look at me.”

“I’ve been looking at you,” I insisted.



“Not like this,” he said as his fingertips teased the crook of my elbow, making an unexpected shiver course through me. “Yeah, like that,” he said, voice going a bit deeper as I felt myself relaxing deeper into him even as his hand teased across my belly then up, his forearm brushing my breast as he continued his path upward.

Over my arm.

My shoulder.

Up the column of my neck.

His thumb traced my jaw from my ear to my chin.

Then up.

Sliding across my lower lip.

They parted like an invitation.

One he was all too pleased to receive.

One moment, he was sitting back and watching himself explore.

The next, my head was against the armrest and his body was half folded over mine.

I got one moment to enjoy the heat in his eyes before his lips were suddenly on mine.

Hard.

Hungry.

I swear every inch of me ignited at the contact.

The heat scorched through me, leaving ashes and ruins in its wake as my lips started to respond to his. Taking, giving, yet always demanding more.

Brock’s responded to the call, deepening the kiss, nipping my lower lip, tracing the seam with his tongue, then moving inside to claim mine.

A low, throaty moan escaped me then as need hummed through my system, making me feel overly sensitive.

Suddenly, my dress felt like it was suffocating me, and the material felt like it scraped across my skin.

Brock's lips ripped from mine, tracing a path over my jaw, teasing the shell of my ear, then sliding down my neck.

Turning my head, I gave him more access as I let myself fully submerge in that moment, in the sensation of his lips, the feel of his warm breath on my skin.

His tongue circled the pulse point in my throat before moving down, running kisses over my collarbone, then down between my breasts.

The dress was tight, impossible to slide down, so his face just rested there for a moment before he was moving downward.

Sitting back on his heels, his hands went to my skirt, sliding it up my legs, then thighs, having to tug a bit to get the tight material up over my hips, where he left it.

His hungry gaze slid over my thighs, then the swatch of barely-there lace panties between.

His hand flattened, sliding up my calf, back of my knee, then up my thigh to slip inward, grab the material, and start pulling it down.

Thoughts proved impossible right then.

All that existed was the moment, the way he was focusing on me, the sensations coursing through me.

Panties gone, my thighs pressed together until Brock's hands were moving up my legs once again, gently putting pressure on my knees until they parted for him.

He let out a little sighing sound at the move as he bent forward, pressing a kiss to the side of my knee, then the other, before his lips were moving up the inside of my thigh, getting closer and closer to where I needed him most, where the need was so acute it was almost painful.

Then, just when I was sure that I couldn't take the sweet torment for a moment longer, his face was between my thighs, his tongue was sliding up my cleft, then teasing across my clit.

My whole body jolted at the contact before a shiver coursed through me and a low whimper escaped my lips.

Against me, Brock let out a groaning sound as he kept working me, as he started to drive me upward.

His hands massaged my thighs, then guided my legs over his shoulders.

My hips rocked restlessly against him as my back arched off the couch.

Brock's hand slid between us, his fingers teasing at the entrance of my body, fingers tapping for a long moment before finally sliding inside of me.

His tongue circled and his fingers thrust, then turned, and curled to tease over my top wall as my muted whimpers became moans. My fingers tangled in his soft hair, holding him to me as he pushed me right to that edge, then tossed me over, leaving me to crash down into the orgasm.

My body was still shaking from the release when he was pulling away, kissing back down my thigh, then lifting up and coming over me.

"You taste so fucking good," he murmured before his lips claimed mine again.

I should have felt sated.

But there was renewed desire quickly flickering from flame to fire.

My greedy hands were grabbing at his jacket, shoving it down his shoulders, and tossing it to the floor.

"We can stop," he murmured against my lips."

"No, we can't," I objected as my fingers went to his bowtie, and then the buttons of his shirt, pulling that off, and tossing it into the growing pile on the floor as well.

His cock was straining against his pants, pressing into my hip, promising perfect fullness, and relief from the clawing need within me once again.

I tried to fuss with his belt, but it stubbornly refused to budge.

“Brock, please,” I begged.

He shifted his weight backward and off of me, balancing on his knees as he looked down at me.

“God, you’re fucking beautiful,” he said as his gaze moved over me.

My heart felt like it swelled in my chest at those words.

But the need for him was stronger than wanting to bask in the admiration in his eyes right about then.

My hands went to his belt once again, yanking at it, a move that got a small, sexy little chuckle out of Brock as he took my hands and slid them to his thighs so that he could work the frustrating belt loose, then pulling it off and tossing it to the ground.

My hands moved back upward, working his button and zipper free, then sliding his pants down his hips.

My fingers moved across the front of his boxer briefs, teasing the thick length of his cock.

His gaze was molten as I pulled down his boxer briefs, exposing him, then closing my hand around him.

A shudder coursed through him at the sensation.

But then he was reaching back for the wallet in his pocket, pulling out a condom foil, and tossing his wallet aside.

I stroked him for just another moment before letting my hands fall away, so he could slide on the protection.

Once he was done, my hands moved up his sides to grab his arms, pulling until he folded forward and pressed down onto me.

His cock settled against my cleft, making me shift my hips until the underside of him was flat against me, allowing me to grind against his hardness to ease some of the frustrated ache inside of me as his lips took mine once again.

It started slow and sweet before his lips got harder and more demanding as we writhed against each other.

He pulled back to look at me as the head of his cock pressed against me, then slid inside with one smooth, deep stroke as he buried to the hilt, filling me completely.

My legs rose to his sides as my hips writhed against him and my walls tightened around him.

“Fuck,” he hissed, closing his eyes for a second, looking for some control. “Haven’t been able to stop thinking about this,” he added, lips pecking mine lightly a few times. “Better than I could have imagined,” he added as his hips started to rock in and out of me.

The intensity in his eyes as we moved together made me almost immediately emotional. Folding up, I tried to hide my face in his neck.

“I want to look at you when I’m inside of you,” he objected, pulling back, and sliding an arm around my waist, then shifting our positions, so I was straddling him. “So fucking beautiful,” he hissed as his hands brushed my hair off my neck so he could lean forward and press a kiss at the space where my neck met my shoulder. “Ride me, baby,” he groaned, voice tight with his own need for release.

Somehow, his need only spurred on mine, and my hips started to move.

Slowly at first, then faster and faster as we drove each other higher and higher.

One of Brock’s hands settled at the side of my neck. The other slid between my thighs, engaging my clit as I continued to ride him.

My whimpers grew to ragged moans.

Brock’s hisses and indrawn breaths became low groans and words of praise as we drove toward that edge.

“You feel so fucking good,” he hissed as his hips started to rock up into me as I rode him. “You look so fucking gorgeous

when you're taking my cock," he said, his fingers sinking into my ass, urging me to move faster.

No one had ever talked to me in bed, and certainly never with praise. Somehow, the words were just the push my body needed.

My hips rocked.

His thrust.

And the orgasm slammed through me, stealing my breath along with all the damn strength in my body, leaving me falling into his chest as the waves just kept crashing over and over.

"Fuck, baby," Brock hissed, driving up into me through my orgasm, then yanking my hips down on him to take him deep as he found his own.

I don't know how long we stayed like that, clinging to each other, trying to even out our breathing and bring some order to the chaos in our bodies and minds.

It wasn't until I heard applause from somewhere in the building that I seemed to snap out of it and back into my right mind.

"Shit," I hissed, sliding off of his lap, then climbing off of the couch.

"Baby..." Brock tried, reaching toward me.

"I, ah, I have to go, uhm, freshen up," I said, yanking my skirt down, then rushing out of the door, leaving him all but naked as I rushed through the building, trying to find my way back to the bathrooms.

"You okay?" a voice asked as I rushed in.

There she was, a pretty blonde that I knew by association, though not personally.

Elsie.

"Yeah, a little, uhm, overheated," I said, going toward the sink to turn on the tap with one hand and grab some paper

towels with the other. I soaked the paper towel and pressed it to the back of my neck.

Only then did I look up at my reflection.

Anyone who looked closely would see a woman freshly fucked.

There was no other way around it.

My cheeks and chest were flushed.

There was a slight beard burn across my skin.

My hair was messy.

My lipstick was smudged.

“You know,” Elsie said, shooting me a smirk as she went to the door, “I got... overheated at this event last year,” she told me with a smirk before disappearing.

Alone, I took a few, deep breaths, knowing I needed to get it together before I went back to the hall.

It wasn't until, a few moments later, when I was making my way toward the door that I realized something.

My panties were missing.

“Shit,” I hissed as I pulled the door open, ready to rush back to the room to find them.

“Looking for these?” Brock's voice asked, making me jolt hard to find him leaning against the wall near the door, twirling my panties on his finger.

“Brock!” I hissed, trying to reach out, but he was faster than I was, grabbing them, and shoving them into his breast pocket.

“Don't worry. No one else saw,” he assured me, reaching for my hand, and placing it on his arm. “I believe we are about to miss the horrible first course,” he said.

And that was it.

He didn't mention it.

He didn't shoot me scandalous looks at the table.

We just... ate.

And talked.

Like we hadn't just snuck away and had sex in some hidden room in the back of the building.

Insecurity, ugly and uncomfortable, wrapped its cold, slimy hand around my throat, squeezing until I felt like there was no air in the room.

It was right then that Brock stood beside my chair, holding out a hand.

When I glanced up, I couldn't read his face.

But I placed my hand in his and let him pull me up, then lead me to the dance floor as I tried to tell myself it was to keep up appearances. When the truth was that I needed the assurance that he wasn't immediately over me after we'd gotten intimate.

"What's the matter?" he asked as he pulled me to his chest and started to lead.

"Nothing," I insisted. But it was too fast. Too telling.

"Liar," he whispered down by my ear.

"I'm hungry," I insisted, giving him half the truth in the hopes that he would take it as all of it and let it drop.

"Me too. But that's not what has your eyes looking like that."

"My eyes are fine," I said, even as I kept my gaze averted.

"If you're worried about the well-being of your panties, don't worry," he said, and I could hear the smirk in his voice. "They're safe. Right here by my heart," he said, guiding my hand there.

"You're ridiculous," I told him, but he accomplished his goal.

He got me to smile.

He got me to look up at him.



“You love it,” he shot back, leaning down to press his forehead to mine for a second. “So, what is it, another forty minutes or so of stuffy nonsense before we can make a run for it?”

“Sounds about right,” I agreed, and found myself suddenly torn. Between the urge to run off with him to get fast food in our formal wear and the desire to have the night stretch as long as possible.

Whether it was long enough or not, though, about forty-five minutes later, we were making our way out the front doors and down the steps toward my waiting car.

And there on my seat in the back was something that hadn't been there before.

A white envelope.

“What's that?” Brock asked as he slid in beside me, looking down at the envelope I was holding.

“I don't know. It wasn't here before,” I told him. “Should I open it?”

“Not yet,” he said, carefully taking it by the very edge and setting it down in the door pocket. “We're going to use some caution. And tweezers,” he said, reaching out to squeeze my knee. “We're not going to obsess over it,” he said. “And we will ask Mitchell if he saw anyone near the car.”

“He probably didn't. On nights that are going to stretch on, I tell him that he's free to go get food or run errands, so long as he is back by the time the event is coming to an end. So if we was in a restaurant, he wouldn't have seen anything.”

“Still, we'll ask.”

And so he did.

Making Mitchell look almost guilty for not having seen anything.

But we tried not to obsess over that as we walked into the fluorescent-lighted fast food place, standing in line behind a bunch of teens who openly stared at us when we walked in.

“It’s a sad day when a fast food meal that cost a couple bucks tastes better than a meal that was, what, eight hundred a plate?”

“It went up a hundred this year,” I told him, dipping my fry in honey mustard.

“Interesting choice,” he said as he used the barbecue sauce.

“Almost as interesting as your choice to mix orange soda with the lemon-lime,” I sited shaking my head at him.

“Don’t knock it until you try it,” he said, reaching across the table to snag one of my nuggets.

“Hey,” I grumbled.

“You ate half of my onion rings,” he reminded me.

And it was just so... normal.

More normal than most things in my life.

Because, despite the outfit, this moment had nothing at all to do with the life I’d built. There was no image to uphold, no need to try to prove myself worthy of anything.

It was just me. And my preferences. And a man I was a little worried that I was starting to fall for.

Worried because it had an expiration date.

When he figured out who was out to get me.

Then he would be gone.

And I would be acutely aware of the sudden emptiness of my life.

“Uh oh. Where’d you go?” Brock asked, making my gaze shoot up to him.

Caught, I knew I couldn’t tell him the truth.

So I came up with a lie.

“Sorry. Just had a little hospital flashback,” I told him.  
“The light in here...”

“Yeah,” Brock said, nodding. “I remember.”

“You... remember?” I asked, brows furrowing.

Brock put down a fry he’d just picked up.

“You’re not the only one who had to spend some time on a 5150, sweetheart. Though, in my case, it was warranted.”

“You don’t have to tell me,” I told him, reaching across the table to put my hand over his.

He ignored the out I offered him, though.

“I got booted from the service,” he said, glancing at me. “I can’t talk too much about that time, but let’s just say that I was recruited to do some dark shit. And I did it. Dark shit. For years. Until, inevitably, it fucked things up, up here,” he said, tapping his temple.

“I can’t imagine.”

“Out, with no direction, I floundered. I couldn’t hold down a job. Pretty soon, I stopped trying. I drank, I slept around, I laid around and didn’t do a fucking thing. Eventually, without any therapy to work through the shit going on up in my head, some dark thoughts started creeping in. Then the thoughts, yeah, they turned into actions,” he said.

“Oh, Brock,” I said, giving his hand a squeeze.

“First time was, technically, an accident. Self-medicating gone awry,” he told me, shrugging. “But the almost dying thing meant that I had to take a trip in an ambulance, and have a little vacation where I wore slipper socks and did group therapy.”

“I couldn’t wait to take off those slipper socks,” I said.

“They somehow managed to do nothing to stave off the cold in that place,” he agreed.

“How long were you there?” I asked.

“Just the mandatory hold. I hadn’t intended to try to kill myself, so they let me go, and advised me to seek therapy and medication for my PTSD. Spoiler alert, I didn’t.”

“You weren’t ready yet.”

“No,” he agreed, nodding. “It seems like you can’t force someone to be ready to accept their own mental illness. Sometimes you just have to spiral through it for a while. After I got back, I was careful for a while. But then the bad dreams came back. So did the ways of distracting and numbing myself. Then one night, maybe a year later, I had a real bad day followed by a real bad night. And then another. And another. Then I took some extra meds again, and got myself my own scar,” he said, reaching up to pull down his bowtie to reveal a scar on his neck that I’d overlooked before.

“Oh,” I exhaled, feeling my heart crack a bit for him, for the man he’d been, one without hope, without a way out of his own misery.

“Yeah, so when I woke up that time, I was ready for my hold, ready to milk it for all it was worth. When I got out, I sought out the therapy and the meds they suggested. Then, not long after that, Sawyer had a job offer for me. The rest...” he said, waving outward.

“You’ve never... you know... since then?”

“No. I won’t say there haven’t been low moments. Meds and therapy help, but they aren’t a cure-all. But my lows never got that low again. I’ve really tried to dedicate my life to staying out of the dark.”

“Does it make it difficult when you have to work dark cases? Or cases like mine that remind you of all that stuff?”

“Some cases can be difficult, but I try as much as I can not to take it on personally. But if you mean was it hard for me to be here for you after your hold, then no. I was the only person on the team who could possibly understand what you’ve been through. I think having that knowledge has been an asset.”

“It did help to feel understood,” I agreed, thinking of the talk in his bedroom.

“So, now the question remains...” he said, making me ask.

“What question?”

“Are you an apple pie kind of girl, or a chocolate sundae kind of girl?”

“Is that really a question?” I asked. “If the machine is even working,” I said, glancing back at it.

It was just... such a perfect time that I’d actually forgotten all about the damn envelope until we were nestled in the car again.

“Don’t let it ruin the night,” Brock suggested, wrapping an arm around my shoulders.

But as we walked through the lobby and rode up to my apartment, it was all I could seem to focus on.

“Tweezers, right?” I asked as Brock set it down on the table.

“Yes. And do you have gloves?” he asked.

Supplies gathered, I met him back on the table.

The apartment was painfully silent, so quiet that I could hear the ticking of a clock I’d never noticed before.

Tick-tock, tick-tock.

It matched the beat of my heart, making me suddenly acutely aware of that as well.

I took a long, deep breath as Brock used his gloved finger to hold down the envelope as he ripped the edge with the tip of the tweezer.

I swear the world froze in that moment.

Or, at the very least, my heartbeat and breathing did.

Then Brock was opening the card inside.

To reveal... an invitation?

The laugh that bubbled up and burst out of Brock was a mix of shocked, amused, and relieved.

“What is it?” I asked, feeling so wound up that I couldn’t relax even after seeing the weight fall from Brock’s shoulders.

“An invitation from Bellamy for the two of us to stay at his Italian villa.”

“What?” I asked, voice breathless.

“I’m not shitting you,” Brock said, holding it out to me.

“What? Does he drive around with these things in his car?” I asked, turning it over to see a hand-drawn image of the villa we were discussing.

I won’t lie.

I would love to spend a week there.

I didn’t even remember the last time I took a vacation.

“You mull on that,” Brock said. “I have to take this,” he added, reaching for his phone that must have been vibrating in his pocket.

Taking it out, he moved onto the balcony.

And despite thinking he’d been a bit of a loon for all the worry about it, I couldn’t help but worry about all the ways Brock could be attacked out there, thanks to Lennon’s words.

I didn’t think anything of the call seeing as I wasn’t the only client that his work had, and they likely needed to give each other advice here and there, but when Brock’s head whipped over to look at me, I had a feeling things had just taken a worrying turn.

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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*Brock*

I was going to be in a world of shit when Sawyer found out about me hooking up with Miranda.

Somehow, though, I couldn't bring myself to give a single fuck about that.

I get that I had a reputation for being a little reckless or careless or even selfish and not a team player. But at the end of the day, I cared what Sawyer thought.

But about this one thing, this one woman, yeah, I couldn't bring myself to give a shit if he was going to be pissed.

Because, whether it made much rational sense to me or not, whatever was going on with Miranda was different than anything else I'd ever known.

I couldn't explain it.

Maybe if I was a man who never spent more than a night with a woman, I could blame the constant close proximity, the patterns we'd fallen into, playing house, and falling into traditional roles because of that, confusing ourselves with reality and fantasy.

But the fact of the matter was, I had spent many weeks with many different women. I knew what it was like to fall into patterns, to appear to be a couple.

That said, never before had it led to interest in having those things be true.

I was not a man who'd ever wanted to be in a couple with anyone.

Until Miranda.

There was no denying that was what I wanted, either.

Sure, for a while, I'd been able to say it was just physical, that we needed to get each other out of our systems.

But as time went on, it became more and more apparent that it wasn't just that.

I just... liked her.

I appreciated her outer image, even admired the effortless way she wore that mask. But I liked the woman underneath even more. The one who liked trash TV and honey mustard on her fries and cursed and had a slight accent when she got a little frustrated over things.

I liked her drive and her confidence.

I liked her mind and her heart.

I just... liked her.

The more time I spent with her, the more that was true.

I mean, I swore I would never force myself to endure another night at the Falkes Benefit. But doing so with Miranda had been an entirely different experience.

And not just because of the sex. Though, yeah, that had been top-tier sex.



A part of me was worried about solving her case, about no longer having an excuse to be in her guest room.

Would she send me packing?

And why did the idea of that make me feel like someone had kicked all the air out of me?

I was more relieved than I should have been that the envelope had been an invitation from Bellamy. Not only because it meant that Miranda was safe for the time being, but because it meant that we weren't one step closer to figuring things out... and ending my access to the woman I was starting to have a lot of feelings for.

"Yeah?" I asked, answering Tig as I moved onto the balcony.

"I've been doing some digging," he told me, and I could hear him shuffling paperwork.

"On what?"

"The doorman," he said.

"We cleared the doorman," I reminded him. "And his wife," I added.

We'd been thorough. Especially because the man could potentially have so much access to Miranda, given his position.

But we couldn't find anything.

Frank was a beloved doorman for many years.

And his wife had been a homemaker until their kids were in middle school. At which time she started to work at a small bakery to fill her time.

Nothing at all to raise a red flag about.

"Yes. The wife and the doorman. And when that came up clean, we stopped digging."

"What else is there to dig for?"

"The daughter," Tig said, making me whip around to look through the glass at Miranda.

“Talk to me,” I demanded.

“The daughter, Taylor, worked for Miranda’s company for two years.”

“Worked. Past tense.”

“She was fired,” he said. “It doesn’t say in the notes for what, but I figure you can find out that information.”

“Why didn’t we notice this when we were going over employee records?”

“Because she’d gotten married, then divorced, but she kept her married name.”

“Send me what you have. I’ll ask Miranda what she knows.”

“Will do,” Tig said, ending the call.

“What’s going on?” Miranda asked as soon as I moved back into her place, turning to lock the sliding door before facing her.

“We have a potential lead,” I told her.

“A real lead? Or a suspicious envelope with a sweet invitation in it sort of lead?” she asked, waving toward the card on the table.

“A possible real lead,” I clarified. “About your doorman, actually.”

“I thought that was a dead-end.”

“It was. Until we figured out that his daughter had once worked for you. And she was fired.”

“Oh,” Miranda said, exhaling hard.

“Hey, let’s not, okay?” I said, reaching out to snag her chin, drawing it up until she was forced to face me.

“Let’s not what?” she asked.

“Think about it tonight,” I suggested. “Why ruin a good night with information that will be just as relevant in the morning as it is right now?”

“You know... I don’t hate that logic,” she admitted, giving me a soft smile.

“You know what sounds better than worrying about shit we don’t need to be worrying about?”

“What?” she asked, likely thinking I was about to suggest coffee or dessert.

“A nice soak in a hot tub,” I told her.

“You... you want to take a bath.”

“Not particularly, no. I want you to take a bath. And I want to be as close to you when you’re naked as possible,” I clarified.

I expected her to brush me off.

So I was surprised when she reached out to take my hand... then started to walk down the hallway toward her bedroom, through it, and into the bath.

“Turn on the water,” she demanded as she reached up to unclasp her earrings.

I didn’t even hesitate.

I stopped the tub and ran the water, even poured some of the bombs and salts that were lying around into it, then sat my ass down on the edge of it, watching as she moved toward me, then turned her back on me.

“Zipper,” she demanded, making me reach up to undo it. Did I go ahead and run my finger down her exposed spine? Yes, of course I did.

But then she was walking away from me.

And I got to watch as she slid the dress down, shimmying it over her hips, then down her thighs until it finally puddled around her feet.

Leaving her completely naked save for the band of her strapless bra.

Not for long, though, because her arms curled backward to unfasten the hooks, and soon that was on the ground as well.

It was then that I saw it.

The tattoo she'd alluded to once before.

On her 'lower hip.'

It was her ass.

A cute little flower.

Likely something she got as soon as she was legal to do so, just so she could feel more like the adult she was.

All thoughts of the tattoo flew out of my mind right then, though.

Because she turned to face me in all her glorious nakedness.

"Fuck," I hissed as she walked toward me slowly, letting me take in every curve before she stood before me.

"Beautiful," I told her as my hands moved up her thighs, over her hips, then up the sides of her ribs as I got to my own feet.

But she wasn't going to let me explore any more than that.

She planted a hand on my shoulder, then lifted a leg to climb into the tub.

I swear she got into the water in slow motion.

"Are you joining me?" she asked, snapping me out of my stupor.

I don't think I'd ever fumbled as much removing my own clothing as I did right then, somehow managing to knot my bowtie tighter before getting it untied, struggling with my belt much the way she had hours earlier, and even missed one of my buttons, so when I yanked off my shirt, it popped off and went flying.

I felt like I couldn't even think straight as she sat there, looking up at me with a face flushed from the hot water, her breasts exposed over the top of the water that was still filling the tub.

“Your watch,” she warned me as I went for my boxer briefs, the last thing between me and that water and her.

I pulled that off, placing it next to her earrings on the counter, then yanked off my boxer briefs, watching as her gaze slid down my body to land on my straining cock.

I wasn't imagining the way her eyes went hooded while looking at it, either.

Moving forward, I watched as she scooted forward, a silent invitation to slide in behind her, which was exactly where I wanted to be.

The water was way too fucking hot, but at least the sensation of getting second-degree burns over every inch of my body made it easier to focus as I got into place, my legs wide to the side of the tub.

Reaching out, I pulled her back against my chest, her head resting on my shoulder.

As soon as she was in position, a soft sigh escaped her, like it had been an intolerable wait to get me close again.

Turning her head in a bit, she took a deep breath, breathing me in, as my hands went around her, just holding her around her midsection for a moment or two, just the two of us lost in the casual intimacy of a shared bath.

But things were still too new to be able to ignore the way our bodies seemed to ignite when they were close, when they were touching.

My hands slid up her belly to tease over the swells of her breasts, dragging a soft sigh out of her as her nipples started to pebble up at the whisper-soft brushes of my fingertips.

My thumbs and forefingers found her nipples, rolling them over and over as she started to arch into the sensation. Only then did I squeeze tighter. And tighter.

A little whimper escaped her as her hips writhed subconsciously, needing more.

But I wasn't done exploring.

My hands squeezed her breasts, feeling the weight of them, the way they perfectly filled my hands. Overfilled, to be truthful.

“You feel so good,” I murmured, my nose teasing up the shell of her ear, and I didn’t miss the way her body shivered a bit at the words. “More?” I asked as my fingers slipped back to her nipples.

“Yes.”

My fingers rolled again, but increased pressure, making the blood rush to the tips, making the pleasure tiptoe the line of pain, something that had her fingernails digging into the skin on my knees as I continued to tease her.

“Brock,” she whimpered, getting desperate for more.

My hands slid away from her breasts, moving back down her belly.

Then going between her thighs, teasing up her cleft, teasing around the outside of her clit, but refusing to make direct contact.

I loved the way she squirmed, writhed, the way her breath caught then exhaled in short little bursts, like her body was forgetting how it worked, was too lost in the sensations to figure it out again.

“You’re so sensitive,” I said as my fingers traced that soft spot where the thigh met the side of her sex.

My hands moved inward at the same time, pressing her lips closed, then rubbing along the cleft, creating a friction without any direct contact.

“Brock, please,” she whimpered a few moments later, too far gone to care about begging, about being so damn desperate for me.

Then and only then did my one hand find her clit as my other hand moved down and pressed two fingers inside her tight, wet, pussy, feeling the way her walls clenched around them, knowing they would do the same to my cock when I got inside of her again.

But not yet.

I wanted to drag this out.

I wanted to drive her to that edge over and over but deny her the release each time, until she was begging, until she was damn near crying for release.

Then I was going to slide inside her, feel her close around me, inviting me in deep.

I underestimated her, though.

I figured she would stay passive, would allow me to keep giving her the sweet torment without the blissful relief.

This was Miranda Coulter, though.

A woman at the top of a man's world.

The most self-assured woman I'd ever met.

When she wanted something, she wasn't going to sit around and wait for her.

She straightened suddenly, pulling away, then turning around to face me.

Her hands reached for me, and I was too thrown off to know what was going on, so I just went with it as she pulled me upward onto my knees.

The water teased over my hips.

But my cock was straining upward out of the water.

And then Miranda was reaching out for it, wrapping her hand around my shaft, then leaning down to suck me into her mouth.

I swear I fucking saw white for a moment.

She didn't tease.

She didn't ease her way into it.

She just started to fuck me with her mouth.

Fast, deep, her head twisting as she sucked up and down my cock.

“Fuck, baby,” I growled, gathering her hair to hold it back so I could watch her as she worked me. “You’re so fucking good at that,” I murmured as her hand shifted down, palming my balls as she continued to suck me off.

I’d never wanted to come down someone’s throat as badly as I wanted to come down hers right then.

Someday, I promised myself, I would.

Let her work me as I sat selfishly back, having her take me to that brink, then pulling her tightly against me, so when my release moved through me, it slid right down the back of her throat.

But that was not tonight.

Tonight, I needed to feel her hot, tight walls closing around me again.

With her hair wrapped around my palm, I yanked hard, feeling my cock slip out of her mouth with a small pop.

Pulling, I turned her, bending her over the back of the tub as my free hand fished for the wallet I’d placed next to the tub, finding the condom there.

I released her hair to slide on the protection, then sank my fingers into her hips instead, slipping down for a second to massage her plump ass, before slamming deep inside her, both of us gasping at the sensation.

“Feel how fucking perfect you are for me,” I hissed as I fucked her. Hard. Fast. The sounds of our sex echoing off the tiled walls of the bathroom. That sound was quickly drowned out, though, by her throaty moans as I drove her higher and higher.

My hand slid between her thighs, working her clit as I fucked her harder still.

Her hips slammed back against me with each move, taking me to the hilt, helping drive herself right to that edge.

“Fuck. Are you going to come for me?” I hissed as her walls tightened.



“Yes,” she whimpered.

“Let me feel you let go,” I said. “Yes,” I groaned as the orgasm started, her walls tightening over and over. “Squeeze my cock, baby. That feels so fucking good,” I hissed, fucking her through it, then slamming deep and cursing out my release.

I can’t say for sure, but I swear to fuck I was pretty sure I actually blacked out from the intensity for a moment.

Nothing had ever felt like fucking her felt.

All consuming.

Overwhelming.

And somehow... new.

Sex, I figured, was just sex.

Sometimes great, almost always good.

But this was different.

Deeper.

Laced with feeling, and therefore, meaning.

“Uh oh,” Miranda said, sounding like she was just barely holding back a laugh.

“What?” I asked, shaking the lingering thoughts loose.

“We made a mess,” she said, straightening so her back was to my chest, and gesturing around the bathroom.

Apparently, we’d fucked a little harder than I’d realized.

In fact, we’d fucked half of the damn water out of the tub.

She finally let the laugh loose as she shook her head.

“Well, at least it was worth the hassle of cleaning that up,” she told me, turning her head a bit so she could lean up, a silent invitation to press a kiss to her lips.

And I damn sure wasn’t going to miss an opportunity to do that.

Afterward, I shoed her to bed, and I handled the mess, hanging up the sopping towels in the shower so they could

hopefully dry. If not, I could run them to the laundry room before I got my day started.

“You sleeping?” I asked as I moved into her room, finding the TV already on, as it always was when she slept, and her curled up under the blankets.

“Not yet,” she said, voice soft, making it clear she was close to that.

“Want some company?” I asked, still not sure where things stood with us. Were we just fucking? Was she open to something other than that?

She didn’t respond to that, just pulled up the blankets as a silent invitation in.

I wasted no time climbing in, sliding an arm under her, and pulling her up onto my chest. She was initially tense for a moment before she melted into me.

“So, what’s tomorrow’s schedule?” I asked, sifting my hand through her hair, the silky strands sliding easily.

“I have a lunch with Cam and his boyfriend,” she said. “I mean, if you want to—“

“It’s okay. Enjoy your time with your friends. I am going to track down the doorman’s daughter and talk to her.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah. We can do dinner, yeah?” I asked.

“That’s true. But I think I’ve had enough going out,” she said.

“Ordering in, then. Eating in bed. Possibly naked.”

“That sounds like a mess waiting to happen.”

“Don’t worry, if you spill anything on you, I will lick it off,” I promised, getting a little, girlish giggle out of her.

It wasn’t the first night I’d spent with a woman.

But it was damn sure the happiest one.

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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*Brock*

Some part of me felt like the doorman's daughter thing was a bit of a dead-end. But as much as I did believe in gut instincts, I also believed in doing your due diligence. That was the job, wasn't it? To investigate. Even if the leads didn't feel like they were going to actually, well, *lead* anywhere.

The paperwork we had said that Maude Edwardson has worked at Miranda's company for about eight months, but that the employment had ended a few months ago.

There weren't, though, any notes about poor behavior.

Miranda herself didn't remember Maude. Which wasn't surprising. She employed a bunch of people. I doubted she knew every single person's name, let alone why they left the company.

Cam might have more of a clue since had a firm finger on the pulse of the entire company. But I wasn't about to bother

him on his day off. He already worked too damn hard. And she was safe with him and me for the day, so it wasn't like putting it off was going to put her in harm's way.

"What?" Miranda asked as she came out of the bathroom after getting ready for lunch.

How could I explain to her that it seemed like a small transformation had taken place for her? She was always a very formal, business-style dresser. Even at home. She liked her outfits that could easily go from a board room to out to dinner without requiring she change.

And she almost never had her hair down, always preferring that sort of stern-looking bun.

But for lunch? Her hair was down, dancing around her shoulders as she moved.

And she'd opted for a soft, feminine dress.

It was autumnal with its deep green, blue, maroon, and gold vertical stripes with a bit of a plunging neckline, but a long hem where her high-heeled brown boots could be seen.

She just looked... casual and at ease.

"You look beautiful," I told her since I couldn't easily put all that other shit into words.

"Thanks," she said, her smile sweet. "It's probably a little cold for a dress," she said. "Especially since I didn't put leggings or stockings on."

"Oh, really?" I asked, tossing aside my paperwork to climb off the bed and make my way toward her.

"What are you doing?" she asked, but the wicked little smile that was tugging at her lips suggested she knew what the look in my eyes was saying to her.

"I think you should start wearing a lot more skirts," I told her as I got closer.

"Really?" she asked, feigning innocence. "Why is that?"

"You know, I don't think it will make much sense if I tell you. I think I should probably show you," I told her.

“That might be a good idea. I am a bit of a hands-on learner,” she told me.

“I can help with that,” I agreed, reaching down to bunch up her skirt, watching as her face went from amused to turned on as my hand slid between her thighs, pressing against the material of her panties.

My fingers slipped inside the material, working over her clit until she was writhing and whimpering for more.

“Brock, please,” she begged as her hand rubbed against my cock through my thin pants.

“Here,” I demanded, reaching for her hand, and placing it between her thighs, replacing my own. “Work your pussy for me,” I demanded, then took a step back to watch before moving out of the room and heading back into mine to fish more condoms out of my bag.

With the way things were going with her, I was going to need to stash the damn things all over her place.

When I came back in the room, I found her with her head back against the wall, tipped up to the ceiling, her eyes closed as she rubbed her clit.

My cock was straining watching her work herself.

I took advantage of her distraction, pulling down my pants, and putting on the protection before moving forward to press my hand over hers as my lips went to her neck, not wanting to fuck up the lipstick she’d already applied.

“Brock, please,” she whimpered as I pulled her panties down her legs.

“Please what?” I asked, my teeth nipping her earlobe.

“Please fuck me,” she said, making my cock twitch at her words.

Reaching down, I grabbed her leg, pulling it wide, and pinning it to the wall before I slammed inside of her.

Hard.

Deep.

“God, yes,” she moaned, her arms wrapping around me as her hips rocked. “You feel so good,” she whimpered, hips moving faster and faster.

I had to agree.

No one, in fact, had ever felt as right as she did.

“Brock, move,” she demanded, her hands going down my back to sink into my ass, trying to spur me on.

I went ahead and did just that.

Hard.

Deep.

Driving her up and through an orgasm in just a few short moments.

But she wasn't done with me.

Not yet.

She dropped down her leg, and pushed me backward toward the bed, then climbed on top of me.

Shifting up, she reached down, grabbing my cock, and holding me still as she slid down onto me with a low, deep moan.

“Fuck,” I hissed as she leaned back, placing her hands on my legs, a position that would let my cock glide against her G-spot as she rode me.

And, fuck, if it wasn't hot when a woman knew what she needed and wanted, and immediately went for it.

Her movements were fast but short, and it wasn't long before she was whimpering again, getting closer and closer.

My hands went to her hips, just holding on as I started to thrust my legs up into her, matching her movements, but increasing the sensations.

It wasn't long before her pussy was getting almost painfully tight around my cock, making it harder to move.

“Come, baby,” I demanded as my hand shifted from her hip to toy with her clit. “Come for me. Let me feel you

squeeze my cock,” I said, thrusting a little faster as her breathing started to catch. “Fuck, yes, just like that,” I growled as the orgasm slammed through her, making her walls clench my cock over and over, taking me with her as she came.

She fell forward after, burying her face in my neck as she struggled to even out her breathing.

“Thank you for the lesson,” she said, tone a little saucy as she pressed a kiss to my throat before sitting back to look down at me.

“Anytime you need a lesson from me, you just let me know,” I said, my hands sliding up and down her thighs. “But you’re going to be late now,” I reminded her.

“Shit,” she said, eyes going wide. She gave me a guilty look before sliding off of my lap, then off of the bed.

Grabbing her panties, she disappeared into her bathroom to freshen up.

I went ahead and took off to the guest bath to get dressed, meeting her back in the kitchen a few minutes later.

“You don’t need to walk me out,” she insisted as I slipped on shoes.

“Of course I’m walking you out,” I told her, pressing a hand into her lower back as we headed out the door.

I was going to head out too, figuring it was best to get going early if I was going to try to track down the woman.

“Call me before you head home. I want to meet you outside,” I told her as we spotted her car a few spots down the street.

“Will do. We might do some shopping after lunch, so don’t be waiting around. We haven’t bought shoes in too long.”

I knew better than to mention the new shoes she’d gotten for the benefit.

“Okay. Just let me know,” I said, pressing a kiss to her temple, then watching her walk away and disappear into her waiting car.

My gaze slid to the doorman, Frank, who was trying to direct some lost tourists to some destination.

I felt a little guilty about tracking down his daughter, but had to remind myself of the scar on Miranda's arm, the intention behind that.

She was relatively easy to track down, since she was still living in the second-floor walkup she'd been at when she'd been working for Miranda.

Maude, judging by her file, was twenty-seven.

She looked younger in person with her long, golden-blond hair, heart-shaped face with pouty lips, and big blue eyes.

I seemed to catch her on errand day, and I followed behind her as she bopped from one store to the next.

Yes, bopped was the right way to describe it.

The woman seemed to almost bounce on her feet as she move around. Light, carefree.

Not, in my experience, the kind of person who tries to kill another human being.

But, hell, who the fuck knew.

Most serial killers were described as nice, normal people. Good neighbors. Steady employees.

Maybe she was hiding a shitton of crazy under all that upbeat, behind all those smiles she gave to the employees of the stores as well as random strangers on the streets.

She even stopped to drop change to a couple of houseless people along the way.

It was all just... very normal.

The bank. Pharmacy. Groceries. Then a quick stop into a coffee shop to get some fancy iced drink to have on her walk back home.

I looked away just for a minute, wanting to check the time.

And I lost her somehow.



“Shit,” I hissed, rushing forward, wondering if she’d hopped into a cab, or had gone down into the subway or something.

At least, that was what my mind was on until she suddenly stepped out of an alley and in front of me, her chin up, her gaze fierce.

“Why the fuck are you following me?” she hissed.

Gone was the soft and sweet and bouncy, a girl who seemed more like a transplant than a native.

But this woman in front of me—her bags gone, her coffee out of her hand, and in their place, an expandable baton and an eye-gouger—with her shoulders drawn back and her stance wide, ready to beat the piss out of me? Yeah, this was a native New Yorker.

“I need to talk to you about Miranda Coulter,” I said, figuring direct was the best idea. If for no other reason than to see her reaction to her former boss’s name.

“Miranda?” she asked, face scrunching up. “Why?”

“You worked for her.”

“Yeah, for like... less than a year,” she said, shaking her head. “Who are you?” she asked.

“I’m getting my wallet,” I told her, showing her my hands before and after I reached into my pocket.

I handed her a business card.

“Private investigator? Are you, like, investigating the company or something?”

“Should I be?”

“I mean, the paper waste at that place was criminal,” she said, smirking, drawing my attention over toward her reusable bags and the reusable double-walled mug she’d brought to the coffee place. “But no. It was on the up-and-up as far as I could tell. So you’re not investigating it?”

“No.”

“What are you investigating then?”

“Right now? You,” I told her truthfully.

“Me?” she asked, actually letting out a little laugh at the idea.

“Were you fired from your job?”

“No. I mean... no,” she said, shaking her head at herself. “Look, here’s the thing. That job was... intense. It was like running a marathon every single day of your life. And, sure, that’s totally fine if you are a trained athlete. But me? I’m allergic to too much exertion,” she told me. “It was too fast-paced an environment for me. I wasn’t cutting it. I knew it. My direct manager knew it. We both kind of just... agreed it was time for me to get laid off. You know... so I could collect while I looked for something else,” she said.

“No hard feelings then?”

“No. I mean... I’m a little hurt that no one I met there ever reached out after I was gone. But that was kind of the atmosphere there. Everyone was in it together, and outsiders just didn’t get it.”

“You don’t hate Miranda?”

“Miranda? No. That’s crazy. I barely ever met the woman,” she said, shrugging. “But from what I could tell, she was a good boss. We had a great health plan. I miss that. But I’m much better suited for the job I have now.”

Nothing, absolutely nothing, she was saying rang false to me.

“Wait... did someone hurt Miranda?” she asked, pressing a hand to her heart.

“They’re... trying to,” I said, not wanting to give her any sort of personal information on Miranda.

“Oh my God. That’s horrible. I mean, even if I had left on bad terms, I would never. She’s a total idol. Not many women get to that level she has without marrying into affluence or spending a lot more decades building up. She’s so impressive.

But, I guess, that level of success must make her a target to jealous people.”

“Will you talk to me about your time there?” I asked. “As someone who was in the trenches, I mean,” I explained.

“Sure,” she said, stooping to grab her coffee after tucking her weapons away, then leaning against the building. “Shoot.”

“What was the staff like? Did they trash Miranda?”

“I mean... no. I really only ever remember people grumbling about their immediate management, not the boss-boss. I guess they might have made some unkind comments about how much she worked and thinking she needed to get laid. I’m sorry. I know. That’s crude. But those were the kinds of things they might say if they saw her on their floor or something.”

“So, while you were there, you didn’t notice anyone who seemed to genuinely dislike her?”

“I really can’t think of, wait,” she said, pursing her lips. “I mean... I guess he didn’t really work there. He was more there on a contract job.”

He.

That sounded like a much more likely culprit.

Female stalkers and attackers on female targets were relatively rare. Male ones on female targets, though, it was so common place it was sad.

“Who?” I asked.

“Ritchie,” she said, shrugging. And the way she let that name slide off of her tongue seemed to imply that she thought I should have known who he was.

“Ritchie,” I repeated.

“Yeah, he had a contract to do some advertising. But it was... an epic failure,” she said, grimacing. “He’d been really calm when they’d called him in to tell him. But then as he was walking away, he was ranting and raving.”

“They?”

“Sorry?” she asked, taking a sip of her drink.

“You said when *they* called him in to tell him about it not working out. Who do you mean?”

“Well, Miranda and Cam, obviously,” she said, shrugging.

“Cam always has a part in the firing process?” I asked, not having gotten that vibe from him.

“No, of course not. I mean, Miranda usually doesn’t even do the firing, actually. But because it was Ritchie...”

“Who is Ritchie?” I asked, confused. I didn’t remember that name anywhere in any of the paperwork on current and past employees.

“Ritchie,” she said, looking at me like I’d lost my mind. “Cam’s boyfriend.”

Cam’s boyfriend?

No.

No fucking way.

But also... maybe.

I mean, if anyone knew Miranda in and out, it was Cam. And if Cam talked about Miranda at home, that meant that Ritchie would also be privy to all those personal details.

Ritchie was also a person Miranda would open her door for if he showed up.

“Maude, thank you, but I have to go,” I said, turning and running back toward my car as I reached for my phone, immediately dialing Cam.

“What? Did Miranda’s phone die again?” he asked, sounding distracted as he answered.

“What? Cam, put Miranda on right now.”

“I can’t do that since I’m not with her.”

“What do you mean you’re not with her? Did you drop her off at home already? She was supposed to call me.”

“Brock, what are you talking about? I didn’t see Miranda today.”

“She had a lunch date with you and your boyfriend,” I told him, feeling my stomach tense.

“Ah, no. I mean... no. That would not be happening.”

“Because Miranda fired him and he’s holding a grudge?” I asked, throwing myself into my car.

“How did you...”

“I was following a lead who told me. When you should have been the fucking one to do it. Why would Miranda think you two had a date if you didn’t? I saw her texting you.”

“I haven’t talked to her since before the benefit last night.”

“Cam,” I said, voice serious as I broke into the traffic to the sound of horns objecting to me cutting them off. “Check your texts,” I demanded, my tone hard.

“Okay. I mean I always have my phone on m...”

“What? What is it?”

“See you at Bonnie’s,” he said. “I didn’t... I didn’t send this, Brock,” he said, tone bleak. Because he was putting the pieces together too.

“Call your boyfriend,” I demanded. “And keep calling. Get him to answer. I’m heading back toward the apartment building,” I said, hanging up.

“Lennon,” I hissed to myself, then dialed him up.

“Brock, what can I do for you?”

“Where is she?” I growled at him, and his tone immediately changed.

“Miss Coulter?” he clarified, but I could already hear him typing as I ran a red.

“Yeah. Where is Miranda?”

“Fuck,” he hissed, sounding upset.

“What?”

“Well, according to two of her devices, she is at home.”

Fuck.

Goddamn it.

She hadn't had the necklace on.

And she didn't have pants to clip that other one on either.

“What about the keychain?” I asked, knowing she had her keys on her. She always did.

“It's showing up about four blocks from her apartment building. Steady, not moving,” he told me.

“Okay. Stay on the line. I need you to tell me if I'm getting closer.”

“I'm right here,” Lennon agreed, all business.

It felt like it took ten times longer to get back to her building as it had taken to leave it, despite breaking every traffic law in the book. Including double parking as I got to the building, flying out and ignoring Frank's objections as I ran down the street.

“Yep, that's the street. Take the right,” he demanded. “Now a left. A parking lot, it looks like. Do you see her?”

“No,” I said, stomach tightening at what I did see parked there.

Her town car.

With the back door open.

I ran forward, looking inside, seeing no one.

But her purse was sitting on the seat, contents spilled and spread over the chair and ground.

Including the keychain.

“Fuck fuck fuck,” I yelled, slamming a fist on the side panel, a movement that was hard, sure, but shouldn't have made the whole back end wiggle.

There was someone in the trunk.

“Am I calling the police?” Lennon asked, tone tight. Because, despite his formal way of addressing them, Lennon cared about all of his clients. He took any harm that came to them personally.

“Give me one minute,” I said, going into the driver’s seat to pop the trunk, then rushing back toward it to pull it open.

And there he was.

Mitchell.

The driver.

Bound and gagged.

“Sounds like someone trying to scream through a gag,” Lennon said, clearly knowing that sound a little too well.

“Where is she?” I asked as I pulled the gag out of the man’s mouth.

“I don’t know!” Mitchell said, trying to get himself out of the trunk, leaving me to take pity and undo his wrists. “I was tossed in here. Then I felt the car idling. Then moving. I heard Miranda talking. Then I heard her scream. Then... silence,” he said, eyes looking glassy, like he was ready to get teared up about it.

“Was it Ritchie?” I asked, watching as his eyes widened.

“Yes!”

“Fuck,” I growled.

“Who is Ritchie?” Lennon asked.

“Miranda’s assistant’s boyfriend,” I told Lennon. “Do a search for—“

“I’m already on it,” Lennon said. “We are going to find her,” he assured me. And himself.

Yes.

We had to find her.

Because I was pretty sure I was falling in love with her...

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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*Miranda*

I was just so... happy.

God, that word wasn't good enough.

New shoes made me happy.

Good coffee made me happy.

Brock made me... enraptured. Euphoric.

Blissful.

Those were the only words that even came close to how I was feeling as I woke up in his arms, as I shared coffee in bed with him, even as I moved away from him to get dressed.

Blissful.

It was the most at peace I'd ever felt.

I hadn't checked my work email.

I hadn't even thought about work.



I was just... in the moment.

With him.

I was actually kind of bummed that I'd agreed to a lunch date with Cam and Ritchie actually. Which made me immediately feel guilty since I really loved Cam. And, well, he loved Ritchie.

I didn't want to make it sound like I hated Ritchie. I didn't. I loved him for making Cam happy. I just... I never understood the appeal, I guess.

Cam was driven, intelligent, cultured, and put-together.

Ritchie was the antithesis to everything Cam was.

He was a little lazy, dull, slovenly, and really only interested in his TV shows and manga.

I just always figured that they were a real-life example of how opposites do, indeed, attract.

They'd been together forever. And I figured that maybe Cam had changed over time to become the man I knew him to be, someone who was no longer as compatible with his old flame, but he loved him, so he was going to make it work.

Then, well, then the whole advertising shitstorm happened.

I had always been very careful never to mix my work and business life. I didn't hire friends.

But Ritchie had all but cornered me one time and talked for almost an hour about how he could do something great for my company.

I normally didn't feel a lot of guilt for turning people down. When you ran a company as big as mine, you had to crush dreams almost on the daily.

But this wasn't just anyone.

This was Cam's somebody.

I'd actually agreed before even discussing it with Cam, who'd looked absolutely horrified when I'd explained the situation to him.

At the time, I thought maybe the horror had been because his boyfriend had been so inappropriate with his boss.

It wasn't long, though, until I realized the true reason for it.

Because Ritchie didn't know a damn thing about advertising or marketing. It had been a horrendously underwhelming ad that would have actively hurt the brand instead of brought positive attention to it.

But I hadn't been the one to pull the plug on it. I'd felt trapped in that situation, not wanting to hurt Cam by hurting Ritchie, not wanting to strain our relationship.

It had been Cam who'd walked into my office, sat down across from my desk, and let out a hard exhale.

"We can't run Ritchie's campaign," he'd declared. "It would be PR suicide. We have to fire him."

I'd never been more uncomfortable with a business decision as I had been that next day as we both waited for Ritchie to make his way into the office, excitedly spouting off about new—even more awful—ideas he had.

I couldn't even clearly remember what I'd said to him since I'd been trying so hard to be gentle. But I was pretty sure it was about needing to go in a more traditional direction, about the brand being a little too young still to take big, risky moves with the advertising, that we were not as advanced as he was yet.

That kind of thing.

He'd seemed to take it well.

And Cam had never made a comment to suggest otherwise.

So I'd never brought it up again. I figured it was a buried issue. But I also did notice that there were fewer outings with the three of us.

In fact, now that I thought about it, there hadn't been any, save for a corporate dinner party that he'd attended.

So I was excited to see that we were making some progress toward things going back to normal. Especially since he and Cam had to be thinking about rings and vows soon. I had to be on good terms with my assistant's husband.

Lunch was going to be good.

Though I did find it mildly odd that it hadn't been brunch, which was much more my and Cam's style. But who was I to judge? Maybe Ritchie didn't like breakfast foods and endless mimosas.

As I walked away from Brock, though, I couldn't shake this almost desperate urge to turn around, to run back into his arms, demand he take me back upstairs, then not get out of bed with him for weeks. Months. Until the end of time.

But that urge was exactly why I had to keep walking, why I couldn't even let myself look back.

Sure, things were going well. We were clearly enjoying each other. That didn't mean, though, that Brock was having the same sort of feelings that I was.

He'd admitted, more than once, to having enjoyed the company of many a woman. In casual ways, but more than one-night stands.

Maybe, to him, this was just another of his casual flings. Meanwhile I couldn't help but think about how much more pleasant my next formal dinner party would be if he was there at my side. If, maybe, I could persuade him to rush into the forbidden second floor, find a little bathroom, and fuck away the night in it.

Or waking up with him every morning, drinking coffee in bed while we discussed our days ahead.

Or sneaking off to an Italian villa for a week or two.

The thing was, objectively, even if that was the wish for both of us, it didn't work in practical application.

His life was in Navesink Bank.

Mine was in the city.

Sure, yes, it wasn't that far, but it was over an hour out of our days in both directions when we wanted to spend some time together.

And some cynical, jaded part of me knew that over time, it would get tedious, then old, until it eventually became untenable. Then fell apart.

It probably wasn't great that my mind went to the end when we were just limbering up at the starting line.

But it was a defense mechanism. If I could look at all the potential ways things could get really ugly and painful, it made it possible for me to save myself from that. Or, at least, that was what I'd found so far in my life.

I hadn't had much opportunity to try to apply that skill to relationships, seeing as I just... hadn't had one in a long time.

Still, yeah, it seemed smart to hold myself back from being too needy, too clingy, too over the top with my feelings.

As a whole, I was someone who liked to lead, who enjoyed setting the pace and allowing others to fall behind. Just this once, though, I was going to follow Brock's lead.

I guess it came down to not wanting to make a fool of myself. I didn't want to get vulnerable, have him shoot me down, and need to live with that embarrassment.

It was better to take it slow, to feel him out.

So it was good that I was taking a little time to myself, away from him, before we spent the night together.

It didn't even occur to me that it was weird that Mitchell hadn't come out to open my door. I guess I figured maybe he thought that Brock was with me, so he would get my door.

It wasn't a big deal.

I could get my own door.

And my mind was on the menu at the restaurant that we were heading to, since I hated the pressure of having the server waiting to take your order, and not being ready.

So I didn't immediately look up toward the front.

“Traffic is awful today,” I murmured as I took a long sip of the coffee that was waiting for me. Mitchell didn’t always grab me coffee, but when he was getting himself one, he always grabbed me one. “It might be smart to just leave the car parked, and take off on foot if you need to go run some errands or get food,” I added, drinking more.

It wasn’t until then, when I still didn’t get a response from Mitchell, that I looked up.

And like some damn horror movie, the doors clicked lock as I realized that the person in the driver’s seat wasn’t Mitchell at all.

Mitchell, after all, was a little on the shorter side with wide shoulders and reddish-brown hair.

Whoever this was, was tall and narrower with kind of shaggy dirty blond hair.

It didn’t click, not for a long moment, that I knew the driver. All I could focus on was the panic building in my system as my hand went to the door, and found that the child locks were on, and I couldn’t escape. And that I was likely trapped in a moving car with my stalker and would-be murderer.

“Let me out of this car,” I shrieked, slapping my hand on the window as if anyone could hear me, let alone see me with the dark tint on the windows. “You don’t have to do this!” I added, my heart hammering in my chest as a cold sweat broke out across my whole body.

“No, Miranda, I don’t,” a voice said. “But I want to.”

I was so consumed with my terror that I didn’t realize immediately that I recognized that voice, that I’d heard it many times over the past few years.

When it finally did click, though, my gaze shot to the rearview mirror, where I found his eyes looking back at me, crinkled at the edges like he was smiling, like he was taking pleasure in my fear.

“Ritchie.” His name hissed out of me as my mind raced with this new information.

Ritchie?

In what world could it be my assistant and best friend's boyfriend who wanted me dead?

I mean, yes, I had fired him. But that was a while ago. Had he been festering this whole time? Over a small advertising job? When Cam was making the kind of money he was making, the kind of money that meant that Ritchie didn't even need to work anymore. And, as a verified slacker, that should have been exactly what he wanted. To sit around and do nothing, but enjoy the fruits of someone else's labor.

I guess I'd underestimated him and his anger about the loss of the job.

In my defense, though, who the hell would ever expect someone to try to murder them over a job?

"Surprise!" he said, voice full of that wicked glee like that guy in *The Shining*.

"Ritchie, open the door. You don't want to do this," I told him as I tried not to move my arm too much as I reached into my bag, trying to find my phone.

I couldn't say if he saw the movement, or if someone simply cut him off in traffic, but Ritchie slammed on the brake, making the contents of my bag spill all over the seat and floor.

I was about to reach for my phone, fuck the consequences, when it slid up under the driver's seat.

Damnit.

I felt the hysteria rise up, needing to tamp it back down. I couldn't lose my cool. I had to stay focused. I could still get myself out of this.

I needed a weapon.

I had... perfume. Which would work in his eyes if he looked at me. There was a pen. Another eye-type weapon. Then... my keys.

My keys.

With the tracking device.

There was a slight sense of relief at seeing that, at knowing that, eventually, Brock was going to know where I was.

The problem was... I wanted to be alive when he found me.

So I had to try to get myself free.

Without a proper weapon, I did the only thing I could do.

I flew forward and wrapped my hands around his throat, pressing as hard as I could, since I had no idea where I was supposed to press to make him pass out.

Undeterred, Ritchie turned the car into a lot, and slammed on the brake.

Surely, that was what made my vision spin.

It didn't quite explain why my head was starting to feel fuzzy, though. Why my heart, that should have been hammering with my anxiety and fear, seemed to be going slower and slower.

What was going on?

"How was that coffee, Miranda?" Ritchie asked as he pulled out of my suddenly weak hold.

I couldn't stop it. My gaze flew back toward the coffee in the holder. The coffee I'd thought Mitchell had brought me, so I'd gone ahead and had several big sips.

*He'd put something in my drink?*

Had that been how he was able to get me lax enough to slit my wrist the last time? Had I opened the door because I'd known him, invited him in? Or had I left with him, gotten coffee with him? Perhaps under the guise of making amends?

I could have fallen for that.

Then, once he had me drugged, he could have easily overpowered me.

It would explain the alley too, right? If I'd left willingly with him. That would be a convenient place to shove me, to

slice into me, then leave me to die.

A choked whimper escaped me as another wave of dizziness coursed through me, making nausea swirl through my belly and up my throat.

“You’re starting to feel it, aren’t you?” Ritchie asked, smiling as he put the car into park and turned to look back at me. “Don’t worry. I didn’t give you too much. I want you to come back to me in a little while. Once we get where we’re going,” he added, shooting me a smirk as I tried to move across the seat toward the door again, but my body wasn’t moving like it should have. I was getting slow, clumsy, and, God, sleepy.

No.

I couldn’t sleep.

But there seemed to be no fighting it as the moments wore on.

The last thought in my mind, though, as my face lolled into the backseat, was that Brock was going to come for me.

I just hoped he wasn’t too late.

Consciousness came to me slowly, seeming only to touch on one sense at a time.

I heard first, some whooshing sound, like a loud fan, maybe. Behind that, the sounds of traffic, some sort of thumping rock music, and my own breathing. Which, arguably, seemed louder than everything else.

My eyes refused to open, my lips heavy and stubborn, but I felt cool air wash over me, kicking up my hair, making a



shiver course through my slow, lazy body.

The fan, maybe?

Oscillating.

Then there was the tightness around my upper chest and around my hips.

Bindings, maybe.

Scent was next.

The problem was, I couldn't place the scents I smelled. Something I knew, sure, but hadn't been exposed to in years. And just under that smell was something strong, something that made my nose feel like it was burning.

Where the hell was I?

How long had I been unconscious?

Why were my eyes still refusing to open, and my body so weighted and numb?

My brain was still fuzzy, my thoughts feeling like they were treading through molasses to fully form, to start making any kind of sense.

After what felt like an hour of trying to convince my eyelids to open, they finally started to, and the light in the room at least gave me a small clue at how long I'd been unconscious.

It was late fall.

The days were shorter.

So it was sometime between noon and four-thirty or five. That wasn't exactly a narrow window, but it was something.

Had I been gone long enough for Brock to worry?

Had he tracked down the car yet? Was he on his way to save me?

"If you think that new investigator of yours is going to find you," Ritchie said, making my head loll over to find him sitting in a papasan chair near a wall of windows that were painted in different colors, making the world outside

impossible to see, “you’re mistaken. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but I left the car in that lot,” he said, making my heart feel constricted in my chest.

Because in that car was literally the only thing that made it possible for Brock to find me.

I mean, if I hadn’t thought to suspect Ritchie, what were the chances that Brock would?

“Cmml,” I mumbled, brows pinching at the slurred sound of my voice. “Cmmltll,” I tried again.

*Cam will tell him* was what I was trying to say. *Cam will tell him that we didn’t have a lunch date.*

When Brock got home and didn’t see me there, when he couldn’t get a hold of me via my phone, he would absolutely reach out to Cam, since he believed I was with him.

Cam would clear things up.

Brock would find some way to circle back to Ritchie. I didn’t doubt him for a moment.

The problem was if he would be able to locate me quickly enough. Before Ritchie did something crazy.

I understood my role here.

What woman hadn’t heard about how she was supposed to handle a situation where she was taken?

You were supposed to try to humanize yourself to them while you also tried to sympathize with them and their motivations for wanting to hurt you.

But my damn voice wasn’t working.

How was I supposed to try to distract him and drag all of this out if my tongue was fat and useless in my mouth?

Maybe if I focused more, my brain would fire right, and then my lips and tongue and voice box would work in unison.

Okay.

Focus.

The room.

It was slightly unfinished with its brick walls and cement floors. But they weren't the typical gray. Or, rather, they weren't only the typical gray. They were splattered in shades of pink, yellow, green, and blue.

Paint?

Yes, paint.

That was the smell that I'd noticed earlier.

The other scent, the strong, headache-inducing one, that was paint thinner for the brushes.

My gaze lifted, finding easel and large canvases all scattered around.

They were just... splotches. Abstract.

They weren't my style, so I immediately thought they weren't great.

But had they been done by Ritchie?

Was this his... studio?

I did vaguely remember Cam mentioning trying to encourage Ritchie's hobbies since he still hadn't "found his path in life" like Cam thought he personally had.

Was this how he'd encouraged it? By renting him out a studio to tinker in?

Even partially-finished studio space in the city had to be expensive. Which was a testament to how much Cam cared for his boyfriend.

I couldn't help it.

My heart cracked a bit for Cam, for this truth he was going to need to face, whether I lived or not. How he would blame himself. Especially because I was taking the heat for a decision he had ultimately made. A dream he had crushed.

If not for Cam insisting on putting an end to it, I probably would have gone through with the process, but only put the bare minimum amount of money into, so no one ever really

saw the ad. Just to appease a man who meant a lot to the man who meant a lot to me.

“Cam,” I murmured, not really intending to, but at least it came out clearly.

“What about him?” Ritchie asked, twirling something around in his hand, and it took me all of a second to realize what it was.

A knife.

Could it be the same one that had cut me?

Had he held onto it like a souvenir?

How was he going to use it on me this time?

Surely, he wasn't just going to quickly slit my wrist again. He wouldn't have bothered to drug and bind me if that was the case.

Did that speak to his sanity slipping?

Was that better or worse for me when it came to stalling for time?

“I...I... is he okay?”

“Why wouldn't he be?” Ritchie asked, shrugging it off.

I wasn't really conscious of thinking the thoughts before they were spilling out of my lips.

“Because he was the one to tell me to fire you.”

There was no taking it back once it was out.

The best I could do was try to use it to my advantage.

Maybe it would confuse him, split his rage.

It was possible I just put Cam in danger too. But if Ritchie left to try to get Cam and bring him back as well, it gave me a chance to get up and get away, get help for myself and for Cam.

“Liar,” he hissed, his eyes igniting.

“I wasn't happy with the ad,” I admitted. “But I was going to use it. Cam told me that we couldn't run it. He said it would

hurt the brand,” I told him. There was no false note in my voice because I was telling the truth.

Ritchie glared at me for a long moment.

“No. He would never.”

“He did. Why do you think he was there when I fired you? I don’t usually even do the firing at the company.”

“No... he wouldn’t do that to me,” he said, shaking his head.

It felt wrong to do this, to poke at someone’s clear mental health issues. But this was life and death for me.

“How soon after getting fired did you get this fancy studio?” I asked, looking around. “Looks like a guilt present to me.”

Ritchie’s own gaze moved around, and I could see the truth in his gaze, could see the timeline lining up.

“He said he believed in my art,” Ritchie said, and I had to fight against feeling bad for the sadness in his voice.

I couldn’t empathize with him.

That would make it harder to do whatever I needed to do to get out of this situation.

“Does he have any of it in your apartment?” I asked, knowing that he didn’t. Because abstract wasn’t Cam’s style. I’d been to many an art opening with Cam as my date. I knew what he liked. This was not it. He would do everything he could not to have it hanging in the apartment.

“Yes,” Ritchie said, chin jerking up.

“Really? Where?” I asked, having been to their apartment many times. “In the master bathroom? Where no one else would have to see it?” I added, really driving the knife in.

For a second, devastation crossed Ritchie’s eyes as he realized that Cam had been lying to make him feel better. Instead of actually loving his art.

To me, it was actually kind of sweet of Cam. To try to show support as best he could even though it wasn't his cup of tea.

To Ritchie, though, it seemed like the ultimate betrayal.

The devastation was quickly replaced with anger, and I braced myself for the brunt of it.

It wasn't long before it came...

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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*Brock*

By the time I made it back to her apartment building, Cam was stumbling out of a cab.

“Brock,” he said, rushing forward.

“She wasn’t in her car. Mitchell was tied up in the trunk.”

“Oh, my God,” Cam said, eyes going huge.

“Where would he take her? Your place?”

“No. I mean... no. There’s no privacy there. I can go check, but I don’t. Oh...” he said as something dawned on him.

“Oh, what?” I snapped.

“The studio. I rent him out a studio for his art,” Cam told me.

“Get in the car,” I said, waving out toward where mine was still double-parked and creating a traffic jam, making people

lay on the horns and scream at us out their windows as we finally climbed in.

“Brock, I... I had no idea,” Cam said as he frantically dialed his boyfriend again.

“I’m sure you didn’t,” I said, cutting off the traffic that was already pissed at me. It didn’t matter if they were late to lunch or a meeting. My fucking woman could be getting beaten right that moment. Or worse.

“He’s... he’s been off,” Cam admitted after giving me an address, clearly needing to talk. And I’d been around a lot of clients who got chatty when they were upset or nervous, so I couldn’t blame him for needing to talk it out when he realized his boyfriend was a fucking psychopath. “Since we fired him, he’s been weird. I thought, you know, that the studio would help. Let him see that I was supporting him. I never... he never talked about being angry,” Cam insisted.

“No one is blaming you, Cam. You’re not responsible for his actions.”

“If he... if he...”

“He won’t,” I insisted, because my mind refused to believe otherwise.

“I know she’s my boss,” Cam said, blinking hard. “But I love her.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, nodding. “Me too.”

I felt his gaze on my profile, but he said nothing.

“There,” he told me a few minutes later, pointing toward a building with glass windows painted in a bunch of colors. “That’s it,” he said as I swung the car into a spot. Right in front of a stop sign.

“Call the police,” I demanded as I wrenched my door open. “Call the cops, because I might kill him otherwise,” I insisted, rushing down the street and toward the building.

I hadn’t taken a life in a long, long while. I’d been dedicating my life to the lighter things, the happier things. I didn’t want to invite that darkness back in.



But there was no denying that it was darkness that was moving through me as I ran down the street toward the building, hearing the thrumming of music through the walls.

But just under that, was that... whimpering?

It was blackout dark right then as I lifted my leg and kicked in the door.

There he was.

All I saw was a bloody knife and him towering over Miranda.

The rest?

Fuck.

All it was inside of me was rage and long-buried skills, the types of skills that made me really, really fucking good at hurting people.

“Brock! Brock!” a voice yelled as hands grabbed at me from behind, making me swat them back. “You have to stop!” the voice tried again, and I was vaguely aware of it belonging to Cam.

Cam, who was watching me beat the ever-loving shit out of his boyfriend.

“Brock, you can’t be with Miranda if you’re in prison,” he reasoned.

That seemed to break through the rage.

Miranda.

Miranda whimpering.

Miranda’s blood on the knife.

Turning back, the last of the rage fell away, making me see clearly again for the first time in what felt like ages.

I was vaguely aware of the sirens, then another voice joining us in the room.

“Okay. We have two minutes before this place is getting swarmed,” Lennon said, calm, collected. “If you have a

weapon on you, you need to give it to me now,” he said, speaking to me as I made my way over toward Miranda.

“I don’t,” I said, seeing her bloodied, bruised face. “Hey, sweetheart,” I said, trying to keep my voice calm. “If you needed some extra attention, all you needed to do was ask. You didn’t have to get yourself all kidnapped,” I added, reaching for the gag at the back of her head, and carefully undoing it.

But then the cops were rushing in, making all of us separate as they tried to assess the situation.

I was pulled over with Lennon after they figured out we had been working a case, questioning us about the details as the EMTs rushed in to look over Miranda and the fuckhead who’d put his hands on her.

They blocked her from my view as they worked on her.

My gaze slid to Cam instead, standing off with another officer, looking shell-shocked and heartbroken at the same time.

He, a lot like Miranda, was always so put together, so in control of himself and his image. It was startling to see him look so wrecked, so broken.

It wasn’t until he rushed away from the cop and toward Miranda that I glanced back as well.

“No, you have to go,” Cam insisted, making me move away from the cop we were speaking to as well.

“I don’t want to go,” Miranda shot back.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“She doesn’t want to go to the hospital,” Cam explained.

“You have to go to the hospital,” I told her, seeing her swollen eye, the cuts on her arms and face. “You have to get looked over.”

Her gaze went to me, watery, scared, and in pain.

“Just a couple hours, baby,” I assured her. “Just to get checked out. Then you can come home. Cam and I will meet

you there. Right?" I asked, looking at Cam.

"As soon as we are done talking to the police," Cam assured her, reaching out to place a hand on her arm. "You have to go," he insisted again, voice a little firmer.

"Okay," she agreed, pulling herself together a bit. Cam seemed to have that impact on her.

"We will be right behind you," I assured her, leaning in to press a kiss to her temple as they came in with the stretcher.

Ritchie was already gone by the time we turned around to watch them roll Miranda out.

"You okay?" I asked, looking over at Cam.

"No," he answered honestly. But then he was reaching for his phone. "Where are Miranda's things? She's going to need her wallet with her medical cards and her phone and charger," he said, slipping into assistant-mode. Whether that was to assuage any unnecessary guilt he felt, or because it helped him think past his confusion and grief, I had no idea. But I knew a thing or two about coping mechanisms, so I rattled off the information before moving back to finish the questioning with the cops.

Luckily enough for me, Lennon had a long history with one of the cops that was there, so the usual need to have me down to the precinct for questioning was removed, thanks to the active case we were both working on, Mitchell being gagged and stuffed in the trunk, and the clear evidence that Ritchie had been brutalizing Miranda when I'd come in.

"Go see to your girl," Lennon insisted, giving my shoulder a squeeze. "I've got the rest of this."

I didn't need more than that, I turned and ran.

Somehow, though, Cam managed to beat me to the damn hospital, even after stopping to grab her stuff.

"What's the word?"

"They are doing some scans right now. We can go in after," he told me, clicking around on his phone. "I'm clearing

her schedule for this coming week,” he explained. “She needs some time off to process this.”

“Hey, Cam?” I called, waiting until he looked at me.

“Yeah?”

“You do too,” I reminded him.

“I know,” he agreed, and for a second, the facade fell. “We are going to go down to essential work only for the next week,” he said, still tapping away at his phone.

“Cam, the fuck are you doing?” I asked after having updated Sawyer and Tig on the developments, only to find him still working.

“Setting up care packages, wound supplies, and food to be delivered to Miranda’s place later tonight,” he explained.

“That’s nice, Cam, but I think you need to stop working for a minute.”

“If I stop working, all this shit is going to hit me. And I need it not to hit me right now.”

“I get that,” I agreed. “I was really good at that for years. But you gotta make time for it to hit you. Or it’s going to eat you up, man.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I have three therapy sessions set up for myself this week alone,” he told me, flashing his phone at me to show me his schedule.

“Good. That’s good. This is a lot.”

“We will get through it together,” he said, tone sure.

It was only a couple of minutes after that when the doctor came out to speak to us, inviting us back into Miranda’s room where she was in the bed looking pale and exhausted.

She had stitches on her arm and butterfly strips on the worst cut on her face.

The bruises had time to really settle in, looking stark against her skin in the unflattering light.

“I’m okay,” she insisted as Cam and I both stood there for a second.

“Hey, that’s my line,” I said, forcing the light, easy smile to spread across my face, knowing that was what she needed from me right then. “You’re okay,” I told her, moving up the side of her bed. “Did they give you anything yet?”

“They can’t,” she told me. “Not yet.”

“Why not?” I asked, brows furrowing.

“Because of the drugs.”

“The... drugs? What drugs?”

“Rit...” she started, then glanced toward Cam, and started again. “*He* put something in my drink. That was how he got me to the studio. I don’t even remember getting out of my car. Oh, God. Mitchell,” she said, eyes going round.

“Mitchell is okay,” I assured her, putting my hand over hers. “He was in the trunk. He’s shaken up, but fine.”

“Good. Okay,” she said, nodding, trying to figure out what was next on her list to worry about.

Then her gaze was lifting, going toward Cam.

And that, it seemed, was what finally got through to him.

“Randi, I’m so sorry,” he said, tears welling up and spilling over.

“Hey,” she said, glassy-eyed, as she held her hand out toward him. “Come here,” she demanded.

I gave her other hand a squeeze before slipping away, giving the two of them a much-needed private moment.

“How is she?” Lennon asked when I walked back into the waiting room.

“Waiting for the scan results, but she seems to be okay. Physically, at least.”

“The bastard who did this to her is in surgery. You broke his jaw.”

“Good.”

“And his nose. His eye socket...”

“He had it coming.”

“I’m not denying that,” Lennon agreed. “I am just keeping you updated. There’s also a couple of reporters outside.”

“Reporters? Really?”

“Miss Coulter has been popular in the news circles, being so successful at such a young age. They heard she’s been attacked by her assistant’s boyfriend. They are going to want a statement. I don’t do statements.”

“Neither do I.” Or the rest of my team.

“What is it?” Cam’s voice asked, coming up behind us, making me turn to find him standing there, red-eyed, but pulled together again.

“Reporters,” I told him. “They want a statement. Neither Lennon’s nor my team do that sort of shit.”

“Do you know someone who does?” he asked, already reaching for his phone to start to look around himself.

“There is a firm in Navesink Bank that does crisis management. They could be here within an hour and a half. I don’t think Miranda will be released before that.”

“I’m on it,” Cam said, nodding.

“You can drop my name. They know me.”

“Got it,” he said, giving me a nod. “She wants to see you,” he added as he headed toward the door.

I was already on my way.

“Hey, baby,” I said, moving in to find her still wiping her eyes. “You two okay?”

“Yeah. I think we both just needed a good cry over it.”

“You know him better than anyone, is he going to be okay?”

“I’ll see to it. He sees one of the best therapists in the city. And I invited him to stay in the guest room for a while. I don’t

think it's good for him to go home to that apartment with Ritchie's things all around."

"He's staying in my room?" I asked, hoping the vulnerability didn't slip into my words too much. I wasn't sure I succeeded, though. Because some part of me was terrified that she was going to dismiss me now that the job was done. And after witnessing the darkness take over me back in that studio.

Miranda patted the side of her bed as she shifted her legs out of the way.

And, fuck, did this feel like the set up for a letdown.

But I walked over anyway.

I sat down.

"I don't want you in the guest room anymore," she said as I pretended not to tense up. "I want you in my room," she went on. "With me," she finished.

"Yeah?" I asked, giving her a tentative smile.

"I mean, I know the job is technically done, and maybe you want to get back to your own life, but if—"

"I would like you to be a part of my life," I cut her off, watching as her gaze lifted, eyes hopeful.

"I know there are... geographical complications," she said.

"It's an hour away, sweetheart, not a world. And I am a known slacker who only takes jobs when he really needs to. I can be in the city as much as I want."

"Cam cleared my schedule for a week."

"I heard that."

"I was thinking that, maybe after a couple of days, we could... spend some time at your house," she suggested.

"I would fucking love that," I said, watching her eyes go soft at my immediate agreement. "Besides, it sounds like there is a bit of a media storm going on," I told her, watching as her eyes widened. "It might be nice to get out of the city for a bit.

And, if you are away, Cam and Mitchell can get some much-needed time off as well.”

“I can’t imagine what Cam is going through,” she said, shaking her head. “Realizing you’ve been sleeping next to a monster. What?” she asked, making me realize my eyes must have slid away at the thoughts that were moving through my head.

About being a bit of a monster myself.

About her seeing that part of me.

“Brock,” she called, her hand landing on mine when I didn’t answer her. “Why do you look so upset?”

To that, I sighed. “I just... I didn’t ever want you to see me get dark like that.”

“You were defending me,” she said, brows drawing together. “I think anyone would get a little dark when they are defending someone who is... special to them. I mean, not that I’m, you know, special to you. I just—“

“Sweetheart,” I cut her off, saving her from even another second more of uncertainty, insecurity. “You are absolutely very special to me.”

I wasn’t quite ready to say the words I was really feeling. And I didn’t think she wanted to hear them while in a hospital bed after having been attacked.

But there would be plenty of time for that.

“Okay, Miss Coulter,” a voice said a while later, after the doctor came in and told her that her scans were okay, saying they would get the discharge papers ready. “Let’s get your statement prepared,” he said as he moved in.

“Who are you?” she asked, brows furrowing.

“Quinton Baird,” I told her. “He’s a fixer. Crisis manager,” I clarified. “I wasn’t expecting the boss himself,” I said, reaching out to shake his hand.

“With a client as big as Miranda Coulter, you get me. Until we can find someone who specializes in this sort of shit,” he



clarified.

So then he pulled up a seat and they worked out a statement that he would deliver for her to the press as we snuck out through a side door.

“What?” I asked as I felt Miranda’s gaze on my profile as we rode in the back of a cab with Cam in the front, all three of us on our way back to her penthouse.

“Your town is... intriguing,” she said. “Private investigators and ‘fixers’ and the mafia who owns restaurants...”

“Baby, that’s just the tip of the iceberg,” I told her. “But there is plenty of time to fill you in on that later.”

“Over Chinese,” Cam called back to us. “Which should be arriving at the building in under thirty minutes.”

I wondered then if Miranda had ever considered the possibility of having Cam take a more direct role in her company.

He already did so much. So much, in fact, that he managed to step into her shoes when she was away for a few days at the psych ward.

She’d probably been so wrapped up in having him be there to help her manage her life, that she never really stopped to think that he was more than capable of handling her work, so that she could live and manage her own life.

Maybe that was a suggestion I could make to her while we spent some time at my house.

We all walked up to the elevator in silence, ignoring the worried look of the doorman, Frank, whose daughter probably filled him in on the drama. I would find some time to sneak away to talk to him later. But my main focus at the moment was getting Miranda settled.

My arm went around her, and her hand went out to grab Cam’s, all of us just offering silent support after one hell of a day.

“How about you two curl up on the couch and I’ll grab the wine and get the food when it comes?” I suggested. “After you get changed,” I added, looking at Miranda’s bloody clothes. “Cam, I can lend you some lounge around clothes too.”

But then the elevator doors were sliding open, and there we were in the upper hallway. That had a shitton of packages there.

“I ordered some clothes. For both of us,” Cam said, giving Miranda a smile. “Comfy stuff for couch curling and Chinese eating,” he explained. “You too,” he added, giving me a tired-looking, sad smile.

Everyone filed in, grabbing bags as we went, then Cam went through them, dividing them up.

The two of them shuffled off for a wardrobe change, but more so than that, a couple of private moments alone.

So I organized some of the shit on the dining room table, since I figured we were eating on the couch, then got the wine, went down for the food, and set out the plates.

When no one had emerged yet, I made my way down the hall and into Miranda’s room to find her sitting off the side of the bed.

Not crying, but lost in her own head.

Moving forward, I dropped down in front of her, placing my hands on her thighs.

“You okay?” I asked, watching as she looked up at me.

“I’m hungry. And tired. And sad for Cam,” she told me. “I feel like I should be more freaked out.”

“Sometimes it takes a little bit to process shit. So don’t be surprised if after some sleep, or just a couple days pass, you start freaking out about it. That’s normal. But we can definitely do something about the food thing right now. And I poured the wine. I know you were a little worried about the drugs, but you should be on the downslide of the effects now, so one drink will be fine.”

“I need it,” she agreed, standing with me when I got to my feet.

Cam had bought her some sort of super soft, fuzzy off-white pant and sweatshirt set that must have felt like wearing a cloud.

Hearing us, Cam came out in a similar outfit, but in a light blue.

“I look like an outsider,” I said as I looked between them.

“Your’s is dark green and it’s in the bag,” Cam said, trying to give me a smile, but it didn’t reach his red, swollen eyes.

With that, I got changed, we got food, and we all sat on the couch together, eating, watching a movie, and saying nothing.

Eventually, we all fell asleep there as well.

I woke up with Miranda sprawled all over me.

And I knew in that moment that I wanted to wake up every fucking morning for the rest of my life just like that...

## *Epilogue*

### *Miranda - 1 week*

It felt wrong to be as happy as I was after such a traumatic event.

I mean, I was upset about the whole ordeal. I'd woken up in a cold sweat the second night, but Brock was right there, running his hands over me, quietly whispering to me that I was okay, that I was safe, that he was there for me.

After going pretty much my entire life not having a man to be there for me, I had to admit that it felt good.

Cam was with us every day as well, only leaving to go to therapy, or to grab coffee or lunch, claiming he needed something to do, but I was pretty sure some part of him was still feeling guilty about the whole situation, so he wanted to keep doing for me.

“What do you think about me getting Cam a new apartment?” I asked Brock as we sat in the kitchen drinking our coffee. “He doesn't seem to want to go back to his place. And who could blame him? I was thinking that I could... get him a different place, so he could start over fresh. Then when he is ready, he can go and get his old stuff. What?” I asked, looking over at him.

“When I was talking to Frank, someone was moving out of the building,” he said. “I mean, I’m sure you weren’t thinking about giving him an apartment here.”

“That would actually be perfect,” I objected. Was it expensive? Sure. But the more I thought about things, about the future, about what I wanted it to look like, the more I had to admit to myself that I finally needed to take some time away from work, stop making my entire life about it.

But to step away, I had to let someone else take more control.

Who better than Cam for that? The only other person who knew the business as inside and out as I did. Hell, maybe even more so since he had the inside track with the other employees there.

And if I was going to give Cam more control over the company, so I could have more freedom, it made sense for him to be close. It also made sense to have him close if I was going to be spending some time with Brock in Navesink Bank. He could keep an eye on my apartment. Take in my dry cleaning and mail and packages. Make sure the maid was getting paid. That sort of thing.

It was really the smartest option.

“That’s actually a great idea,” I told him.

“You’re going to be making Cam your VP or whatever position is below yours, aren’t you?”

“I, ah, I was thinking that it might be nice to, you know, get a chance to enjoy my life a little bit.”

“Maybe you’ll enjoy some of that life in Navesink Bank?” he asked.

“I hear they have some of the best Italian in the tri-state area,” I said, smiling a bit at him.

“And the best coffee in the country,” he agreed. “I think it’s about time you get some time to live your life, sweetheart. And I think Cam will be more than capable of taking care of the business while you do that.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “He might even be better,” I said. “So... do you think Bellamy was being serious about the villa?” I asked.

“If there is anything I know about Bellamy, it’s that he is rarely serious about anything. But he is also very generous, so he will absolutely let us stay there if we want. I hear he also recently got an over-water villa in the Maldives. There’s a flat in Paris. An estate in Mexico.”

“We could do a world tour of Bellamy’s residences,” I said, smiling.

“If we toss in Fenway’s places, we could practically hit every country,” he agreed.

“I still can’t believe you know Fenway too. It’s such a small world.” I said, shaking my head.

“So that’s what you want to do?” Brock asked. “Travel?”

“I’ve never really gotten a chance to,” I admitted. “All this progress in my career. All this money. And all I really ever do is work and hang out around the city.”

“It sounds like it is time to enjoy what your hard work has provided you with.”

“It sounds like you’ve done a lot of traveling.”

“I have,” he agreed. “I can definitely show you the world,” he said, smirking at the cheesy *Aladdin* reference which I figured he made after learning that it had been my favorite *Disney* movie when I was growing up.

“That sounds perfect,” I said, smiling. “I mean, I know you have a life, but—“

“Honey, this is where being my company’s slacker comes in handy. They’re used to me taking off for a couple of weeks or months at a time. They will hardly know I’m missing.”

“I’m sure that’s not true. I mean, who else is going to sleep with the delivery woman’s girlfriends if not you?” I teased.

“Baby, I’m pretty sure that my sleeping with anyone but you days are behind me.”

“Only pretty sure?” I asked, not wanting to seem too needy, like I needed some grand commitment from him so soon. But also wanting to clarify that we were both on the same page, that we were past sleeping with other people, that we were heading somewhere serious.

“I never thought I would say this,” he said, putting down his coffee mug to reach for my hips and pull me closer. “But I don’t see myself ever wanting to even look at another woman again.”

“Yeah?” I asked, giving him a small smile.

“I mean, if you got to look at you all the time, would you want to look at anyone else?” he asked, giving me that boyish smirk that shouldn’t have been as appealing as it was.

“I kinda like looking at you too,” I told him, leaning into his body more.

“I mean... who could blame you?” he asked as his hands drifted up, then down my back, dipping dangerously low, but not quite low enough.

He’d been a bit of a saint since the attack.

The first night, we’d all crashed on the couch together.

The next, Cam and I passed out in my bed after a long talk, so he’d crashed on the couch again.

After that, I wasn’t sure what kept him from touching me. I guess because he was worried about my stitches. Or being pushy after a traumatic situation.

But I was over waiting.

And Cam was out.

My hands slid up his stomach, then chest, before wrapping around his neck as I went up on my tiptoes to seal my lips over his.

He let me take the lead at first.

But as his cock hardened against me, his lips took over, getting harder, more demanding.

Then his hands were on my ass, squeezing, pulling me more firmly against his hardness.

My hands were impatient, moving down over his chest again, then his stomach, feeling the muscles twitch under my touch.

A low rumbling sound moved through him as my hand slid under the waistband of his pants, my hand closing around him, and stroking.

He only let me touch him for a few seconds before he was grabbing me, yanking my silk pajama shorts and panties down my legs, then dropping to his knees in front of me.

Reaching for my leg, he pulled it up over his shoulder, so his tongue could trace up my cleft, could tease over my clit.

One of my hands slapped down on the counter behind him, steadying myself, and the other grabbed the back of his head, holding him to me, even though he showed no signs of wanting to pull away as he continued to work me, driving me up, pushing me toward that edge, then shoving me over it, leaving me to crash down into the orgasm that had my legs shaking and my moans ricocheting off the walls and cabinets in the kitchen. He was up on his feet before the waves stopped crashing, grabbing me, turning me, and pressing me forward over the kitchen island.

I was vaguely aware of one of the drawers opening and closing, but couldn't make any sense of that until I heard the crinkle of the condom foil.

But before I could even wrap my head around the fact that he was hiding condoms in my *kitchen* cabinets, though, I could feel his cock gliding up and down my cleft, then pressing against, and surging inside of me.

All rational thoughts flew out of my head at the feel of him spreading me again, buried deep inside of me.

Brock's hands slid under the hem of my shirt, moving up my belly to close over my breasts, his fingers working my nipples into hardened buds as his cock stayed stubbornly still inside of me.



Impatient, my hips started to rock back into him.

“Fuck, you’re killing me, baby,” he hissed, his fingers pinching, sending a jolt of pain that had no right to be as sexy as it was.

“Fuck me, Brock,” I demanded.

Whatever control he’d been holding onto before snapped right then.

His hand sank into my hips, using them to slam me back into him as he thrust forward.

Hard.

Deep.

Driving me back up quickly, effortlessly.

Then sending me crashing through an orgasm so intense I swear I damn near blacked out for a second.

“Did you... pull a condom out of the linen napkin drawer?” I asked when I was able to think clearly again.

“Yeah I did,” he said, moving away from me, but not before giving my ass a slap. “There’s also some in your coffee table. The linen cabinet in the bathroom. In one of the sideboards. Oh, and stashed in a few of your decorative vases. Had to be prepared,” he told me, moving fully away, prompting me to grab my panties and pants, and settle them back into place.

“When did you do that?” I asked, wondering if it was before or after the attack.

“While you and Cam were doing your pedicures,” he told me. “Had to be prepared for when you were ready again.”

“I think I will pretty much always be ready for you,” I told him, shrugging it off.

“I know the feeling. Luckily, we got nothing but time now...”

*Brock - 3 months*

“That’s enough of that,” I said, reaching across the table to take the phone out of her hands.

It wasn’t like she was responding to some important work email. She was probably still trying to micromanage from afar. Despite the fact that Cam had taken over the leadership role in a way that suggested he’d been waiting for his chance to shine for a long time.

The part of me that had spent a lot of fucking time working on my own mental health was a bit concerned that he was masking his grief and anger in work. The other part of me, though, knew that Cam was seeing a therapist. And if she was okay with how he was coping, then that was really all that mattered.

As for Miranda, well, it happened a lot like I suggested to her it might. She spent the first week or so mostly okay. More worried about Cam than what had happened to her. But as the second week rolled in, there started to be nightmares. And I would catch her staring out the window, lost in her own thoughts, a freaked out look in her eyes.

But I got her talking about it. And she'd agreed that she would go see a professional if she felt like she was struggling.

Until then, we were just trying to enjoy life and each other.

"Hey, I might as well get something accomplished while we wait," she insisted, but didn't try to take her phone back.

In her defense, we'd been waiting at the independent airport for what felt like ages.

"Remind me again why we agreed to take Bellamy's plane instead of just... going commercial?" she asked. "Or chartering my own private plane?" she said, sighing.

"You were there on the call," I reminded her. "The man talks you in circles until you're too dizzy to think straight."

"I know," she said, shaking her head. "I felt drunk after that call."

When she finally decided she was comfortable enough to leave the country for a while, she'd really had her heart set on Bellamy's villa. I don't know if it was because of the strange night of tension associated with the invitation, or because she'd been in the early stages of the relationship, envisioning us in that villa, or what, but no other one would do.

So when we'd called to ask him to use it, we somehow got roped into using his jet. And then his yacht when we wanted to go to Greece.

It was a whole thing.

One we were instantly regretting.

Since we were on hour four of waiting for the damn jet.

Which would put us in Italy, at earliest, at nine or ten at night. Hardly what we wanted. But we were stuck with this arrangement now.

"Oh, finally," Miranda said as we heard a plane in the distance.

Not too much later, the jet had landed, and we were moving out on the tarmac toward it as the stairs lowered.

Then there was Bellamy.

And... Fenway?

“Sorry, my friends,” Bellamy said, whacking Fenway hard on the back of his shoulder. “I had to pick up Fenway here from the middle of another international incident,” he said, smirking. “He needs to head to Navesink Bank to see some other friends of ours.”

We all knew which friend that would be.

Quinton Baird.

And his poor team who must have been getting sick of cleaning up his messes.

“Is it my fault that wives of powerful men want to bed me?” Fenway asked, not looking the least bit contrite.

“Perhaps making sure the wives in question aren’t married to crime lords might be a wise choice moving forward,” Bellamy suggested.

“Or, you know, bedding unmarried women,” Miranda said, rolling her eyes.

“Miranda!” Fenway said, immediately brightening. “I thought it was you. You exquisite creature,” he said, rushing forward like they were the oldest of friends. “Look at you. Positively glowing. Even after your own incident. It’s so nice to see you outside of a work or benefit setting. What are you doing with this schmuck?” he asked, throwing a smirk in my direction. “You know what, never mind. He is the perfect catch. And I’m not just saying that because he has been competition for all the beautiful women for years now. We should do lunch.”

“No,” Bellamy said, rolling his eyes. Bellamy was, in his own way, pretty carefree and frivolous. You know, save for the dark shit he did that no one knew about. But when he was put next to Fenway Arlington, he was the serious one. “We need to get you to Quin before someone puts a bullet in your skull.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Fenway said, but his tone had gone a shade darker. “No one would want to mess up this perfect

face. Alas, he's right," he said, giving Miranda a kiss on the cheek. "I hear you two are taking a tour of Italy and Greece. If you happen to want to use any of my homes in Europe, I am just a call away."

With that, he was walking toward the car that had pulled up for them, right on time.

"Sorry about the delay. It really was life or death," Bellamy said, exhaling hard. It wouldn't have been clear to Miranda, but since I knew Bellamy from our black ops days, I got the look in his eye then. The one that said he hadn't just grabbed Fenway off of a tarmac in some foreign country, that he'd needed to do some extraction work to get him out. "Unfortunately, the pilot is going to need to fuel up and change out at the next airport, but it should only tack on another hour or so to your flight. I put you up at a hotel in Italy for tonight. That way you can see the villa in the morning."

He'd thought of everything.

And as we enjoyed his hospitality that night before heading to the villa the next morning, all the inconvenience had long since been forgiven.

"I think we need a villa," Miranda declared on our second day there, standing on the balcony that overlooked the olive orchard behind Bellamy's house while I was still sprawled in bed, enjoying the view of her in nothing but my shirt.

We.

She thought *we* needed a villa.

I liked the fact that, more and more often, she was using that word when she spoke of the future.

What countries *we* were going to visit.

Which benefits *we* were going to go to.

Sure, all of our time together implied that she was serious about us as a couple, but it was something else to hear her talk about it.

It was easy to just... be with someone.

It was harder to envision a future with them.

Or, at least, that was what I thought.

The future had always been somewhat... blurry before. I figured there would be constants. Like work, like my house, like travel, and my friends.

But I couldn't see anything else clearly.

Until Miranda.

Now, when I looked toward the future, all I saw was her.

Standing in my kitchen making coffee, in her penthouse in her work clothes that I would strip off of her, lounging in the hammock in my backyard, in another sexy gown at a benefit.

And, more than that, I saw myself right there in every one of those situations.

Because I finally found her.

The person who looked at me like Riya and Sawyer looked at each other. And like Kenzi and Tig did. And Clarke and Barrett.

The person I looked at the same way.

With pure, undiluted love and admiration.

Because there was no way around it.

I fucking adored her.

I loved her in a way I hadn't been sure I was capable of.

"Brock?"

"Hm?" I asked, looking up, realizing I'd been lost in my own thoughts.

"What do you think?"

"About?"

"Getting a villa."

"We would have close proximity to a lot of Italian food," I said, nodding.

“I mean, the restaurants probably aren’t owned by the *mob* or anything,” she said with a smirk as she walked back toward the bed. “But I’m sure we could find a place we like.”

“The coffee, though,” I said, shaking my head.

“I mean, obviously, we will have to import from Navesink Bank,” she said, and I had to have a laugh at that. Potentially living part-time in a country known for its coffee, and importing some in from some little town in New Jersey.

“Obviously,” I agreed. “So what happens if you love Greece and the Maldives and South America as much as you love it here?”

“Well, I guess we start collecting real estate like Bellamy and Fenway,” she said. “Maybe we can even cause an international scandal all our own someday.”

“Well, we would know who to call to fix it.”

“Cam,” she said with a big smile.

“You know what? You’re probably right,” I agreed, folding up, grabbing her, and pulling her back into the bed with me.

*Miranda - 8 months*

“Was that the Chine—“ I started as I walked toward the living room in the penthouse apartment we still split some of our time in, though we did tend to spend more time in Navesink Bank these days.

In Brock’s small, but perfect, house. In close proximity to amazing coffee. And his friends that had become something like an extended family to both of us.

“Actually...”

“Hey! Look who’s not crazy anymore!” a female voice said as my gaze landed on Alice standing just inside the door to the hallway. “I mean, well, for the moment,” she said, giving me a familiar self-deprecating smile.

She looked good, too.

A little less thin, so she didn’t seem so breakable.

“Alice!” I said, beaming at her.

I’d lost hope in seeing her again several months ago. I figured, if I was going to see her, it would have been relatively soon after I’d been released.

“You know, you could have told me that you weren’t, you know,” she said, miming slicing her throat. Appropriate, Alice was not. But I found I liked that she just said whatever was rolling around in her head.

“Would you have believed me?” I shot back.

“I mean, probably not. I once spent an entire evening talking to a chick who swore she was Johnny Cash. So, yeah, you know, sometimes you take what people say with a grain of salt. So... you were never crazy! Good for you.”



“Brock,” I said, gesturing toward him. “This is Alice. Alice, Brock. She made my stay at the psych ward tolerable. Alice, this is my former private investigator turned, ah, boyfriend,” I said, wincing a little at that word. It just sounded so wrong for what he meant to me.

“As a psych ward alum, I have to thank you for being that old timer who helped out the new kid. I had someone do that for me once upon a time too. It meant a lot,” Brock said.

“See, now, you just have a type!” Alice said, pointing to herself and then Brock. “Kind of crazy, but also super hot. Great combination in my humble opinion. So what kind of crazy are you, Smoky McHotpants? Judging by that posture... PTSD? Mix in a little major depression? Maybe some anxiety and panic?”

“You’re good,” he said, nodding.

“I know. If I could keep my own ass on the straight-and-narrow for long enough, I would probably make a great head shrinker. Oh, is that the Chinese you were talking about?” she asked, hearing a buzz on the intercom. “I’ll go grab it,” she said, rushing out to do just that before either of us could object.

“She’s a lot, but she’s amazing,” I told him because he looked a little bit shell-shocked.

“No, yeah, I can see that. I was just thinking...”

“Yeah?”

“Maybe you should consider having her on the staff of your nonprofit,” he said.

I might not have actually needed to go to the mental health facility when I’d been forced there. But there were many people, like Alice, like Brock, who benefited from them.

That said, what I believed the world really needed was more help *before* things got to the institutional level. More community help. Places for people to turn when they were struggling where they could receive professional help without breaking the bank.

That was what I wanted to focus the second part of my life to.

I'd done the 'success' thing.

That was never going to go away.

Now I wanted to do the 'finding meaning' thing instead.

"That is actually a great idea," I said, nodding.

No, I didn't know Alice that well.

And, yes, her own mental health could mean she might be unavailable at times, but having someone like her, a 'veteran' of the current mental healthcare world, would be a really valuable asset.

"Hey, there's only two spring rolls," Alice said, coming back in. "I'm calling dibs on one. What?" she asked, looking between us.

"I have a proposition for you," I said.

Her gaze moved between the two of us.

"I mean, you're both smoking hot, don't get me wrong. But you're gonna have to catch me on my slutty manic stage to be your third. And, as much as I'm sure it would be sweaty-good fun, I'm trying not to go manic right now."

Oh, Alice was going to be fun to have on my team for the nonprofit.

*Brock - 11 months*

What do you get as a birthday present for a woman who could literally buy herself anything in the world that she wanted?

Well, you had to get inventive.

“She’s going to know what it is if they don’t hush,” Cam said, eyeing the box I’d put in his lap after picking him up from the train.

I’d been mildly worried about that since I’d picked them up from the breeder. It was why I was going to do a quick re-packaging, if you will, before we went into the house for the party.

I had a padded basket in the back that I hoped would keep them cozier and quieter.

“She’s going to love them,” Cam told me, picking up on my anxiety.

“I hope so,” I agreed.

I mean, this was a woman who had entire collection of coffee mugs with ducks on them.

Real life little ducklings sounded like a safe bet.

Something she would never get for herself, but would absolutely adore.

“Where’s that boyfriend of yours?” I asked.

“He’s driving down,” Cam told me, a tentative smile tugging at his lips. “We are going to head down to Cape May for the weekend.”

Cam had just recently started dating again after dedicating his entire life to work and therapy for the past almost year.

But he just so happened to hit it off with another head of a tech company a few weeks ago, and was finally giving in to everyone's gentle encouragement to put himself out there again.

"That will be nice. Next trip, you can go to the villa," I suggested.

"We're not there yet," Cam insisted. "But maybe someday," he added with a wistful little smile. "Alright. Take these. I will go distract the birthday girl while you wrap them."

That was just what I did, arranging the three little ducklings with their fat bodies, tiny wings, and big beaks into a basket with a promise of some mealworm treats later if they were quiet for their unboxing.

"You didn't have to get me anything," Miranda insisted a few minutes later, shaking her head as I walked in. "You've already given me everything I could have wanted," she added in a lower voice as I got closer.

And, fuck, to hear that from the woman you loved? Yeah, that was a good feeling.

"You have to hurry up and open it."

"What? Is it going to expire?" she asked, shaking her head at me, put lifting the lid of the basket.

Then, earning their mealworms, they suddenly broke into little choruses of quacks that had Miranda squealing, then crying, as she picked them up to love on them.

"Don't worry," Tig said, nodding. "Your man has already arranged to have us dig them a pond in the backyard."

"And their Aunt Alice bought them the coolest little custom coop ever, that will be delivered in a few weeks since they're too little to go outside yet anyway."

"Looks like you missed part of your gift there, Randi," Cam said, on cue, making her hand two of the ducks to an eager Alice as she looked back in the basket.

Distracted for just long enough for me to get down on my knee in front of her and pull out the ring box.

“I don’t see... oh,” she said, smile huge as she looked from me, to the ring, back to me again. “You don’t even have to ask,” she said, holding the duck to her chest with one hand, his little webbed feet dangling down, and thrusting her left hand toward me. “In this and every other lifetime, yes.”

“Hear that?” Sawyer asked, after I got the ring on, and a solid kiss from my woman, making everyone quiet down and listen. “That is the sound of every rich divorcee crying now that he is officially off the market.”

To that, Miranda let out a little laugh.

“They might have gotten a piece of you,” she said, handing me a duck. “But I get all of you.”

And so she did.

*Miranda - 10 years*

We didn't rush anything.

There were no timelines for us, no pressing reason to get to any particular part of life.

So we went ahead and enjoyed six solid years together. Just us, our ducks, our eventual dogs, our friends that were like family, and our love.

We ate great food.

We saw beautiful countries.

We went to benefits.

We built an amazing nonprofit that was helping people through their mental health struggles every single day.

Then, eventually, it was time.

To, as Brock put it, 'do the parent thing.'

But we'd both agreed that small kids weren't our style.

First, we were both older. And pretty fond of sleeping through the night.

Second, we had a lot to offer some teens in the system who might otherwise age out with no families of their own.

We'd talked extensively with Riya, who had been adopted, and who had adopted as a parent as well.

We'd discussed it with Alice, who had, after she stabled herself out, gone after that therapy degree she used to joke about, and she'd worked with us to understand the innate trauma that came with adoption, helping us to understand what we would be dealing with when we were ready.

Then, we were.

Ready.

And after a home study, some classes, and meeting with a caseworker to go over files, we were paired up with a set of siblings—fourteen and twelve—who we'd welcomed into our home(s), into our life.

They'd been with us just under a year, and we already couldn't imagine a life without them.

"Hey," Brock said, coming into the kitchen where I was putting together a snack board.

"What's that look for?" I asked, knowing mischief when I saw it.

"Fenway just called. He's at some concert or something that the kids like. And he's going to do a video call with the band. You know what that means?"

"That we really shouldn't let our children associate with a man who keeps a team of crisis managers on the payroll?"

"He's gotten in less trouble since he's settled down," Brock insisted. "But no."

"What does it mean then?" I asked.

"It means we have a solid twenty-five to thirty minutes of alone time," he told me, already grabbing my wrist and pulling me toward the stairs. "I bet, if we use your little buzzy friend, we can get you to come three or four times," he added, smirking at me, his eyes bright with the upcoming challenge.

It was four.

And we stumbled back down the stairs, disheveled, flushed, to find the kids just wrapping up their call with Fenway.

None the wiser to what had just happened.

"Hey, tell your mom that she missed a button," Fenway called.

"Fucking Fenway," Brock hissed, closing his eyes as he sighed.

It was our daughter, the eldest, who looked over, her face screwing up.

"Gross," she decided, then turned her attention back to choosing a movie on the TV.

“Hey, did you hear that? We grossed out the kids,” Brock says. “I’ve never felt more like a parent.”

“Not even when you tell your awful dad jokes that makes them roll their eyes?” I shot back, fixing my buttons.

“Hey, those are loving eye rolls,” Brock insisted, grabbing the snack board for me.

“Whatever you need to tell yourself to feel better,” he said, putting down the tray, then pulling me down beside him.

Reaching down, he grabbed my wrist, pulling my arm up, and planting a kiss on the inside of my forearm.

Where I’d gotten something completely ridiculous tattooed on my skin.

Reptar.

To match the one Brock had tattooed on him years before.

It covered the scar that had brought us together, turning it into something that represented our connection, the life we’d built together.

It wasn’t the first time in my life that I found a way to be thankful for all those horrible things all those years ago.

Because if it hadn’t been for all of that, I would never have built all of this.

“Hey,” Brock called as the movie started, making me turn my head up on his shoulder to look at him.

“Yeah?”

“What ever happened to that statue?”

“What statue?”

“The one you almost bashed me over the head with,” he clarified. “I haven’t seen it in years.”

“I think I boxed it up to donate to a museum.”

“You can’t donate it. It has sentimental value. That shit’s priceless.”



“You want us to hold onto something I almost used as a weapon against you?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re ridiculous.”

“You love it.”

And I did.

And I always would.

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**Under the pen name JGALA:**

The Heir Apparent

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